

Want to be happier? Try getting to know yourself

January 14 2019, by Niia Nikolova



Credit: Tatiana Syrikova from Pexels

The unexamined life is not worth living, [wrote the Greek philosopher Socrates](#). He was reflecting on the expression "Know Thyself" – an aphorism inscribed on the [temple of Apollo at Delphi](#) and one of the

ultimate achievements in ancient Greece.

While we walk around the world more or less successful in our endeavours, many of us sometimes have the nagging feeling that we don't truly know ourselves. Why do we really feel and behave the way we do? While we have some ideas about who we are, our understanding of ourselves is often patchy and inconsistent. So, is self-knowledge something we should strive for, or are we better off living in blissful ignorance? Let's examine the research.

By [self-knowledge](#), psychologists mean having an understanding of our feelings, motivations, thinking patterns and tendencies. These give us a stable sense of self-worth and a secure grip on our values and motivations. Without self-knowledge we cannot have an internal measure of our own worth.

This leaves us vulnerable to accepting others' opinions of us as truths. If a co-worker decides (and acts as if) we are worthless, we may swallow their verdict. We end up looking out to the world, rather than into ourselves, in order to know what we should feel, think and want.

It is an advantage to learn how to recognise our feelings. The experience of sadness, for example, could be the result of bad news, but it could also be caused by a predisposition to feeling sad resulting from childhood trauma or even just the [bacteria](#) in [our gut](#). Recognising true emotions can help us to intervene in the [space between feelings and actions](#) – knowing your emotions is the first step to being in control of them, breaking negative thought patterns. Understanding our own emotions and thinking patterns can also help us more easily empathise with others.

Self-awareness also allows us to make better decisions. In [one study](#), students who scored higher on "metacognitive awareness" – the ability to reflect on personal thoughts, feelings, attitudes and beliefs – tended to

make more effective decisions when it came to playing a computer game in which they had to diagnose and treat virtual patients in order to cure them. The authors argued that this was because they could set more well defined goals and make strategic actions.

Getting to know yourself

So how can we learn to know how we feel? People can have different ways of thinking about themselves. We can think about our history, and how past experiences have made us who we are. But we can also brood about negative scenarios in the past or future. Some of these ways of thinking about ourselves are better for us than others. Unfortunately, many of us tend to ruminate and to worry. That is, we focus on our fears and shortcomings, and as a result we become anxious or depressed.

The best way to start would be talking with an insightful friend or a trained therapist. The latter is especially important in cases where a lack of self-knowledge is interfering with our mental health. Putting words to feelings and being asked follow-up questions can really help us to understand who we are. Reading about [useful ways of thinking](#) can also help us to navigate our lives better.

In addition, there are several other traditions throughout history that have explored ways of getting to know ourselves. Both [Stoic philosophy](#) and [Buddhist traditions](#) valued [self-knowledge](#) and developed practices to nurture awareness of mental states – such as meditation.

Nowadays, [mindfulness meditation](#) has [gained traction](#) in psychology, medicine and neuroscience. Meditation and emotion regulation training can reduce negative feelings, rumination and anxiety. They also [increase positive emotions](#), improve the ability to recognise emotions in others, and protect us from social stress. Therapies that integrate mindfulness have been shown to be reliable in helping to [improve mental health](#),

specifically the outcomes of depression, stress and anxiety.

By just sitting for a little while and watching our thoughts and feelings from a distance, as if we're sitting by the side of the road and watching cars go by, we can get to know ourselves better. This helps us practice the skill of not thinking about the past or future, and we can be in the present a little bit more. We can learn to recognise the feelings that certain events and emotions trigger in us at the moment, and to create a space in which we can decide how to act (as some responses are more constructive than others).

Imagine, for example, that you have plans to go for a bike ride with a friend tomorrow and you're very much looking forward to this. In the morning, your friend cancels. Later in the day, a colleague asks you for help with a problem, and you feel annoyed and snap at them – telling them you don't have time for it.

Maybe you felt annoyed with the colleague, but the real reason was that you felt disappointed with your friend, and you now feel that you may not be as important to them as they are to you. If we're more self-aware, we're more likely to have the chance to pause and realise why we're feeling the way we're feeling. Rather than taking it out on our colleague, we can then realise that we are overreacting or identify whether there are any problems in our relationship with our friend.

It is fascinating that almost 2,500 years after the construction of the temple of Apollo, the quest to know ourselves better is still equally important.

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