

KEEPING YOUR SANITY THROUGH SELF-REFLECTION

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In Greek and Roman Mythology, Narcissus

stared at his own reflection, so absorbed in his own image he was oblivious to anybody else. The idealized image that he saw withdrew him from the world. He was in an emotional vacuum, devoid of anything but what he wanted to see.

But aside from Narcissus, and those suffering from the psychological condition of narcissism, our own self-reflection can provide us the kind of useful assessment that allows us to live up to our own standards.

Researchers Robert Wicklund and Shelley Duval discovered back in the 1970s that when people were in front of a mirror and told they were being filmed, those people changed their behavior in very positive ways. They worked harder, gave more accurate answers to questions, were more consistent in their actions, and acted more consistently with their values.

About a decade later, Charles Carver and Michael Scheier looked at this in more depth, and within their larger explorations of self-awareness and self-regulation, found something fascinating.

When people sat at a desk with a mirror—not a great big ostentatious mirror mind you, just a small part of the surroundings—they were more likely to stay true to their own values than to follow someone else's orders. They would work harder, they resisted being bullied into changing their opinion, and when they were told to administer shocks to somebody, they were more restrained in doing so.

A simple, small mirror provided enough reflection for people to better regulate their behavior.

Self-regulation is the moral fulcrum that allows all other moral behavior. Without the capacity for self-regulation, we would live in an *amoral* world; a world where the concept of right and wrong is meaningless. If we are not in charge of our actions, if we don't have a choice in what we do or don't do, then we can't reasonably be held responsible for our actions.

Self-reflection is what makes self-regulation possible. It allows us to see ourselves in action. In these experiments, a mirror was used to enhance people's self-reflection. But self-reflection is also enabled by the feedback we receive from others—and therefore our choice of relationships can make a big difference in our

lives.

If a mirror can have the kind of impact that was demonstrated in these experiments, think of how great an impact we have on the people in our lives—particularly those who look up to us: children, employees, students, and lots of other people whom we might not ever think we were influencing.

A great effect of our relationships is to have who we are—our actions, words, and way of being in the world—reflected back to us, and to do the same for others. There will be different qualities that will be reflected than those of a simple mirror; we will be thinking more of the other's experience of what we do than just our own internal values and wishes. Perhaps more emphasis on what's appropriate or expected through the eyes of the other. But the experience of being seen, of being visible to others, is a fundamental emotional need.

When we pay attention to a loved one, when we respond to her when she asks for our attention, when we show enthusiasm and interest at his good news, we are reflecting something precious back to that loved one.

On the receiving end, of course, we don't always want to see or hear what's being reflected to us about our behavior. It's easy to interpret as criticism what may be intended as feedback, and we don't always want to hear about our blind spots.

Speaking personally, some of my most important lessons came after fighting the crucial feedback I needed—until reality handily won that fight, as it always does. It's often the reflection we most want to avoid that holds the greatest potential for our growth. Sometimes the comments that are hardest to hear are the ones that we end up grumbling about, mulling over, and then eventually, grudgingly, using to make fundamental changes in our lives. It worked that way for me.

Accepting the reflection—from a valued person, from our own thoughts, or even from a simple mirror—can give us leverage to make real, tangible improvements in our daily lives. It's through such reflection that we are able to see, grow—and possess—our own virtue.

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. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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