

# KEEPING YOUR SANITY THROUGH MEASUREMENT

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Aristotle 387-322 BC

*Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it. ? H. James Harrington*

*It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind the nature of the particular subject admits. – Aristotle*

Our ability to learn is based on feedback.

If I bump my head on a cabinet, the pain lets me know to duck next time... or to change the layout of my cabinets! If a conversation sparks my interest, that spark lets me know to pay closer attention. If I feel awful whenever I spend time with a particular acquaintance, that awful feeling tells me to reconsider spending more time with him.

There is a whole field of study of psychophysiology and biofeedback that is dedicated to helping people learn to control aspects of their physiology, including certain brainwaves, in order to achieve greater relaxation, lowered blood pressure, and other psychological and health benefits.

But we don't need that level of sophistication in order to make use of biofeedback. Our own bodies, and many common devices, give us plenty to go on... if we pay attention. This holds the key to taking charge of much more of our psychological and physiological existence than many of us know.

For example, how do you know when you're angry? The common answer is, "Well, because I *feel* angry!"

But there's something else that happens besides the emotion or reaction of anger. We have physical sensations – our muscles tighten, our heart rate climbs, our breathing changes, our teeth clench...

The specifics will vary to some degree for different people, but the more aware we can be of the physical sensations that accompany feeling angry, the easier it will be for us to sense that emotion coming on, and the better able we will be to catch it before we feel too consumed with emotion to think straight.

Panic attacks are often preceded by a shift in breathing as much as *forty-five minutes before* most people are aware of any feelings of panic. Becoming more aware of our breathing can help us catch those shifts and gently deepen our breathing long before our shallower breathing would have triggered a panic attack.

Situational awareness is noticing what's going on around us, paying attention to our perceptions. When we tune in to our surroundings, we can more easily notice signs of potential danger. We might be driving and notice a car that's weaving ever so slightly, and know to keep some extra distance in case they're texting, or they've been drinking – or they're maybe just a rotten driver.

When we don't pay attention to our physical sensations or perceptions, we can be easily blindsided – by our own emotions or reactions, or by external threats that seem to come out of nowhere.

*Thomas Jefferson once said that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. I would say that goes for the price of self-ownership and effective living, too. Aristotle would also.*

More subtle physical sensations often can precede the more intense emotional reactions that can cause so much trouble.

Once our heart rate goes above about 100 beats per minute we are likely in our fight or flight system and lose some of our cognitive ability, and even the ability to discern changes in facial expression or vocal tone – which means that the kind of intense, angry arguments that some of us can get caught in have – at best – zero useful effect in understanding each other.

Most often they're just destructive. And we can tell that by how we feel afterward, and the repairs we need to make with our relationship from the battle. It's much better to recognize our emotional state and remove ourselves from the situation long enough to calm our system, come out of our fight or flight protective system, and back into our higher brain.

(My course *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* goes into this in much more detail).

The more we can come to recognize our own physical sensations, the more quickly we can identify what's happening, and the more effectively and consciously we can respond.

We can grow all of these capacities through practice. Take a moment right now to notice what you're sensing physically in your body – tension, relaxation, warmth, cold, vibrations, your breathing, the beating of your heart....

This is different from our emotions, these are purely physical sensations; but they accompany, and can help us track our emotions – like spoor can help us track an animal. The more we practice noticing these sensations, the more attuned to them we can become, and the sooner we can notice when something's different.

We can also grow our situational awareness through practice. Just take a moment any time you enter a room to consciously take in some of the details. Pay a little closer attention to the people around you, notice what they're doing; notice specific details like hair color, height, tone of voice.

But there's another facet to explore here. What if there's something about our current situation that we would like to change? Our behavior, our knowledge, or our physical condition?

Simply put, if you want to change something, measure it.

If you want to lose weight, one of the most effective – and very simple – things you can do is to weigh yourself every morning. It helps you to keep tuned to your goal, and the feedback keeps you conscious of your own behavior as well.

If you want to be more frugal, write down what you spend. Not just the things that are easy to write down; *everything* you spend. Writing it down diligently means you can't keep secrets from yourself.

Do you want to be better at your work? Measure your activities, and what comes of them.

Do you want a better relationship? Write down how many kind things you do, how many times you respond positively and actively to good news – and how many times you respond to good news by ignoring it.

Do you want to become more physically fit? Write down exactly what you do each day for physical exercise.

Carpenters have a saying, "Measure Twice, cut once." Paying attention and measuring what we do that we'd like to improve, puts our personal feedback system on alert. It engages our conscious awareness in the project of building ourselves into better people.

Take the time to pay attention to your body's signals, and to measure the things you want to improve. It can significantly sharpen your skills of self-improvement and give you the precious feedback you need to flourish.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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