

# KEEPING YOUR SANITY WITH CURIOSITY

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An essential ingredient for

success at anything – beyond the most mundane of rote tasks – is curiosity.

Curiosity is about exploration and discovery; it creates energy, possibilities, and movement. It also allows us to create relationships, and to grow more deeply and delightfully connected with one another. It allows us to play – and excellence in work can be like play for adults.

In my work as a Marriage and Family Therapist, Life Coach, and Business Consultant, I would be utterly useless without curiosity as a central deliberate practice. I need to get to know, before I do anything else, *who this other person is* – or who *these people* are if it's a couple or a work team.

I need to be keenly interested in knowing and understanding them, their circumstances, and what their goals and challenges and strengths are. That's all about curiosity.

You might think, “Well, that sounds like you start with empathy...” But empathy, in my experience, *follows from* curiosity. If we're curious about the other person, that's the portal through which our empathy and care for other people enters.

Think of your own work, your own family, your own friendships. With those with whom you enjoy a good relationship, I would bet that you also are curious about who they are as people.

On the other hand, if there are people from whom you feel more distant or critical, you might find that bringing more curiosity about their internal worlds can bring fresh energy and interest – and perhaps greater compassion as well.

In our work, our success and prospects grow with curiosity. The antithesis of curiosity is a sense of or desire for certainty.

*Curiosity* is a quality that allows us to deliberately expand our awareness, to explore and search for possibilities.

In contrast, when we look for *certainty*, we're looking to end the search, and bring the exploration to a close.

The need for certainty can reinforce the need for more certainty, as we narrow our possibilities.

We become *more defensive* in the pursuit of being right; we'll tend to replay events as we interpreted them, rather than wondering what we may have missed. We'll tend to look for and *hold on to stereotypes*, avoiding too much empathy or self-reflection in favor of what we think we know.

Needing certainty locks us down into familiar dogma. It makes us rigid, saps our energy, and leads ultimately to bad decision making – since we will have closed off a whole world of information that doesn't already fit our model of the world.

This is why in my profession – and I many other professions as well – the longer one spends practicing does not often lead to greater skill. Unless we continue to explore and learn and practice new skills deliberately. That all requires curiosity.

As Harry Truman said, “An expert is someone who doesn't want to learn anything new, because then he wouldn't be an expert.”

There's nothing wrong with wanting certainty. There are times when curiosity is not called for. Pure, well-practiced, rote competence and focus can make the difference between life and death when we're driving in a dangerous situation; it can make the difference between success or failure in an objective test, or putting together a precise piece of machinery.

So there are times where exploration and curiosity are not what we need. But when we're *habitually* looking for certainty, eager to end the search, we're severely limiting the possibilities for living a rich and fulfilling life.

We may also be limiting our health and how long we live.

When curiosity and mortality were studied over five years, in 2,000 older adults between the ages of 60 and 86, the single most important quality that determined whether any of them were still living at the end of the 5-year study was – you guessed it – curiosity.

Their age, whether they smoked, or any other medical conditions such as cancer or cardiovascular disease... none of this affected their mortality as much as curiosity.

Growing our sense of curiosity is also something that we can do fairly easily – and it can be *a lot of fun*, once we get the hang of it. Of all the major personality traits, curiosity and openness are the most malleable; curiosity is something we can grow on purpose, and we can do this at any time of life.

So how do we do this? We start by not expecting ourselves to fundamentally transform overnight. We begin to grow in curiosity by practicing it; by opening our self-concept to think of ourselves as a curious explorer; and by deciding to deliberately bring more curiosity to little things we do each day.

This can be absolutely anything; and it can help to use the words, “*I wonder.*”

We can try a different kind of food (“I wonder what that would taste like?”), or see what it's like to drink our morning coffee outside instead of inside (“I wonder what I'll experience?”).

We can go for a “listening walk” around our neighborhood, deliberately noticing the different sounds we hear (“I wonder what I’ll discover?”).

We can ask different questions, drive a different route to work (“I wonder what that would be like?”).

It may help to think of a role model, somebody you know who is particularly curious. What are some things they might explore that you could imagine happily trying yourself?

We can grow our curiosity with others in the same way; by deciding to deliberately bring a little more curiosity to each interaction. This may mean thinking of some good questions in advance.

But more than anything it means that when we ask those questions, our focus is on listening to the answers, getting to know the unique internal world of this strange creature (“I wonder what they have experienced that brought them to that idea or decision?”)

*Curiosity in relationships has a lot more to do with what we hear and understand from others than what we say.*

It’s worth reflecting a bit on the kinds of things where certainty is useful and effective. Write those out so they’re clear to you. Then look at everything else and wonder what it would be like if you could bring more curiosity to these areas of your life.

Don’t look for an all or nothing, overnight change in your personality and habits. We usually don’t work that way.

Instead, ask yourself what it would be like if you brought just 5% more curiosity to your work, your relationships, your other activities. If you brought 5% more curiosity to any of these this week, what would happen?

I wonder what that would be like....

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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