

# The Start of Change: Self-Awareness

by Mike Hawkins



Bill thought his wife Joan spent too much money. Joan thought Bill was too controlling. Yet neither believed it about themselves. Bill didn't think he was controlling. Joan didn't feel she spent too much money. Despite being married for years, neither could see themselves authentically.

There is a fundamental truth about people: people don't change unless they are aware of their need to change. And then, many still don't change. They don't communicate better, lose weight, become more patient, practice more self-discipline, or do whatever simply because they know they need to. Self-awareness is the start of change and therefore the most important element in change, but true change requires doing something with that awareness.

What is surprising about self-awareness is how many people think they are self-aware, but really aren't. Neuroscience confirms this. Most people don't have an objective understanding of themselves. People don't fully understand how they think, communicate, and behave. This is especially true about engrained habits rooted in people's subconscious.

Neuroscience finds that others have a more accurate perspective of us than we do ourselves. We only have our own perspective which is generally based on good intentions, not realities. Plus, our internal perspective is clouded, if not obscured, by our many biases, fears, desires, and innate personality traits. Then there is our instinct which can lead us astray. For example, we associate our successes with our behaviors which isn't always true. In some cases, we experience success despite, not because of, the decisions we make, things we say, and actions we take.

What happens when we don't accurately see how we influence our circumstances? Our circumstances don't change. Our relationships, career, finances, family, mental health, and physical health don't change. Because we think we are better than we are and know more than we do, we don't change how we think and behave. After all, why would we work on ourselves when we don't think we need to? Or when we don't think our influence on a situation is really that bad?

Looking in the proverbial mirror can be really hard. Discovering what you need to do better or different is not the most enjoyable way to spend your time. But when you think about the positive upside of doing so, the discomfort is worth it. Knowing how you can improve yourself and taking action on that knowledge can provide a lifetime of benefits.

If some people just received 30 minutes of candid feedback on how annoying they are or how much they underperform compared to their potential, they could make simple and immediate changes that would transform their lives. Frustrating relationships they spend hours a day complaining about could become satisfying relationships. Jobs that seem like dead-ends could become fulfilling. Obstacles that seem insurmountable could be overcome.

You may be substantially self-aware or at least think you are, but rather than take the chance, give thought to increasing your self-awareness. Consider how well you apply the eight principles below. Assess yourself with the goal of knowing your strengths and weaknesses to the fullest extent so you can become the best version of yourself possible:

1. **Have an open mind.** People take the path their subconscious takes them. People do things and say things without deliberate thought because their subconscious is always working in the background. To truly know yourself, you have to override your subconscious and innate habits. You have to arrest your fears and biases. You have to open your mind to the probability that there are better ideas, experiences, information, behaviors, tools, and methods than those you have now. Replace thoughts like "that's not who I am", "I've always done it this way", or "I already know that" with "I want to know what I don't know."
2. **Engage in new experiences.** Know yourself in new ways by doing new things. Discover hidden talents and opportunities for growth by getting out of your comfort zone. Look for opportunities to engage in activities that are different from your status quo. Meet with people who have different perspectives. Attend events different from your normal ones. Within reasonable limits, when asked to try a new activity or go to a new destination, accept the invitation. Try a different sport, game, or type of entertainment. Challenge yourself. Don't merely do that which is easy, comfortable, and convenient. Adversity is a particularly good teacher. Trying something new can be humbling, but life enhancing in many ways.

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- Learn from your consequences.** Psychological studies find that over a lifetime, people generally have the same experiences. People deal with the same types of adversity and enjoy the same types of successes. They have the same general problems and experience similar types of prosperity. Yet, not everyone learns from their experiences. Some ignore their role in their circumstances and gain no new knowledge from them. Learn the lessons that can be learned. Don't hit the delete button on your successes or adversities. Take note of what you did and didn't do that worked and didn't work. Be especially introspective about your role in undesirable circumstances and repeated patterns of behavior.
- Seek feedback.** As the cliché goes, feedback is a gift. It is usually free and provides valuable insight. However, few people are good at giving constructive, specific, and accurate feedback. But even when given poorly, there is insight to be gained. Seek input from people who know you well and are willing to be honest. Deepen your conversations. Ask for meaningful input from colleagues, bosses, family, and friends. Take advantage of counselors, coaches, and subject matter experts who ask thought-provoking questions. Ask for specific feedback. For example, if someone suggests you work on your communication skills, ask for clarification. Communication is too broad. The more specific your understanding, the more you can leverage your strengths and work on your short comings.
- Take assessments.** Personality assessments, 360 surveys, and questionnaires can provide great insight into what you think, say, and do. The questions and your answers alone can be revealing, but many assessments also come with interpretation reports and debriefings. Take advantage of these. They reveal hidden preferences, perceptions, drivers, fears, biases, habits, styles, and other attributes. Take these in as many areas as possible. They are available online and through reputable service providers. Since most are based on your self-input, they are subjective, so strive to complete them as honestly as possible. Answer them as you normally are, not as you aspire to be.
- Don't justify, defend, deflect, blame, shut down, dismiss, or attack.** Seek to understand, not to validate or invalidate others' opinions. Because feedback is merely others' perceptions and assessments merely reveal preferences, resist the temptation to take issue with them. They aren't the whole story, so don't correct them, at least not immediately. People are entitled to their perceptions. You will receive insight about yourself that is at odds with how you think, what you've done, what you enjoy, and what has enabled your success. It's okay. Don't react to it other than to clarify and understand it. Remember, the process of building self-awareness involves changing how you think.
- Find the kernel of truth.** Despite how poorly people's feedback might be or off-the-mark assessment results might seem, don't dismiss them in their entirety. Just because one point is false, doesn't mean all points are false. Throw out data that is clearly not true if you need to, but consider the rest could have merit. Override your pride, manage your tendency to react defensively, and find the bit of truth, no matter how nuanced it might be. Seek and identify any small aspect of your being that can be as valuable as a one-degree change in your golf swing that makes the difference between hitting the ball on the green or losing it in the water.
- Accept responsibility.** The last but ongoing step of self-awareness is thinking through all the input you've received, assessing your experiences, reflecting, and accepting responsibility for that which is true. Accept responsibility for that which you've contributed, influenced, said, thought, or did. You are only self-aware to the extent that you accept responsibility for your traits—good and bad. This often requires that you resist the temptation to dismiss something because it seemed to only have a minor impact. For example, you might become aware that your comment was only a small part of a conflict, but words matter. Your comment might be minor in the overall context of the situation, but own it. It might have been small, but that which started something much bigger.

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