

Through The Looking Glass: 7 Benefits To Seeing Yourself Through Your Emotions

Without realizing it, you have been trained to see yourself and others in a very destructive way. You were given a looking glass that reduces the patterns in human behavior to character traits. This understanding is not only limited but also it is destructive to your belief in yourself and contributes to confusion about who you really are.

Let me give you a few examples of the effect of the looking glass. There is a common view that fat people overeat and are weak, lazy and have no self-control. The same reasoning applies to the person who stops exercising. They lack discipline or motivation. A similar method is used to describe the alcoholic or drug user. If the person drinks alcohol to excess, they are weak and lack discipline. The possibility that the person is self-medicating their own emotions and seeking stress relief from anxiety is never mentioned. The explanation fits the view out of the looking glass.

A similar process can happen with simple everyday behavior.

If somebody says something hostile, they are mean. If a person is insensitive, they are selfish, self-centered and don't care about other people. If an individual procrastinates, they are lazy. So too is the child who gets bad grades or doesn't do their chores. The child is lazy and lacking motivation. A six-year-old who hits has a mean streak. Nobody stops to think that any of these acts may reflect underlying emotional issues.

The looking glass distorts the most basic perceptions. If a person takes something without asking, they may be called a "bad person". There is no room for making a mistake, a misunderstanding, or bad communication. The same holds true for good deeds as well as bad. If a person performs a kind act, they are called a "nice person".

Likewise, people who achieve are labeled in a positive way. They are strong and disciplined. They do well because they work hard and are smart. They are respected for their ability to perform, and their character is considered highly developed.

Nobody wonders what situations enabled them to succeed, and what advantages did they possess that gave them an advantage over others. They achieved simply because of the nature of their character.

This tendency to label people can even extend to being defined by one's emotional states.

If a person is assertive or even aggressive, they run the risk of being labeled "an angry person". Sadness is another emotion that can be used to define the person. A person who is sad may be called a "downer" and avoided to prevent their sadness from affecting others.

Looking through the looking glass can distort anxiety as much as it distorts mad and sad. Anxiety is contagious and can be caught by others. People who are anxious are called an "anxious person" and treated as if their anxiety is a trait that defines them in some negative way. Who wants to be around somebody who makes you feel nervous?

Whether bad or good or just expressing an emotion, the looking glass creates an overwhelming tendency for people to use traits to describe their own behavior and the actions of others. We use traits like mini-psychologists trying to establish meaning and reasons to explain people's behavior. Traits are a simple and easy way to accomplish this task.

Simplicity has a cost.

The use of traits to explain human behavior can have grave consequences. When we call people "liars" or "cheats", we are attacking their character. We are assigning enduring traits that render the person incapable of being trusted forever. They didn't just do something wrong like lie or steal. They are branded with an enduring label that sticks with them and can never be erased.

There is an equivalent use of trait psychology in modern mental health treatment.

People are diagnosed with personality disorders like narcissistic or borderline, that many believe are enduring and unchangeable characteristics. An angry child who may have good reason to be hostile is labeled with the diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder. Those labels stick and become the justification for use of psychiatric medications or inpatient treatment. They are labels that follow the person and unjustly define who they are and what they need.

There is a different lens to view these behaviors. Instead of using a personality disorder to explain the symptom pattern, I believe there are psychological defenses that come into play to

regulate emotion. The narcissist is actually defending against strong feelings of inadequacy. They fear that the exposure would cause them to be ignored or rejected. This is a learned reaction that can be unlearned with different experiences. It is not carved in stone, as the personality disorder label would suggest.

Separating Religion, Philosophy, and Psychology

In a subsequent section, I will be making the case to get rid of the looking glass and show the benefits of changing the lens to see yourself through your emotions. Before doing that, I think it is necessary to provide a historical perspective on the use of character traits. To change the lens, you must first understand the origin of the ideas, why they are so appealing and separate the domains of religion, philosophy, and psychology to take a different approach.

Religion is the domain of spirituality, the meaning of life, and the mysteries of life. People derive their moral codes and sacred values from their religious beliefs. In the age-old Judeo-Christian traditions, the Ten Commandments are used to define the laws that define good and bad behavior. As a result, good and evil were the first traits used to understand mankind's actions.

Bad behavior is further defined by the seven deadly sins.

Pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth are vices that are excessive versions of natural inclinations. Since they are seen as choices the person makes, they are considered evidence of evil forces operating on or within the person. Conversely, good is defined by the heavenly virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage along with faith, hope, and charity. Behavior that reflects these values is evidence for the good within the person.

The religious concept of man as a sinner is a theological construct. It is based on the view of man as good or bad. While sin may have value in a religious context to explain the concepts of redemption and the afterlife, it has limited value to explain man's everyday behavior and does not explain the emotional root cause of human actions.

Religion adds value to psychology to understand evil behavior where denial of emotion and human connection can result in murder, rape, incest and other depraved acts. The determination of evil must allow for the difference between crimes of passion and true evil behavior, but religion does provide a framework to understand the most destructive of human behavior.

Philosophy is the domain of rational thought where consistency of reasoning is examined.

Philosophies of life must be congruent with one's religious beliefs and one's psychology to make sense to the individual. Christians believe that the Bible is holy and contains philosophical truths that act as a guide to make life decisions. The most basic philosophy is that love is the core guiding principle and is best represented in the phrase, "Love thy neighbor as thyself".

The principles of balance and equality are incorporated into that simple phrase and define the requirements of human relationships. In this case, the religious beliefs are consistent with a philosophy of life.

Philosophy and psychology also need to be consistent. Traditional psychiatric theory provides an example of how philosophy can influence psychology. The most influential psychiatric theory of human behavior,

Freudian theory created by Sigmund Freud, M.D. nearly 100 years ago, defined personality and character traits that result from the management of aggressive and sexual impulses. In this framework, people's personalities reflect the organization of one's character. Freud explained bad, immoral or evil acts as the result of failure to control these impulses. He even went so far as to assume that mankind had a death instinct, called Thanatos that explained behavior that was self-destructive. His theory remains the basis for the present medical model of mental health treatment and remains actively applied in modern psychiatric care.

While religion and philosophy have historically been the basis for understanding human behavior, psychology has emerged since the 1900's to provide alternative explanations for human actions. Psychology is the realm of thinking, feeling and human behavior, especially human relationships.

In the last fifty years, modern psychology has introduced a new framework based on emotion to understand human behavior.

This new framework lacks the historical acceptance and traditions of personality traits and character disorders but offers a new lens that is based on a philosophy of man that is more positive than traditional psychiatric theory, one that restores trust in the nature of man.

A Psychological Revolution

Despite its value, it will not be an easy task to change the lens of the looking glass. Even in this new millennium, you will continue to be subjected to the teachings from both religion and psychiatry that support a trait framework based on good and evil to explain all human behavior. To accept this new framework, you have to be willing to challenge existing philosophies, check your strong learned bias toward character traits and learn a new psychology.

This new psychology begins with a different philosophy about the nature of man. Rather than a death instinct, this psychology of emotion adopts the premise that man's behavior is based on survival instincts. People use their minds including their thoughts and their feelings, to make sense of the world in order to survive. As an extension of survival, people are inherently motivated to survive and thrive. They are instinctively driven to collect information and make decisions that ensure their survival.

The mind is seen as the organ of survival using both thoughts and feeling to make decisions. While psychologists have spent many years studying thought and human information processing, we are in the infancy of understanding how emotion affects the mind and the management of information. We know that emotion drives human behavior.

We act to reduce the tensions created by our emotions. People act to relieve the tensions of emotions like fear, guilt, and shame. They also seek human connection and information in various forms to ensure their survival.

The mind is an organ of learning.

What we have learned is that memories encode both events and the associated feelings. These emotions enable us to categorize what we learn, separating natural emotions based on determining what feels good or bad from learned emotions that are trained by family experiences. These same stored emotions can be triggered by present events, resulting in an overload of emotion that can temporarily overwhelm the mind's ability to make decisions or act rationally.

In this new psychology, there is an alternative explanation for self-destructive behavior. Acts like suicide, self-harm, addictions, etc. result from the attempt to reduce levels of tension and anxiety that interfere with the ability to function. While suicide is the most obvious form of self-destruction, the person is looking to end the pain because they have lost the ability to survive.

Self-harm can be understood as a distraction from a level of emotion that can lead to suicide. Addictions form the basis for the reduction in stress levels. The user is focused solely on short-term relief and not the long-term effects that are self-destructive. Like the suicidal person, they are looking for relief from overwhelming emotional distress.

In summary, if you change the lens, even the most apparently self-destructive acts can be understood as survival attempts. People act in ways that make sense to them. All you need to determine is the emotions behind the actions and you can understand yourself and others in a more complete way.

Let me use the example of a child who does not study as a case study to demonstrate the principles of this new psychology of emotion. If a child is not applying himself or herself, there are many emotional issues to consider.

For one, the child has stopped responding to their natural motivation. Children are naturally curious and want to learn. If they experience excessive pressure to perform, or if they feel nobody understands their difficulty in learning the lesson, they will feel afraid that they can't please their parents or their teacher. They will feel hopeless and helpless and give up. In that event, they are protecting themselves from the experience of sadness and shame.

Punishing the child may be the wrong thing to do.

If this child is subjected to more pressure to perform under these circumstances, the situation may get worse. I remember one case where the child refused to study, despite the fact that the parents stripped his room and grounded him until his grades improved. In fact, his grades never did improve and he continued to get all F's.

As he explained to me, he was angry that his parents favored his older brother who had been admitted to a prestigious college, and he was constantly compared to his brother. It meant more to him to let his parents know how angry he was than surrender and do what they asked of him.

This child ultimately was successful doing things his way. He learned the material on his own and achieved nearly perfect scores on his SAT tests. A college took a gamble on him and offered him a scholarship. I believe he found his own way and is most likely fitting into the world on his own terms.

7 Benefits to Seeing Yourself Through Your Emotions

Your emotions are the new lens to see yourself and others in a new way. There are multiple benefits that can occur when you use this lens. I have listed a few for you to consider:

Benefit #1: Learning to trust yourself

You think and feel for a reason. If your thoughts are negative, you are not trying to hurt yourself. They may be thoughts reflecting fear or sadness that need to be understood. They are the voice of the emotions of your self designed to please your parents, the Self for Others. They are telling you what your parents expect in the situation, but not necessarily how you feel. Those feelings may be buried under the weight of the shame and need to be accessed to know how you truly feel.

Benefit #2: Becoming less afraid of your mind

People have learned from traditional psychology to be afraid of their mind. Terms like the unconscious or beliefs that man is self-destructive make people afraid of what is going in their mind. In this new psychology, the mind is a machine to process information coded in thoughts and emotions.

There is a breaker built into the mind that protects the person from emotional overload. Emotion becomes hidden for self-protection. You can access this emotion through following indirect expressions such as body language, tone, and context. It is not scary. It is no different than the body's capacity to heal a wound. You don't direct the body to heal, nor do you direct the mind to manage emotion. The mind simply works on autopilot to protect you from harm.

Benefit #3: Learning to know yourself

The idea that you have two selves, one, the authentic self-organized to express the natural emotions and second, the self for others, designed to please your parents and do what you were told to do (See the article, 5 Ways To Recognize Your Real Self for a more complete explanation). Your self becomes defined by the emotions you choose to use as your guide for decisions and actions.

If you use your anger to make and defend your choices, you are representing your authentic self. If you give in or go along with others demands to relieve your fear, guilt or shame, you are allowing yourself to be defined by others.

Your emotions that drive you are your roadmap to represent what you believe and define who you are. You can only be your real self if you learn to recognize and use your natural emotions and tell the difference from your learned emotions. Know your emotions, know yourself.

Benefit #4: Form emotionally honest relationships

Hidden or disguised emotion interferes with communication and causes harm to relationships. People become confused, afraid and withdraw when the person denies the emotion that they see or feel. They resort to justifying their actions to avoid being exposed and threatened with exposure of how they truly feel.

When confused or scared, people gravitate toward roles that dictate what how they should act in a given situation. Roles are rigid and produce emotional distance. They force people into doing things out of obligation rather than from mutual respect. Emotional honesty must be the core requirement of all relationships to build connections that are deep and enduring.

Benefit #5: Develop independence

Children are born dependent on their parents for survival. Independence is a person's natural state, but the ability to be independent has to be learned. Parents can ease this burden by teaching the child to be independent right from the start. If they protect the child to excess, the child will need to teach him or herself to be independent.

They will need access to their anger for this task. A fighting spirit has to be developed and must survive the disappointments experienced by others when you fail to meet their needs. This disappointment often results in causing a temporary distance in a relationship. Learning to ride through these times of distress can only be done if one can hold onto their anger during this period of challenge.

Benefit #6: Learn to dissent respectfully

Many people feel they have to gear up for a fight in order to speak their mind. They spend countless hours trying to predict the response of somebody they need to talk to. They obsess trying to figure out what the other person might do or say if they do this or that. This is all wasted energy as the situation or the person's response will always be difficult to judge. You can only prepare to trust yourself in the moment and know that you will say or do what you can at that time.

This is why respectful dissent needs to be taught.

Whether it is a parent, teacher, or boss, there will always be a time when you disagree with an authority figure. Each will have the power to hurt you. The parent can disown you, the teacher can refuse to teach you, and the boss can fail to give you a promotion or a raise in pay. It is difficult to stand up for yourself in those situations, but necessary to manage your life and live on your terms.

Self-respecting dissent can be learned from practice, but you must take the risk to challenge when it is presented in order to learn it.

Benefit #7: Live your moral code

Seeing yourself through your emotions enables you to live an emotionally honest life. You become better able to define the moral values that you believe in and represent them in your life. Even more importantly, you will be better able to defend them against others who criticize you or want you to live by their morality and not your own.

Your morals will always be challenged and should be expected. The fighting spirit you need to protect them lies inside of your natural emotions. The more you can trust them, the more you are able to live a life based on the morals you choose.