
SELF-DISCOVERY

Dr Christian Jonathan Haverkamp M.D.

Self-Discovery is an important element mental health and in pursuing ones needs, values and aspirations. It helps in building a stronger sense of self, which is helpful from a mental health perspective. It can help make decisions and reduce internal conflicts. Knowing more about own character traits and personality can also help make interactions with other people work better. Since internal and external communication is how individuals get their needs, values and aspirations met, better communication can raise the quality of life and work effectively against various mental health issues. When life is 'out of sync' with the own needs, values and aspirations, anxiety and other symptoms increase. Self-discovery is an important tool among communication-focused approaches to resolve the underlying causes of these symptoms.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Reasons for Self-Discovery.....	3
Identifying Conflict.....	4
Minimizing Conflict	4
Decision-Making	5
Discovering Oneself	5
Techniques.....	6
Imagination	6
Personality	6
Cognition and Emotions.....	7
Metacognition.....	7
The Sense of Self	8
Into the Future.....	8
References	10

Introduction

Self-discovery is often seen as a panacea to numerous problems, although the various attempts at self-discovery that are advocated by therapists and counsellors fall far short of their objectives. Self-discovery is not about changing oneself but learning more about how one communicates with oneself and others. The 'discovery' consists in gaining greater awareness of and insight into internal and external communication processes. It can involve reflecting on how one interacts with others and with oneself, and it can provide greater clarity on one's values, needs and aspirations.

Self-discovery can be practiced by the individual on his or her own, but often it is done together with others. Other people not only provide feedback, but the communication patterns with others can also be used to provide insight into one's own personality and character traits, which can strengthen the sense of self.

Reasons for Self-Discovery

Maladaptive strategies and patterns of internal and external communication are at the root of many mental health problems. (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2017a) They are maladaptive in the sense that they do not work to help the individual fulfil important needs and aspirations. So, the first step to identify them as maladaptive is to know more about the own needs, values and aspirations. Communication with oneself and others is the instrument to get them fulfilled, and self-discovery should thus also be about one's interactions with oneself and the world around.

Self-discovery means being receptive to any signals that something is 'out of sync'. They can thus provide the direction and motivation to make changes. Unfortunately, often people go through life without being receptive to what is not working for them. Psychotherapy is a place where this should be possible in a safe and curiosity activating environment. Fears and anxieties may block this process in the beginning but having a sense of the benefits and realising that it cannot get worse than it is in the present usually helps to overcome these barriers.

Better information leads to better decisions. If one wants to have a life that is more closely aligned with one's needs, values and aspirations, it is important to make decisions that take them into account, which is an important objective of self-discovery. This makes it less likely that one finds oneself in situations which 'do not feel right' and experiences the symptoms that are often a consequence of it, such as anxiety or even a reactive depression or an increase in obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviours in the case of OCD.

Self-discovery should help one identify those points where life is out of sync with the own needs, values and aspirations. Since areas of conflict can lower happiness, satisfaction and contentment and maintain various mental health problems, getting a better sense for the own needs, values and aspirations and lowering these conflicts can lead to significant improvements in symptoms and a better quality of life. Finding out about the basic parameters, values, needs and aspirations, is something which can be accomplished in therapy or in other settings by connecting with own thoughts and emotions by awareness for the own internal and external communication patterns to get a better reading on which potential decisions and activities in life are better aligned with oneself.

Identifying Conflict

If there is a conflict, there is a variance or a difference. From a psychological perspective, this means that two pieces of information disagree with each other, and that this disagreement is relevant to the individual. The resolution of a conflict can be meaningful, which adds value to a conflict and its identification. Recognizing a conflict and working on a resolution can improve the quality of life and resolve various mental health symptoms. Conflicts are thus an important part of change processes.

Change requires identifying feelings and thoughts that are conflicting with each other. Minimizing a conflict is much easier once one becomes fully aware of it. Unfortunately, people are often afraid of looking at conflicts because they underestimate the capabilities they have in resolving conflict and start out with the assumption that they will fail. Yet change does not mean a complete overhaul of one's life is needed tomorrow. Just the opposite, successful stories of making helpful changes in life are about gradual movements in the right direction. They not only take away the fear and anxiety but make successful and lasting change more likely.

Internal change is usually the important first step. By becoming clearer about my own basic values and interests, I can bring about a change in myself, which can put things back 'in sync' again. People mostly follow patterns of behaviour and interaction which they adopted from other people, often unconsciously, and which may not agree with their own basic parameters. These patterns serve important functions by freeing up higher cognitive resources for more complex tasks and making learning of communication patterns with others much faster. However, over time they may become maladaptive and dysfunctional, interfering with the flow of information with others and within oneself, unless they are reassessed and adjusted from time to time. Self-discovery is an important process in which maladaptive patterns can become visible and conscious again.

Minimizing Conflict

Conflicts impair communication, internally and externally, and reducing a conflict improves communication. This may happen through a reduction in anxiety and fears or several emotions, including anger or sadness, which underly the anxiety. Thus, resolving conflicts often requires becoming more connected and aware of one's emotions.

Developmental and evolving processes, such as a creative task on a job or a developing relationship, can unfold faster if the exchange of meaningful messages is better, that means if there are less barriers due to conflict. Also, if one's professional and private life are not compatible, there is a conflict which usually requires resolution to balance both areas of life. Resolving the conflict not only leads to a better life and more happiness, but – presuming one goes about this constructively – also to greater insight and improved decision and communication patterns in the future. Reducing conflict can thus lead to improvements internally, through different perspectives and different patterns of self-talk, and externally, by bringing about changes in one's environment.

Decision-Making

The future is the result of a long string of decision-making, and better decisions can also lead to a better sense of self and more faith in oneself. Having a better sense of oneself also makes it easier to trust one's decisions, which also means one feels better about the future. This adds to a sense of stability and helps against negative ruminations.

Improving the information that goes into decisions helps to make better decisions. Basically, there are two kinds of information which need to be considered, information about the environment and information about oneself. The more information one has the better the decisions will be. Especially in situations where one does not have all the information about a situation or intended activity, the own compass informed by the own emotions and thoughts is important. Self-discovery can thus provide the information needed to make a more anxiety free decision.

Discovering Oneself

A good starting point for self-discovery is the concept of a blank page. It is important to scrutinize and question everything over time. So much is acquired from external sources that a reflection on one's own internal and external communication patterns may make it difficult to distinguish what corresponds with own needs, values and aspirations and someone else's. In many cases, there may be no need to make the distinction as humans share many basic parameters and we all live in an interconnected world where other people's needs and wants can be important variables in one's own decision making. Still, if there seems to be a significant conflict between one's own needs and those of others, it is helpful to try to determine if there are other needs below these apparent needs before moving on to stand up for one's needs or trying to reach a compromise. As mentioned, change in external and internal communication patterns in most cases should be gradual and incremental once one knows where change is necessary.

The process of self-discovery will reveal areas where there is a deficit in openness, which is maybe one of its most important consequences. Self-discovery helps one in identifying the barriers to open communication within and without. When one identifies such a point, becoming aware of it and reflecting on it are important steps in resolving it.

Techniques

The author has developed communication-focused therapy (CFT), which is helpful in the process of self-discovery. Many of the techniques from this approach, which are described elsewhere (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2017c, 2018), can be useful also for the process of self-discovery. For a therapist, listening, reflecting and asking the right questions or summarizing what was said in a novel way can often be helpful to the patient.

Reflecting on communication is an important piece in creating awareness, understanding and insight into the communication patterns which are helpful, and those which are not. The next step is then to experiment with them and to see how change is possible if they are maladaptive. This can be done in the interaction with the therapist or with others outside the therapy room.

Imagination

Imagination is an important element of the self-discovery process. It allows to identify pieces and to put them together. Imagination allows us to imagine a future which is different from our present. This helps motivate oneself and chart out a course from here to a better future. Imagination may work in many ways, we can imagine interactions, actions and situations and see how they work for us. The imagination can thus be a playground to experiment and find out more about ourselves.

Imagination is a creative process, producing something new from the existing, just like coming up with an idea or resolving a conflict. We make associations and combine ideas in novel ways, which can lead to images which do not exist in the present. The first step to do this, however, is to take apart what exists in the present. Self-discovery begins with looking at the things we do and engage in in the present. A good experiment is to take an object or a situation and play out in one's mind different scenarios. Since this playing out is already influenced by the own personality and needs, values and aspirations, it can be an important piece in finding out more about oneself.

Personality

One's personality is relatively stable over time. It does not change much, which also keeps a person's interactions with the environment relatively stable over time. The benefit is that stable and predictable relationships with others, as well as oneself, are possible. However, it is possible that parts of the personality cannot surface and show itself in the interactions and communication patterns with others, because of fears and conflicts. Thus, identifying these fears and conflicts can help bring out more facets of an individual's personality. In many cases this is helpful because it facilitates communication patterns which are more in tune with the person.

Since one's personality remains relatively stable over time, knowing more about one's personality can also give one a greater sense of stability. In the case of emotional instability, such as the typical symptoms of

Bipolar personality disorder (BPD), there seems to be a disconnect in relation to the information that is necessary to get a reading on oneself. The result is a weaker sense of self at times which in intervals can lead to a feeling of 'loss' of self, which can turn into the painful perception of an existential void. (Haverkamp, 2013, 2017e)

Cognition and Emotions

Self-discovery means connecting with all the information that is meaningful and relevant. The own thoughts and emotions are certainly important contributors. Thoughts and emotions are conscious, and the messages they contain reflect on the internal and external communication patterns one uses.

Developing awareness for and reflecting on the own thoughts and emotions requires a shift in viewpoint by regarding them as communication events that can be observed, analysed and mined for meaning rather than as a complete and true description of one's inner world or oneself. This observation of one's own information flows can be helpful in anxiety and other conditions where the problem is an inaccurate identification of the own emotional signals. (Haverkamp, 2017b, 2017d) In OCD, for example, one needs to be able to establish a certain distance from intrusive and obsessive thoughts to be able to see what emotional signals or thoughts may be underlying them.

Metacognition

Thinking about thinking is a key internal communication pattern in the process of self-discovery. The reason is that the sense of self is itself comes from the awareness of the own internal flows of meaningful information. Reflecting on how one thinks and feels is a reflection on oneself. Since reflecting on the own internal communication is what generates the sense of self, engaging in metacognition and 'meta-feeling' strengthens the sense of self. It is more than just observing own behaviours, actions and interactions. Rather it is having a sense of information in coming in from the environment, it's processing and how one communicates new meaningful messages out into the world. While we are engaged in mental activity, we cannot observe the information flowing through individual synapses or through parts of the brain, but it is possible to take more control over which information becomes subject to consciousness or, in a wider sense, to get a sense for the information that is available inside oneself.

Working with this information is an important part of therapy. Awareness for external communication and a reflection on it in the interactions between therapist and patient helps also to gain insight into the internal communication, which can help the patient to develop better strategies to become aware and reflect about the own cognitive and emotional information flows.

The Sense of Self

Having a feeling of oneself is important because it is from here where all experiences of agency and efficacy in the world are perceived to originate from. It is also what makes it possible to erect healthy boundaries with a sense of an outside and an inside. It allows us to say 'I' as distinct from 'you'. What gives rise to this sense of self? Basically, it is the perception of information flows inside oneself. Once one is aware of one's internal flows of meaningful information, that is information with the inherent property to bring about changes, there is a sense of self. (Haverkamp, 2010a, 2017a, 2018) Self-discovery thus becomes the exploration of one's internal and external communication patterns, which inform the sense of self.

Communication flows within the larger communication system of the person have structure. If there are unhelpful structural issues there may be obsessive thoughts in OCD or acoustic hallucination in schizophrenia, for example. The source of a piece of information may no longer be distinguishable, for example, in the latter cases. In the former case, there may also be a breakdown in the filtering of information in addition to maladaptive ways of processing, attaching relevance and meaning to it.

Since basic flows of information do not change much over time, the sense of self remains relatively stable. A strong sense of self can also help in building more positive emotions about one's decisions and one's future, which can raise self-confidence and trust in one's decision-making. Since the sense of self is the point from where we feel that we have an effect in the world, a stronger sense of self can also make one's actions in the world more relevant to the own person.

Into the Future

Self-discovery should help an individual to have a better higher-resolution vision of the future, one that is more aligned with the own needs, values and aspirations. This helps make better decisions and build a life which is more in tune with one's basic parameters. It also reduces anxiety and common symptoms of other mental health conditions, which are often triggered and maintained by the stress of conflict. Knowing more about oneself is the first step in reducing this stress.

A strengthened sense of self and a more stable sense of oneself contributes to less anxiety and better mental health in many aspects. Self-discovery is important to accomplish this. It provides the necessary information, while connecting with oneself emotionally and cognitively, which can also increase the feeling of connectedness and mental well-being.



Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. MLA (Harvard) LL.M. trained in medicine, psychiatry and psychotherapy and works in private practice for psychotherapy, counselling and psychiatric medication in Dublin, Ireland. He also has advanced degrees in management and law. The author can be reached by email at jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com or on the websites www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie and www.jonathanhaverkamp.com.

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