
FEEL YOURSELF

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Feeling oneself may sound easy, but it is what we do not do enough of. It is a communication process with the parts of oneself that define who we are. 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. Feelings are a communication of meaningful information, which can provide insight into individual needs, values and aspirations, and help a person to make decisions and create a life story that works for him or her.

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Introduction

Feeling oneself may sound easy, but it is what we do not do enough of. It is a communication process with the parts of oneself that define who we are. 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.

Overall, 35% of adolescents acknowledged that their perceived appearance determined their self-esteem, with boys and girls being proportionally distributed between the groups. Adolescents in the group more concerned with appearance reported lower satisfaction with their physical appearance, lower self-esteem than others, and lower perceived competence in the scholastic and social domains. (Seidah & Bouffard, 2007)

The finer colors of feeling

In order to get the most information from a feeling, it is important to be aware of it and to be able to reflect on it. This applies to feelings in general. The little sensation when we talk to someone or have a thought can provide insight into a much richer domain underneath it. Crucial is an awareness of it in the first place, which requires an openness to this kind of internal information.

In the case of the feeling of self-esteem, for example, it has been suggested that instead of studying self-esteem as unidimensional continuum from “low” to “high,” qualitative distinctions should be made, for instance, between different types of unhealthy self-esteem, such as disparaging and underestimating oneself versus narcissistically refusing to see anything negative in oneself. (The latter type seems to be associated with aggressive behavior.) (Salmivalli, 2001) However, most of the millions of feelings one experiences every day will not be as general and as easy to define as ‘self-esteem’. It is not only easy to overlook the important ones because they seem less textured and well-defined, but it is also possible to be overwhelmed by those which are merely reactive loops and do not add much new information.

Therapy is about change. It happens between two people who are through their communication patterns experiencing similarities and differences. If people were exactly the same, had the same experiences, and were sitting in the same place, change would be difficult. Feelings make the similarities and differences palpable, and the meaning they carry within them brings about change (Haverkamp, 2012). Therapy has been described as a delicate balance between mutual findings of oneself and not-oneself in the other at the explanatory level (Togashi, 2012).

Insight

After a person has become stuck on a problem, they sometimes achieve a clear and sudden solution through insight, which is a distinctive experience (Bowden, Jung-Beeman, Fleck, & Kounios, 2005) that is familiar to most people. One example is solving challenging puzzles whose answers cannot be obtained through ordinary means (Sternberg & Davidson, 1995). Awareness of a feeling can lead to insight into the information contained in the feeling. Insight “denotes a mental restructuring that leads to a sudden gain of explicit knowledge allowing qualitatively changed behavior” (Wagner, Gais, Haider, Verleger, & Born, 2004) It is like diving into an emotion through communication techniques, with oneself and with others, that produces meaningful information like a nugget of gold. In Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT), as developed by the author, an awareness of and reflection about communication patterns usually leads to experimentation and change towards those that can help distill meaningful information from the feelings once experienced (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2017a, 2018a).

Insight or meaningful information in general has also a very direct effect on feelings. The type and level of existing information and feelings go hand in hand. One study showed that certainty about self-attributes is associated with positive affect about the self (Baumgardner, 1990). Low self-esteem was associated in one study with less certainty about possessing several trait attributes. The data further suggested that low-esteem subjects do not simply respond to impression management cues, and that their lack of certainty is specific to self-judgments. Also, subjects exposed to certain diagnoses of their self-perceived traits showed an improvement in self-affect and egotism. (Baumgardner, 1990) Gaining insight, even if it is not entirely correct, seems to have an effect on feelings, particularly those that are closer to the sense of self or provide information about how one communicates and processes information.

Compassion

Compassion establishes an emotional connection with another person, but it can also be practiced with oneself. Self-compassion is an emotionally positive self-attitude that should protect against the negative consequences of self-judgment, isolation, and rumination (such as depression). Because of its non-evaluative and interconnected nature, it should also counter the tendencies towards narcissism, self-centeredness, and downward social comparison that have been associated with attempts to maintain self-esteem. (NEFF, 2003) Building compassion for oneself can thus be accomplished by connecting with oneself, identifying the basic parameters, the needs, values and aspirations one holds. Observing how one interacts with others and the communication patterns one uses provides insights into them.

Time

Being able to experience feelings in the present is an important skill. However, past and future play essential roles in shaping our present perceptions. Interestingly, the brain distinguishes here the qualities of feelings. In one study, for both past and future, representations of positive events were associated with a greater feeling of re-experiencing (or pre-experiencing) than representations of negative events. In addition, representations of temporally close events (both past and future) contained more sensorial and contextual details and generated a stronger feeling of re-experiencing

(or pre-experiencing) than representations of temporally distant events. (D'Argembeau & Van Der Linden, 2004) On the other hand, how we experience something is also influenced by what is important to us, our needs, values and aspirations, the basic parameters (Haverkamp, 2012).

Connectedness

Feeling oneself is a prerequisite to communicating with the world. The German philosopher Kant famously suggested to "act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." (Kerstein, 2008) 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. The reason is that we subconsciously communicate on various levels all the time, and that even all our conscious messages are influenced by these unconscious messages all the time. 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. This requires an awareness for the communication patterns one uses (Haverkamp, 2018b).

An awareness of the communication patterns one uses helps to gain insight into motives of underlying beliefs, which can inform helpful changes of these beliefs and the communication patterns to bring them about (Haverkamp, 2010b). For example, if one has a habit of not trusting other people, it is important to question if another person's message really is that he or she has ulterior motives in mind and wants to hurt us. 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 touch with these values. We do not want to steal someone else's job, but we have learned that we cannot rely on other people, for example. However, this creates an internal conflict. Over time being out of sync with one's values will come back to haunt one, because the world ends up becoming a place we do not really want to live in. The escape may often be a greater disconnectedness from the world and oneself, which causes more anxiety, burnout and several other mental health symptoms. It is important to remember here that disconnectedness from oneself and the world go hand in hand (Haverkamp, 2010c).

Self-Esteem

Educators believe that self-esteem plays an essential role in academic achievement, while politicians, business managers, and religious leaders extol the virtues of self-esteem as a vehicle for attaining success in numerous other pursuits and endeavors, and social scientists proclaim that self-esteem is integral to life adjustment (Brown, 2014). It was found also found that self-esteem and self-compassion were statistically equivalent predictors of happiness, optimism, and positive affect. (Neff & Vonk, 2009) However, self-compassion appears to predict more stable feelings of self-worth than self-esteem and was less contingent on particular outcomes. Self-compassion also had a stronger negative association with social comparison, public self-consciousness, self-rumination, anger, and need for cognitive closure (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Self-esteem (but not self-compassion) was in the same study positively associated with narcissism.

However, it seems that self-esteem can lead to positive effects in narcissistic individuals. Enhancements in self-esteem increases their tendency to act altruistically and to feel intrinsically motivated to be moral. Self-esteem increases their openness to experience. (Hart, Tortoriello, & Richardson, 2019) Narcissism is in some ways a desire to connect with oneself, to see one's reflection on the water surface of a pond in the mythical tale of Narcissus, but without ever achieving it. A narcissist urges to feel himself or herself, but cannot, which is why this needs to be accomplished through others. However, as internal and external communication patterns are tightly linked, this cannot be accomplished either (Haverkamp, 2019a). The narcissist is continuously hungry, thirsty and cold, which can be temporarily patched up with an increase in self-esteem. Yet, if the narcissist can again awareness for the own communication patterns, there will be a new opportunity for positive change.

Integration

The flow of meaningful information through the nervous system, and by extension the body, creates the sense of self(Haverkamp, 2010a, 2017b, 2017c). Altschuler and Ramachandran used a simple method of using two mirrors which allows one to stand out-side oneself. This method demonstrated that registration of vision with touch and proprioception is crucial for the perception of the corporeal self. (Altschuler & Ramachandran, 2007)

It has been argued that the notion of «feeling» emerged from the particular encounter between Heideggerian reflection and phenomenological psychiatry. Considering the philosophical and psychoanalytic reflections on guilt, language and the subject the notions of “Befindlichkeit” (feeling) and of “Trieb” (drive) can Freud's proposal from and Heidegger's analysis of being-there can be contrasted. (Bonazzi, 2016)

Awareness of Self and Others

Two regions in the brain play particular roles in the perception of complex representations of the self and of its interactions with the external world. The anterior insula seems to be concerned with the integration of all the concordant multimodal sensory signals associated with voluntary movements, while the inferior parietal cortex appears to represent movements that can be applied to the actions of others as well as the self. A study by Farrer and Frith showed that being aware of causing an action was associated with activation in the anterior insula, whereas being aware of not causing the action and attributing it to another person was associated with activation in the inferior parietal cortex. (Farrer & Frith, 2002)

Having insight into oneself is an important element of a process for change. Psychotherapy, to a much greater extent than psychopharmacological interventions, involves the whole profile of the self in its attempts to effect a change. (Svenaeus, 2009) Feelings play an important role here because they represent a broad and deep summation and integration of information from diverse sources within the person (Haverkamp, 2012). To perceive, decode and understand them is a powerful tool to scan and process a massive amount of information in a relatively short time. However, this would require that one is vigilant and receptive towards them.

The 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.

Feeling Oneself in Interaction with Others

A sense of self does not depend on another, while personality does (Haverkamp, 2017b). The sense of self is the perception of information flows. However, the kind of self depends on others. The development of a whole and healthy, integrated self begins from birth, and even before it. It arises through communication, the exchange of meaningful messages. The processes and several of the communication patterns involved have been described by the author elsewhere (Haverkamp, 2019b). One important dynamic is feedback which uses features of the general communication pattern of the question. The infant, by his behavior, stimulates the environment, and foremost his mother or other primary caretaker, to various reactions. Balint called this echo and feed-back (Balint, 1963). He described this response as what the mother contributes to the stimulus and reactions out of her self. The infant then gets to know what he is like in terms of someone else's experience. The infant therefore gets to know himself, and his mother at the same time, by how she reacts to him. "There is no possibility of the development of a healthy self when there is no proper feed-back at acceptable intervals." (Balint, 1963)

While individual self-realization may in several cases may mean greater freedoms in some aspects, it has also contributed to inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose (Honneth, 2004). However, if we understand self-realization also from a psychological perspective, in terms of a better connectedness and greater receptiveness to internal and external information, then it can actually have the opposite effect by contributing a richer and more detailed inner representation of oneself. The better understanding of oneself leads to greater effectiveness in interactions with the world and clearer goals in terms of needs, values and aspirations (Haverkamp, 2018c).

Reflection of Outer and Inner Worlds

The inner world of wishes, fantasies, affects, and self- and object-representations and the outer world of overt behavior and social reality continuously and reciprocally co-create each other (Wachtel, 2009). Daily life and conscious and unconscious subjective organization mutually shape and maintain each other and in the process maintain the individual's dominant personality patterns. (Wachtel, 2009)

Out of Sync in the World

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.

Building Connections from the Inside

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.

The Story of Life

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 to one's maximum potential. Individuals with an experience of self which lacks solidity and conviction appear to be unable to know themselves directly and turn to others in their environment and in fantasy in order to discover or confirm a vision of themselves (La Farge, 2008). We "can come to understand these patients' shadowy sense of self by

looking at direct self-knowledge and knowledge of the self that is acquired through others as two storylines” (La Farge, 2008).

The experienced ability to bring about information or “things” within oneself and within the larger world is integral to the concept of story, and so also to the story of one’s life. Beyond the internal worlds of thoughts and feelings, however, it also has a significant effect in real life. Greater perceptions of generativity are associated with greater longevity and better physical functioning in old age. In one study, greater levels of generativity and generative contributions at baseline predicted lower odds of experiencing increases in disability with regard to activities of daily living, or of dying, over a 10-year follow-up period (Gruenewald, Liao, & Seeman, 2012) Feelings as an important source of information, when listened to and used effectively, can contribute to the creation of the individual life story that works for him or her.



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