



ABC July 2020

Developing Self-Awareness at CIMBA: A Glimpse of the Future

The summer months give us the opportunity to take apart various components of our development system and make repairs, refine processes, calibrate technology, and test new approaches. Particular interest this summer has been placed on those brain circuits making up our Social Brain: those highly specialized neural pathways defining our Self-awareness, Social Awareness, and Self-Regulation abilities. Of primary interest is the integration of the LIFE bio-data and the various psychometric assessments that support each of these three neural pathways. Our intent is to create a “Workbook” for each of the three that provides its Science, Guidelines, and Assessments. One of the more interesting investigations has been **Self-Awareness**. As a first here in the ABC, we are going to present a “Beta” version of this activity, and seek your feedback. Please send your thoughts to info@cimba.it. Let’s begin:

What is Self-Awareness?

Self-awareness is defined as internal mindful consciousness of your character, strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. In order to serve a beneficial, productive purpose toward your wellbeing, Self-Awareness requires developing a clear perception and understanding of your mental, emotional, and physiological states. It means being attentive to your System 1 perceptions and knowing when to empower your System 2 to consider those perceptions more thoroughly. It allows you to objectively and impartially evaluate yourself, willingly seek feedback, manage your emotions, and align your action and behavior choices with your values. Being Self-Aware means having an enhanced sensitivity to the potential influence of System 1 thinking errors on critical thinking and decision making, perhaps explaining why research has repeatedly shown it as being one of *the strongest overall predictors of personal and professional success*.

What is the Neuroscience of Self-Awareness?

Our Self-Awareness circuits are an interesting mix of System 1 and 2 neural pathways. While Self-Awareness is predominately a System 2 function, our Self-Awareness circuits embrace System 1 functions for use in emotion processing, particularly negative emotions. Its primary System 2 component is the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), responsible for rationally processing sensory information in building a self-referential explanatory or *predictive narrative* as we think about ourselves. The orbitofrontal prefrontal cortex (OFC), the medial posterior parietal cortex (MPPC), and the insula serve to select, integrate, and enhance diverse sensory information to facilitate the MPC’s thought processing. If the MPFC perceives a threat (real or imagined), it elicits System 1 neural pathways to assist in emotion processing and reaction, particularly the temporal pole [emotion processing], subgenual prefrontal cortex (SGPFC) [rumination], amygdala [fight or flight emotions], hippocampus [memory], and hypothalamus [hormonal control]. Our most interesting insight was in seeing that individuals prone to heavy emotion processing and rumination show significantly more gray matter in the temporal lobe relative to those individuals with higher levels of Self-Awareness; that is, they are making greater use of those System 1 brain structures on a consistent basis, often to their detriment, and typically



below their level of conscious awareness. In this sense, we can almost “see” an individual’s level of Self-Awareness.

A second interesting insight has come from a deeper investigation into the data generated during the LIFE experience. For those of you who have had LIFE, in later sections of the Bio Report there is a measure of your overall stress during LIFE. What we have discovered is that this measure of stress provides an insight into your level of awareness. More specifically, if your level of overall stress is above average relative to the greater LIFE data set, it suggests additional work on awareness may be warranted. Note that I have used the word "awareness" by itself in that we cannot tell if that shortcoming is in Self or Social Awareness. I encourage you take a moment and look at your Bio Report. If you have questions, please direct them to your coach for a more specific response or to *info* for more general one.

How do I develop Self Awareness?

Another important insight was discovering that the traditional approach to developing Self-Awareness has serious shortcomings. Under traditional thinking, it is often stated that to have Self-Awareness you must do self-reflection. With the advent of brain imaging technology, we have found that this process definition can be misleading. In its purest form, Self-Reflection is about the conscious System 2 mental process of examining our thoughts, feelings, actions, and behaviors. In mathematics, physics, psychology, and other sciences, such a reflective inquiry requires that we examine the facts available and make an effort to understand why: relevant, verifiable, objective data used to address the question “why.”

As applied to Self-Awareness, a self-reflective inquiry undertaken in this way would address such inner “why” questions as: Why am I angry? Why am I still in this horrible relationship? Why am I afraid to speak up? Why do I always say yes when I am too busy and should say no? Why do I lack confidence? Why did this happen to me? The mental inquiry would focus on determining the causes of our thoughts, feelings, actions, and behaviors, particularly in the case of seemingly associated negative emotions. As in other sciences, we would search for the easiest and most plausible answer based on the data available to us. In contrast to the sciences, however, the data available is far more subjective and thus far less reliable. The data are often heavily influenced by System 1 thinking errors that can significantly bias our conclusions and, worse, often do so below our level of conscious awareness. Blinded by such System 1 thinking errors, such a “why” inquiry has more to do with self-criticism and victimhood than it does with personal growth and development. If we again reach into the realm of the broader sciences for insights, we can see that such reflective inquiry is necessary, but not sufficient, to fully support the Self Awareness development process. Self-reflection is often influenced by System 1 thinking errors, allowing biases and other mental shortcuts to itself generate "data" through interpretations and predictions based on non-causal random events, coincidences, and correlations; recall that the brain is a highly sophisticated prediction machine. Such “data” is typically given factual status by our brain, motivating us to jump to conclusions that they are causal when they are not, often influencing our action and behavior choices to our detriment.



We have found that Self-Awareness requires a more intricate self-reflective process called *introspection*, a deeper and more personal form of self-reflection. In contrast to self-reflection alone, introspection looks beyond the “facts” and additionally includes an examination of our mental and emotional states in looking inward. Importantly, instead of "why" questions, introspection demands "what" questions. That is, whereas self-reflection by itself would lead to the inquiry "Why do I feel terrible?" introspection would ask "What situations make me feel terrible and what do they have in common?" Because with introspection our “What” mindset is on personal growth and development, we are more receptive to new perspectives and to the notion that they could help us better determine the facts, leading to a more objective understanding of ourselves. In contrast to "why," "what" keeps our brain open to discovering new data about ourselves, even when that data is negative, in conflict with our existing beliefs, or otherwise would be viewed as being “in error” and ignored. If, as is the case with self-reflection alone, we do not make such a concerted effort to better understand true cause and effect, we will find ourselves far more susceptible to biases and other such thinking errors.

The CIMBA Preferred Self-Reflective Process: Embracing Mindfulness

Our most important discovery is in observing that in many of their important functions, mindfulness and Self-Reflection/introspection practices are very similar. The basic intent of mindfulness is in focusing our wandering mind, bringing it back to the present moment; that is, it involves attentive, engaged, observant System 2 Circuits. When we are mindfully aware of something, we are observing it impartially and objectively; we are not prejudging its significance based on unsupported and unverified assumptions. Such assumptions will motivate our System 1 Circuits to manage its disdain for ambiguity and uncertainty by developing an explanatory narrative, a narrative that very likely will be influenced by System 1 thinking errors to the detriment of our physical and mental well-being.

In training our brain to be more mindful, the typical approach involves focusing mental attention on our breathing. However, mindfulness can also be practiced by focusing on any activity, such as in mindful eating or walking. In any case, the intent is to train our brain to maintain its locus of attention on the present moment, excluding distractive and unrelated thoughts and feelings that may arise into our consciousness from our past or future. In a very similar fashion, Self-Reflection/Introspection makes use of the same mental processes. In our self-reflective inquiry, we place our attentional focus on a particular event that is giving us a degree of discomfort. Our intent is to better understand it, what is influencing it, in order to make better action and behavior choices toward the more effective management of it. Both mindfulness and Self-Reflection/Introspection practices provide us with the opportunity and ability to change our thoughts and feelings with regard to an event, particularly when we determine that they are being influenced by System 1 thinking errors. One question seemed obvious to us: Given our efforts in understanding and then developing the most effective Self-Reflection/Introspection practice, is there a particular mindfulness practice that couples with it most efficiently, that allows us to get the most from both of them? After years of evaluation and testing, we have settled on Dr. Dan Siegel's *Wheel of Awareness*. (I encourage you to go to Dan’s website for a full and complete description of this important tool - www.drdansiegel.com/resources/wheel_of_awareness/).



Within our personal development system, we place considerable importance upon our brain's ability to productively integrate episodic and emotional information (social sensitivity), to be interoceptive (have a conscious sense of the internal state of our body), and to manage unproductive, unhealthy patterns of emotion and cognition (System 1 thinking errors). Consistent with these developmental objectives, the *Wheel of Awareness* is specifically intended to strengthen our mind by integrating our consciousness. It promotes insight, empathy, and integration by exploring our mental life, elevating conscious awareness of our body sensations, five senses, social connections, and thoughts and activities.

The *Wheel* has a center hub, an outer rim, and is divided into 4 quadrants in between. It is intended to be a metaphor for how our mind is structured. Through the practice, we essentially step outside of our immediate experience and enter an “observer” mode. The purpose of the practice is to cultivate a full sense of connection and awareness to both ourselves and the world around us, bringing a purposeful intent to being in the present. Our singular modification was in quadrant three focused on our mental activities; in this quadrant, we place the event upon which we want to focus our self-inquiry. Moving through the previous quadrants serves to “warm up” and integrate our senses, allowing the deeper self-exploration that Introspection requires.

THE APPROACH

To get the most from the experience, we suggest the following approach to the mixed *Wheel of Awareness* and *Self-Reflection/Introspection* practices:

1. Identify and place in your mind, the event upon which you intend to reflect more deeply. To avoid emotional confusion, a strong System 1 tendency, we encourage you to limit yourself to one event.
2. Find a quiet time and place. Begin by placing yourself in a comfortable position. Whether sitting on the floor or in a chair, allow your spine to be straight and long, and let your shoulders drop, relaxed. Rest your hands in your lap, and gently close your eyes.
3. Sense the rhythm of your breathing. There is no need to change your breathing in any specific way, simply notice it exactly as it is.
4. As you breathe in and out, begin by visualizing the *Wheel*. The hub is at the center of the *Wheel*, and the four quadrants surround it. The rim of the *Wheel* encompasses everything -- the hub and the four quadrants – and metaphorically, everything you know and can be aware of. For each portion of this practice, you will send out a "spoke" from the hub to the rim that specifies where you will focus your attention. Envision that spoke rotating counterclockwise from the beginning to the end of the quadrant as you focus your attention and reflect upon the subject of the quadrant. After each quadrant, we suggest you again center yourself at the hub with a deep breath before sending out a spoke to the next quadrant.



5. Turn your attention to the first quadrant – your five senses. One by one, take time to focus your awareness on what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. When you turn your attention toward seeing, you can either gently open your eyes for a moment or place attention on the shadows created by the light that pierces your eyelids.

6. Next, send a spoke to the second quadrant and focus your attention on the inner sensations of your body (Sixth Sense). Take a few moments to move your focus of attention throughout your entire body, becoming aware of any sensation you feel from inside your physical being, from the muscles and bones of your head, limbs, and torso, to feeling the sensations in the organs within your body. Scan your body from head to toe, becoming aware of any and all physical sensations throughout: tingling, temperature, tension, numbness. Take your time to move through each body group, noticing, being curious, just observing.

7. The traditional approach to the Wheel would now move you to quadrant three, which focuses on the mind itself (Seventh Sense) and encourages you to take notice of any emotion, thought, memory, hope, belief, dream, image, longing, urge, attitude, or intention that enters your mind. It is here where we want you to bring into mind for reflection, your event of concern and undertake your Self-Reflection/Introspection practice upon it. We have found that the first and second quadrants of the *Wheel* serve to "warm up" the brain, greatly assisting in the deeper reflection introspection requires.

8. Next, move to the fourth quadrant (Eighth Sense). But here the traditional *Wheel* process is done in a slightly different way that serves both the *Wheel's* objectives and those of your Self-Reflection/Introspection practice. In the fourth quadrant, your attention is focused on your social environment, particularly on the people that make up that environment. To this point, the hub has been the "you" that has observed everything so far in the *Wheel* mindfulness practice - the part of you that has been listening, looking, focusing, sensing. But this time, "bend" the spoke of awareness and refocus it back on the hub, on you. In essence, you are standing in their shoes observing you, exploring their thoughts and feelings about your relationship. From the perspective of your Self-Reflection/Introspection practice, the fourth quadrant of the *Wheel* provides a particularly important follow-on from the third quadrant in that the overwhelming majority of coachee events of concern arise in a social context. The intent of the reflective practice in the third quadrant is to assist you in identifying more productive action and behavior choices for when you confront them in the future. Those choices are likely to affect others and the fourth quadrant gives you the opportunity to consider what they may see, feel, sense, or believe. After raising your awareness of those affected by your third quadrant reflection and the choice alternatives it has provided, consistent with traditional *Wheel* practice we encourage you to move to others in your social environment and examine their thoughts and feelings about your relationship more generally. Again, ask what they may see, feel, sense, or believe. As you bring the fourth quadrant to close, take a few moments to cultivate a sense of being aware of your awareness.

9. As the mindfulness session comes to an end, simply bring your attention back to your breathing, as you did in the beginning of the practice. You may find it beneficial to take a few deep, slow breaths here, to ground



yourself back into this moment. Then, when you are ready, open your eyes, rub your hands together to warm them and gently stroke your face to bring the warmth of your hands to your face as a symbol of the session's close and as a physical reward for your efforts.

Self-Awareness Support Development Aid

In addition, this summer we are working on several developmental aids to support your Self-Awareness development process. In general terms, these aids encompass specific developmental tools, self-discovery experiences, personal and professional feedback, and self-discovery assessments. One aid in particular that has caught our attention is *Expressive Journaling*. Despite the effectiveness of a concerted Self-Reflection/Introspection practice in developing our Self-Awareness Circuits, there are going to be emotional upheavals in our lives that require much more. While the experience itself will very likely alert us to this need, we might otherwise come to this realization after examining such an emotional experience through our Self-Reflection/Introspection practice. In such cases, rather than the sense of calm control that typically accompanies the closure of our practice, we find ourselves burdened with a persistent dysfunctional level of emotion. If left alone, the emotional agitation may seriously disrupt our thought patterns, often through continuous rumination, and impact our productivity and health. In such situations, your coach will likely suggest a deep form of journaling that has been found to be effective in assisting in better understanding and managing such experiences. Within the journaling literature, this approach is referred to as either *expressive writing* or *story editing*. Here, we will refer to them more generally as *Expressive Journaling*.

Have a great Summer!