
CONNECTING WITH ONESELF: FEELING AND REFLECTION

Christian Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D.

Many mental health conditions are triggered and maintained by a disconnect with oneself. Anxiety, for example, can be an important signal that something is out of sync in life. An emotional and cognitive reconnection can lead to changes that lower anxiety. The same applies to burnout and many other mental health conditions.

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Introduction

A disconnect from oneself can happen for a number of reasons. In the moment, it can be a protective mechanism to keep seemingly overwhelming emotions and thoughts from conscious experience, for example. In the long run, however, it can lead to various mental health, or even physical conditions.

Listening into oneself, feeling and reflecting, is a communication process with the parts of oneself that reveal insights about one's own needs, values and aspirations. The most therapy accomplishes is usually to facilitate this flow of information. Our values in the broadest sense, the features of the desired state of the world that truly makes us happy, do not change much, if at all, over time. To a significant part they derive from our biology. However, this derivation is sensitive to the information that is added after birth. While a fundamental value may not change, such as finding science interesting and worthwhile, one may find out that practicing science is more rewarding in the interaction with people than in a lab, which is the consequence of experiencing another value, enjoyment of the interpersonal contact. How do we find these values? By developing a sense for how we feel about things and activities.

Finding these basic parameters, the needs, values and aspirations, is important because many mental health conditions are caused by individuals arranging their lives in ways which go in some important ways against them. If needs, values and aspirations are not met in the long run, anxiety, burnout, depression, eating disorders, sexual dysfunctions, and many other conditions can develop and lead to further problems in life, at the workplace and in relationships in the future.

Internal Information

Feeling oneself is a prerequisite to communicating with the world. Unless we can communicate with ourselves and find the values, interests and aspirations that shape our interactions, we will not be able to send out clear and unambiguous messages.

Communication happens on many levels all the time, for the most part subconsciously. Internal communication between the cells of the body drives autoregulatory mechanisms which maintain an environment conducive to life. Particularly the communication within the network of cells in the nervous system maintains the autoregulatory mechanisms between the individual and the environment.

It is not necessary that all these information flows become conscious, neither would it be helpful because of the very large amounts of information. However, it is helpful to become aware of information that is constructed from these volumes of information, such as the emotions and feelings they are summarized in.

To decode messages from other people, whether verbal or nonverbal, such as a gesture or facial expressions, we need to be aware of how we interpret information from the world reaching us. The more one can read the own emotions the more information is available to use in communicating with another.

Reflection

If one does not trust people much, it is important to question if another person's message really is that he or she has ulterior motives in mind and intends to be hurtful.

A good starting point is to assume that people share certain fundamental values, but their life experiences and what they were told over time can bring many people out of contact with these values. The disconnect can lead to decisions which can be hurtful and do not feel good in the long run. Thus, one's own disconnect can make it harder to see the disconnect in other people.

Reflection means using the information provided internally and externally to make sense of it and decode the meaning in it. Meaningful information is information that can bring about some change in thought, feelings, perspective, behavior, and so on, which is helpful and adaptive to the individual. For example, when one experiences sadness when talking to another person, and identifies the emotion as sadness, this can take the interaction in a new direction. It might be the other person's sadness which one experiences, but which the other person cannot feel because of a disconnect. If one can reflect this back into the conversation, this could even be helpful to the other person.

Basic Parameters

Having a sense for what one values and is important to oneself, one needs to be able to observe oneself, one's thoughts, behaviors and emotions. This reflection happens in an automatic form as 'feeling', because there is much more information that reaches our brain than we could ever consciously process.

Reflecting on feelings as highly condensed information, however, is possible and a very important process. A good happy feeling means

that most of the information that reaches us confirms that our life in the present moment is in sync with who we are, our fundamental values, our interests and aspirations. When things start to go wrong we have a bad feeling. Then it is important to find out what is going wrong. This process allows us to use huge volumes of information to base our decisions, our actions and our behaviors on.

Many people suffering from burnout and various kinds of anxieties have become out of sync with feeling themselves. Not knowing what one values and feels strongly about, makes it difficult to establish a compass in life, and without the compass many people get lost in little details that seem unconnected and devoid of meaning. If we do not live in sync with who we are for an extended length of time, our jobs and relationships lose meaning, and in the end, we lose ourselves.

Reconnection

Reconnecting with oneself happens through communication. A psychotherapy session, for example, can provide the setting for increased awareness of communication patterns with oneself and others, reflection, experimentation and insight. Listening to one's feelings and thoughts in everyday life and reflecting on them can lead to better decisions and more happiness, satisfaction and contentment in life. Many people make uninformed decisions because they are not open and receptive to the information communicated inside them.

Having a sense of oneself also helps with relationships, especially romantic relationships. The more one knows about oneself, the easier one can derive meaning from relationships and be happy. Most relationship tragedies happen, when we no longer follow the compass of our basic values, interests and aspirations. However,

once we do, a relationship with another human being can become a splendid and wonderful universe in itself, filled with meaning.

Life has its uncertainties, but following one's values, interests and aspirations can lead to a truly magical and wonderful story of one's life. It is living up to what one is capable of.



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. The author can be reached by email at jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com or on the websites www.jonathanhaverkamp.com and www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie.

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