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The Evolution of Experience

AUTHENTIC COUNSELING SERVICES

Conscious awareness. Intentional action. Acceptance and resolution.

The goal of this process is to bring your conscious mind into the lead: observing and evaluating your thoughts, directing your actions, and allowing emotions to provide valuable information rather than make your decisions. Instead of being driven primarily by unconscious reactions and the alarm responses of your nervous system, you are learning to respond with awareness and intention.

When these automatic systems are driving us, fear can become anxiety, and emotional turmoil can create a physical state that is uncomfortable to be in. We do not feel well, and it becomes difficult to think clearly. Thoughts become disorganized. Our energy goes into reacting rather than resolving. We may feel out of control or even helpless, as though we are living in survival mode.

Our survival responses put us on alert so that we can recognize danger, react, and stay alive. These responses can prepare us to run fast or fight hard. But many everyday problems require something different: clear thinking, creativity, patience, and effective communication. When we are highly activated, those abilities can become harder to access. The reaction that prepares us for danger may not be the response that helps us resolve a difficult conversation, tolerate uncertainty, or make a thoughtful decision.

At the same time, we may feel driven to avoid whatever is causing the turmoil. It seems too frightening, too overwhelming, too difficult, or too time-consuming to face. Yet turning toward what is bothering us is often necessary to work toward **acceptance of what is outside our control, intentional action toward what is within our control, and resolution where resolution is possible.**

Keep the goal in mind. It is not perfect peace or the absence of anxiety. It is to have more say in your response than your automatic reactions do. Proactive instead of reactive. Deliberate instead of driven by survival impulses. We are learning to suffer well rather than organizing our lives around escaping every uncomfortable experience. Avoidance may postpone the discomfort without resolving what is underneath it. Let’s learn to remain present in difficulty while working toward resolution or acceptance.

Use this process when emotional turmoil begins, or when you notice that you are no longer consciously aware and present. Its value grows as it moves from a coping skill you use in a difficult moment into a way of approaching life. A quiet setting may help at first. As you practice, you may be able to use a shorter version in everyday situations. Automatic reactions may pull you back in; notice that pull and deliberately return your attention to the process.

As you become more capable of facing emotional turmoil, you can develop greater confidence in yourself. From that confidence, a sense of peace can grow. Thoughts are observed and evaluated. Behavior becomes intentional and purposeful. Emotions have an important place: valuable information, but not the primary decision maker.

Let’s go there and practice staying there.

Slow down. Become present.

Create the space to respond instead of react.

Begin somewhere you can safely pause. Close your eyes if comfortable, and become aware of your breath. If closing your eyes makes it harder to stay present, keep them open.

Imagine time slowing down, like it does in a movie. Hear it slowing down. Feel the sensation of things becoming slower. Picture the movement around you slowing. Give yourself permission to stop rushing for a moment.

Allow your breath to slow. If comfortable, draw a breath in for a count of four, hold it for four, and let it out for four. Keep the breath gentle rather than forcing it. Shorten the count or leave out the hold if needed; if you become dizzy or uncomfortable, return to your natural breathing. Stay aware of the deliberate choice you are making with each breath.

Now allow your body to begin relaxing. Bring your attention to your forehead and let it soften. Notice your nose and lips. As you think about your lips, allow your jaw to loosen and your mouth to part slightly. Notice your shoulders and let them release and drop. Continue down through your arms, hands, chest, abdomen, legs, and feet. Imagine your muscles softening, as though your body is melting into the support beneath you. Continue to attend to your breath.

Throughout this process, remain aware of the influence you have over your breathing and your attention. Time is still slow. Your body is becoming more settled. If you are safe in this moment, remind yourself: I do not need to move right now. There is nothing I have to solve this instant. There is nowhere I need to go for this moment. My breath is slow. My body can be still. I can stay here.

Stay with this until you have enough space to begin responding rather than simply reacting. You do not have to eliminate every feeling. You are here, in the present moment, consciously aware. This is the moment in which you can choose your next action.

Bring the turmoil into focus

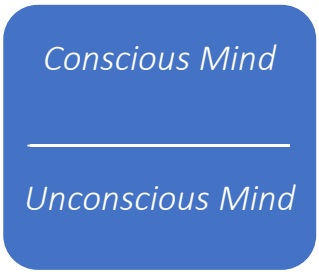
It can be difficult to work things out entirely inside your mind because attention is easily pulled away. Take out paper and a pencil, open a document, or talk with someone you trust who has wisdom. Putting your thoughts into words can help you maintain awareness, attention, and focus as you work toward resolution. Continue to notice your breathing and release tension as you go.

Be honest with yourself. Do not be unfair to yourself, but do not lie to yourself either. Ask the hard questions, and stay long enough to consider the answers. Do not let a question become another way to frighten yourself without examining it. If you do not yet know an answer, name what you do know and what remains uncertain.

When fear urges you to stop looking, notice it and return deliberately to what needs attention. Facing something does not require forcing yourself through overwhelming distress. Work at a pace that allows you to stay present, and bring in support when needed. The first eight questions and the final five help restore perspective. The middle questions help you understand the problem and decide what to do about it.

REFLECTION & DIRECTION

Questions for reflection



Keep your breath steady and your attention on one situation at a time.

1. What am I grateful for?
2. How long is this likely to last? Am I treating a difficult moment as though it will last forever?
3. Am I in actual danger, or am I facing a difficult moment?
4. Is this truly life-threatening, or does it feel that way?
5. Could I learn something valuable or gain strength through this experience?
6. What will change, and what will remain unresolved, if I avoid this?
7. Can I find peace or resolution without facing what is bothering me?
8. Can I face this and deal with it? What support would help me do that?
9. What is really bothering me?
10. How do I feel right now?
11. What am I afraid of?
12. What might this emotion be signaling or trying to accomplish?
13. What is my nervous system prompting me to do through this emotion? Does that response fit the situation?
14. Would acting on that urge actually help me?
15. What are my realistic options for handling this?
16. What are the pros and cons of each option?
17. What patterns am I falling into, and what do I need to guard against?
18. Do I have realistic expectations? Ask that question again.
19. What am I wishing were true? Is that wish realistic?
20. What am I wishing were not true? Am I responding to reality or resisting it?
21. Even if it would be difficult, what would be the best decision?
22. What parts of this situation must I accept? Identify what you cannot change, or what would require unreasonable or unrealistic efforts to change. Begin to imagine living with that reality and responding to it intentionally.
23. Am I okay in this moment? Can I handle the next step?
24. Do I feel different from when I started? Am I thinking more clearly or responding more intentionally?
25. Is this approach more helpful than the ways I have handled similar situations before?
26. Suffering is part of life. Joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, life and death all belong to the human experience. Can I practice accepting unavoidable suffering and doing something meaningful with it? Can this become a way of life?
27. What can I do right now to care for myself? A shower, a meal, a conversation, a run, or some rest?

If faith is part of your life

You can approach this process as prayer. Get quiet. Place your trust in God. Lament honestly about what is causing turmoil. Then remain quiet and attentive, seeking God’s guidance as you consciously reflect. Allow room for answers and peace to develop, even when they do not come immediately.

The central idea: Emotional turmoil can keep us caught between a problem we have not resolved and a reality we have not accepted. Slow down enough to think clearly, communicate effectively, and make a deliberate plan. Work toward resolution where you can, and acceptance where you cannot. Let your emotions inform you while your conscious awareness guides your response.