



It's called "metacognition," and it's a topnotch mental skill to possess.

By definition, this means "awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes." Notice the term "processes," which is central to this attribute.

Metacognition is more than the ability to recognize one's thoughts. It includes the capacity to identify how one's thinking operates in cognitive areas such as decision-making, creativity, emotional awareness and self-regulation, learning and comprehension. Simply stated, it is understanding how we know.

If our thoughts are like bits of data in a computer, then mental processes are the software making it all work. So, having the ability to recognize, reflect on and even tinker with these processes makes you a kind of super user of the mind. And that can make big differences in one's life.

Consider Sheryl, a single career professional, hobbled with what she described as "a deep insecurity." For instance, if she texted a friend or romantic interest without receiving a response quickly, she became anxious and felt compelled to repeat her message, often multiple times.

And then there was Jeb, a middle-aged dad and tradesman who struggled with his temper. If someone pushed one of his hot buttons, and he had many, he went from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde in the blink of an idea.

Metacognition involves splitting into two mental personas, one doing the thinking and the other observing the entire cognitive dance. This psychological division of labor promotes self-regulation, the ability to respond emotionally without reacting in a knee-jerk fashion. Which is why young children, who lack metacognition, often struggle with managing their feelings and behaviors. This attribute leaves the thinking mind more in charge of one's feelings, rather than the other way around.

"You might want to consider learning awareness-focused meditation," I suggested to both of them.

Meditation, which is a scientifically validated tool for promoting well-being, incorporates several potential areas of focus. One centers on growing one's compassion for others and one's self. Another addresses concentration and the capacity to stay in the present moment. But, the one I recommended to Sheryl and Jeb focuses on growing metacognition by observing one's thought processes.

Now, many folks hear the word "meditation" and think of turbaned ascetics sitting in the lotus position. But, the modern secular version is far less intimidating.

There is growing evidence that as little as ten minutes a day of this type of meditation is sufficient to grow metacognition. The discernible effects arrive around six to eight weeks into this daily discipline and amplify as one's practice elongates, which is what both Sheryl and Jeb discovered.

"I still get those insecure thoughts, but I don't feel nearly as anxious and can put them aside pretty easily," she said three months into her practice.

Jeb reported that, "When something ticks me off, I can actually pause and look at what's happening in my head. Usually, that cuts it off at the pass."

Through this meditative approach, both of them recognized how their thoughts followed a predictable line of thinking, and the ways this inner dialogue triggered their emotional reactions, which then instigated unwanted behavioral responses. The whole cognitive dance became visible. And, often, what we can see, we can modify.

Without metacognition, we are far more emotionally reactive, harbor many mental blind spots, lack self-awareness and pretty much fly blind from a psychological perspective. Some folks seem pre-loaded for this capacity, but others, like Sheryl and Jeb, have to work at it.

The good news is that, except in some narrow circumstances, metacognition is a learnable capacity. And while meditation is not the only contemplative way to incorporate this attribute (journaling is another, for example), it is proving to be highly effective and easy to incorporate into one's life, even a busy one.

Without metacognition, we remain oblivious to how the mind operates.

As Einstein said, "Any fool can know. The point is to understand."