

Your place to grow

Finding the happy balance between what you know and where you could go

There are two strong narratives that run through self-improvement advice – understanding who you are and what you want and being curious to new experiences and ideas. Sometimes, it can feel as though the two forces are pulling in opposing directions. It's a fine line at points, but incorporating a balance of both is important for happiness, mental wellbeing and a rich and fulfilling life.

Knowing yourself

Navigating this difficult dance is an ongoing process, but a good way to start is by building a deeper understanding of how these two ideas differ, the benefits they offer and their limitations. 'Knowing yourself entails understanding your values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, desires and emotions,' says counselling psychologist Louise Goddard-Crawley. This, she says, is built via self-reflection, introspection and gaining insights from past choices: 'Knowing yourself provides a solid foundation for making informed decisions and setting meaningful goals aligned with your authentic self.' It also fosters authenticity in relationships and helps develop resilience. 'You build genuine connections with others, as you can express your thoughts and feelings more openly,' says Louise. 'And when you are self-aware, you can navigate challenges more effectively and bounce back from setbacks.'

Embarking on a journey of getting to know yourself is important, but sometimes, if you walk too far down this path, it can have a negative impact on wellbeing. Louise notes that 'overemphasis on introspection' can be self-limiting and create a fixed mindset instead of an open one. 'It may lead to excessive

self-criticism or complacency, or analysis paralysis,' she says. 'Assuming you know everything about yourself can hinder openness to change and adaptation.' This could limit future opportunities and prevent you from experiencing life to its fullest.

Going beyond your comfort zone

At the other end of the spectrum is putting yourself out there and being open and curious to new experiences. This is important for several reasons. It's a crucial part of personal growth. 'Trying new experiences and challenges stimulates learning and development,' says Louise. And venturing beyond your comfort zone exposes you to diverse perspectives and opportunities which, she adds, are key to 'expanding your horizons'. It also boosts self-confidence in the long-term, as 'conquering challenges reinforces belief in your capabilities and builds self-assurance'.

Taken to the extreme, however, the approach can cause problems. Constantly pushing yourself beyond your limits, for example, can lead to stress and burnout. It can also result in unnecessary risk-taking and cause a dip in confidence. 'Taking on too much without assessing your capabilities may result in failure and disappointment,' says Louise.

Mixing and matching

Incorporating both ideas is necessary for a balanced life. At times, one approach may be at the fore as the other recedes, and vice versa. Often, however, it's about finding a happy middle, where both ideas work together. 'In reality, they are





complementary,’ says mindset and confidence coach Phyllis Woodfine. ‘They are both sides of one coin that, if looked at equally, can really lead to a fulfilling life. You can use your knowledge of yourself to propel yourself forward. This is about the self-awareness of knowing your strengths, weaknesses and passions and, at the same time, not wanting to stagnate or isolate yourself.’ This same awareness helps you pull yourself back when needed, too.

Part of this centres on adopting a growth mindset rather than a fixed one. The concept, developed by US psychologist Carol Dweck, refers to believing in your ability to become better. When you adopt a growth mindset, you change your thought patterns, abilities and skills by working hard over time. In contrast, a fixed mindset is one that believes talent and intelligence cannot be improved, thereby rendering futile any effort to work towards change. Looked at from the position of a growth mindset, it’s arguably easier to navigate the journey of learning to understand yourself at the same time as remaining curious and open to new challenges.

Navigating the two

At times, it’s natural to feel torn between these opposing ideas. You’re not alone if you’ve ever found yourself questioning whether you’re making a decision from a place of knowing yourself or if you’re letting an idea of who you are – and what you can and can’t do – hold you back from trying something new or different. Thankfully, there are ways to interrogate what’s going on. Reflecting on your behaviour within a wider self-awareness practice is useful. ‘Make time in your day to quietly sit and do this,’ says Phyllis. This could be by journaling or simply allowing yourself some space to think and check in with your emotions and feelings. Pay attention to how you feel about a situation or opportunity. Fear and discomfort might

indicate holding back, while excitement and enthusiasm may suggest personal growth. Mindfulness can also bring clarity when the mind is whirring fast, says Phyllis: ‘Think about what you are experiencing without judgment. Just observe it for a few minutes or longer, if you wish.’ (See opposite for more suggestions.)

It’s also useful to assess long-held thoughts and beliefs and ask if they still reflect who you are and whether they’re indicative of where you want to be. ‘Ask if they’re [still] true,’ says Phyllis. ‘If you view [them] as library books you have at home, is it time you took them back to the library, as you don’t need them any more?’ If you’ve been unintentionally holding yourself back, think about small, manageable and realistic goals for the future. ‘These need to be clear but not overwhelming, so they may help push you beyond your comfort zone,’ adds Phyllis. Louise agrees: ‘Go slowly. Gradually stretch your comfort zone instead of rushing into overwhelming situations.’

A clear, unbiased and honest awareness of the self, however, isn’t always straightforward. Sometimes, it’s helpful to ask trusted friends and family for their opinion. They might throw light on a blind spot or a potential area for growth that you’ve overlooked. Or you might find it useful to talk to someone who’s totally independent, perhaps a life coach, counsellor or therapist. However you approach your reflection, cut yourself some slack. As Louise says: ‘Embrace self-acceptance and kindness while exploring new experiences or confronting personal limitations.’

Words: Elizabeth Bennett

For more information about Louise, visit drlouiseqc.co.uk and go to phylliswoodfinecoaching.com for details of Phyllis’s work

DO YOU KNOW YOURSELF OR ARE YOU HOLDING YOURSELF BACK?

Phyllis suggests patterns that might lead you to the answers

Indications that self-awareness is keeping you in your comfort zone

Life is becoming boring. You find yourself stuck in predictable or routine scenarios and habits, without any real excitement in life.

There’s a resistance to change and challenges. You avoid any situation that requires adaptation or things that make you feel uncomfortable.

Failure feels like a big deal. You avoid taking risks and trying new activities because you’re afraid they won’t work out and overlook the importance of any lessons you might learn.

People’s judgments worry you. You avoid speaking up at meetings or around friends and family, for fear they’ll think you less than able or competent.

The passion has gone. You’re no longer excited about what you’re doing and find yourself just going through the motions.

Signs that curiosity is pushing you too far

Emotions are drained or frazzled. You constantly feel exhausted, tired and unhappy doing things that no longer meet your values or that you enjoy.

Passions have been neglected. You’ve abandoned hobbies or activities that brought you joy and prioritised pursuits that don’t truly align with your desires.

Physical signs of a mismatch. You feel stressed, fatigued and struggle to sleep well because your lifestyle doesn’t align with your true values or ideas.

Loss of authenticity. You’ve lost sight of the real you and feel like you’re fitting into someone else’s mould.

Social isolation. You’re no longer seeing friends and family. Other non-joy-giving commitments take priority or you’re feeling disconnected from loved ones.

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