

Self-Awareness Reading 25

Self-Awareness Module

We must be self-aware to be emotionally, socially, and physically healthy. Not only is being self-aware an essential emotional health skill, but it is also a prerequisite skill to master the other social-emotional skills, including social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills. Being self-aware means being able to experience a broad range of emotions and knowing what we are feeling, why we are feeling that way, and how our feelings affect our behavior. It means knowing what we are thinking (our assumptions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices) and determining whether they are accurate, realistic, and/or rational. Being self-aware means knowing when our feelings are caused by events, situations, and relationships in the present, things that have happened in the past that we can no longer control, or things we anticipate in the future that may never happen. Being aware is knowing what we are seeing, feeling, thinking, saying, sensing, doing, daydreaming or fantasizing about, etc. It means knowing our values, interests, talents, needs, goals, and what gives us a sense of meaning and purpose. It means knowing when we are being ourselves and when we are not. Being self-aware tells us who and how we are and how we wish to become, and it can be a call to action to continue as we are or change.

Self-Awareness Is Essential To:

1. Accurately assess our strengths and limitations and accurately perceive who we are and how we wish to become.
2. Have self-confidence, positive self-esteem, and a growth mindset.
3. Know when we are being our true selves and being genuine and when we are not.
4. Know when our methods of coping are effective and when they are not.
5. Understand how to successfully regulate and manage our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.
6. Understand the effects our actions and inaction have on us and others.
7. Set and work towards personal and academic goals and make responsible decisions.
8. Identify personal problems, analyze risks and consequences, make responsible decisions to solve personal problems, and understand the barriers to action and what might be holding us back from changing.
9. Develop goals and set priorities based on our values, strengths, interests, needs, and talents, as well as the needs of others.
10. Understand the impact our eating, exercise, sleep habits, and other behaviors have on our health.
11. Identify stressors in life, take action to prevent them when possible, and effectively cope with them when they cannot be prevented.
12. Take the perspective of and empathize with others.
13. Establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and make healthy choices in relationships.
14. Resist social pressure when it goes against our values, needs, and goals.
15. Communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, and work effectively in groups and teams.
16. Work through conflicts, misunderstandings, and impasses in relationships.

People Who Are Self-Aware:

1. Experience a broad range of emotions
2. Understand and accept what they feel and why they feel that way.
3. Understand that initial feelings such as anger may be a secondary feeling that masks deeper feelings.
4. Understand how their feelings affect their behavior and their relationships.
5. Understand when their feelings are caused by their behavior or events, situations, and relationships in the present.
6. Understand when their feelings are caused by things that have happened in the past or things they anticipate may happen in the future.
7. Know their interests, talents, needs, values, goals, and what gives them a sense of meaning, purpose, and satisfaction.
8. Know when they are being themselves (genuine) and when they are not.
9. Understand and accept what they are thinking (their assumptions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices) and why they think that way.
10. Understand when their feelings are caused by their thinking.
11. Can determine whether their thinking (their assumptions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices) are accurate, realistic, and/or rational.
12. Know how their thinking affects how they feel.
13. Know how their thinking affects their behavior and their relationships.

Self-aware people know what they are seeing, feeling, thinking, saying, sensing, doing, daydreaming, and fantasizing about. Being self-aware tells us who and how we are in the present and how we wish to become in the future. It can be a call to action to continue as we are or change.

Areas (Zones) of Awareness

Our awareness can be in one of three places:

1. Awareness of Our External World. This area of awareness is when we use our senses to discover sensations outside ourselves—what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Being fully aware of what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch can be a great source of delight.
2. Awareness of our Thinking Activity. Awareness of “thinking” activity includes imagining, guessing, thinking, planning, remembering, anticipating, rationalizing, fantasizing, and knowing our assumptions, interpretations, beliefs, and prejudices. What we think about can tell us much about who and how we are and what we want. Our “thinking” activity affects our feelings, which in turn affects our behavior.
3. Awareness of Feelings. Awareness of our feelings is when we know what we are feeling and why we are feeling that way. It also includes any physical manifestations of feelings like muscular tensions and aches.

Although we can move quickly back and forth between the three zones, we can only be entirely in one zone at a time. For example, if you are eating your favorite dessert while captivated by something on TV, you can only be fully aware of the taste of the dessert or fully attend to what is on TV. If your awareness is focused on the TV show, you will miss the taste of what you eat. If you are walking barefoot along the ocean but are planning (mental activity) what you will do that evening, you will miss the sights, sounds, and smells of the sea and the feel of the sand against your feet (external world). An important emotional health skill is to be able to focus our awareness on the zone that is most important to us at the moment.

Awareness of What We Are Feeling and Why We Feel That Way

Being aware of our feelings is probably the most powerful tool for knowing who we are, how we are, and it is the beginning step for changing and becoming all we can be. Feelings tell us who and how we are at any moment. Feelings don't just happen. They are emotions that we experience because of some external or internal event or experience. Experiencing a broad range of emotions is one thing that makes us human. The capacity to feel is as vital as our capacity to think and reason.

It is essential to remember that what we are aware of is neither good nor bad. Our awareness just is. We might not like how we feel or what we think, remember, or fantasize about, but those feelings, thoughts, or dreams just are. They are not our behavior, but being aware of them can be a call to action. The effectiveness of our behavior depends, to a considerable extent, on our self-awareness. If we don't like how we feel, we can figure out why we feel this way and do something about it. We can categorize feelings as pleasant (those we like) or unpleasant (those we don't like). If we like how we feel, we can ask ourselves questions like where am I, what am I doing, who am I with, and what led to these feelings. Part of understanding who we are is knowing what gives us pleasant emotions, such as feeling satisfied, relaxed, challenged, and happy, and what gives us a sense of meaning and purpose in life. If we don't like how we feel, we can ask ourselves the same questions: where am I, what am I doing, who am I with, what led to these feelings, and what do I want to do about it? The effectiveness of our behavior depends largely on our self-awareness of what we are feeling and why we are feeling that way. Being aware of what we are feeling and why we feel that way can motivate us to continue what we are doing or can be a catalyst for change.

It is unhealthy to be unaware of our feelings. When we are unaware of or deny our feelings, we don't understand who we are, how we are, or how we wish to become. It takes energy to deny or suppress feelings from self and others, energy we don't have for the people and things we value most. The more we are aware of and accept our feelings and appropriately express them to others, the more energy we will have. We do not manage our feelings by pretending they don't exist or by holding them inside. We manage them by accepting our feelings and why we feel that way and expressing them to others when appropriate. Pleasant feelings can be a catalyst for continuing our actions, and unpleasant feelings can motivate change. Before we can change, we must be aware of our feelings and why we feel that way.

Being aware of pleasant feelings is a significant source of joy, and we cannot enjoy these feelings if we are unaware of them. We can't express feelings we refuse to acknowledge or communicate feelings we refuse to accept. It takes energy to hide our feelings from ourselves and others. The more we are aware of our feelings, accept them, and appropriately and effectively express them to others, the more energy we will have for enjoying our life and our relationships. The repression of feelings leads to a lack of knowledge of self, which can lead to self-alienation and leave a person confused about what motivates and causes them to behave in certain ways. If we are unaware, deny, or suppress our feelings, we may say or do things that are inappropriate or dangerous to us and our relationships. In addition, if we are unaware of and unaccepting of our feelings, we will probably be unaware and unaccepting of others' feelings. Thus, we will not understand them, hindering our ability to empathize with them. If we do not understand others and are unaware of our needs and feelings, it will be impossible to communicate with them and work through misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts in relationships.

Being Aware of What We Are Thinking

We often experience unpleasant feelings not because of actual events or situations but because of what we think and our assumptions and interpretations. We can make inaccurate, unrealistic, and/or irrational assumptions about:

1. Our current situation or some event in the present
2. Situations we imagine will happen in the future (when they may not) and that these future events will have bad consequences for us (when they may not).
3. Negative self-labels and self-talk (see the section on self-esteem).
4. Another person's behavior or intentions (see the section on Communication Competencies).

To change unpleasant feelings caused by inaccurate, unrealistic, incomplete, or irrational thinking, we need to:

1. Be aware of our feelings and how our thinking is causing those feelings.
2. Understand the interpretations and assumptions we are making.
3. Determine whether the interpretations and assumptions are accurate, realistic and/or rational.
4. Let go of interpretations and assumptions that are inaccurate, unrealistic, and/or irrational.
5. Replace inaccurate, unrealistic, and irrational interpretations and assumptions with accurate, realistic, and rational ones.

See [Reality Checking](#) in the [Self-Management Skills Module](#) on how to change unpleasant feelings caused by inaccurate, unrealistic, incomplete, or irrational thinking.

Ways of Becoming Aware

1. **Introspection.** Being introspective is focusing on what we feel and think at any moment. Introspection can be a mental activity, or we can write about it. Keeping a journal can be a very helpful way to become aware. It also allows us to track our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors over time to see how we have changed or not changed and to understand how effective or ineffective our behavior has been. All self-awareness learning experiences in this section require students to be introspective.
2. **Self-disclosing.** Self-disclosing is sharing our feelings, thoughts, and who we are with others. It is a psychological truth that we cannot completely know ourselves without sharing ourselves. When we say something aloud, it becomes more real than if we were only thinking about it. Becoming self-aware and self-disclosing go hand in hand. When processing the self-awareness learning experiences, you will ask your students to share their responses with their classmates and ask them to self-disclose. Self-disclosing in a group, especially in a group where everyone is the same age, increases our awareness of how we are similar and how we have many of the same worries, concerns, problems, aspirations, and goals. Keeping our feelings to ourselves can make us feel lonely, the sense that we are the only ones who feel this way or have these problems, concerns, aspirations, and goals. Self-disclosing can help overcome these feelings of loneliness by helping us realize how much we have in common with others. In addition, students act as positive social role models for one another in developing social-emotional skills, thus giving one another the belief that they, too, possess the capabilities to master these skills, increasing their self-efficacy.
3. **Feedback from Others:** We all have blind spots that we cannot see, but others can. Feedback from caring others given with skill and with the intent to help them grow emotionally can increase self-awareness. A skillful teacher can provide opportunities for students to receive positive feedback and feedback to “grow” from their peers. Teachers, with the student’s permission, can also provide such feedback.