

Personal Development Program

Objectives

- 1) To understand the self and identify positive and negative qualities in order to progress on the path to God.
- 2) To learn strategies for personal growth from the wisdom in Divine teachings.
- 3) To achieve well-being through self-awareness and self-control.
- 4) To enjoy peace of mind that is independent of circumstances.
- 5) To maximise the God given potential present in each human being.

Topics

Session One: Knowing yourself

Session Two: Mindfulness

Session Three: Building self esteem

Session Four: Emotional Intelligence

Session Five: Communicating well

Session Six: Building Resilience

Session Seven: Understanding Happiness

Session Eight: Looking after the self

Session Nine: Relationships

Session Ten: Enthusiasm for life

Knowing the Self

Importance of self-knowledge

Self-knowledge is a highly effective system of self-improvement. Knowing yourself means understanding yourself, probing deeper than just the surface. It can be uncomfortable and that is why many people tend to ignore it. But without it life can never achieve its maximum possible perfection. Knowing yourself is a conscious effort that requires thought and planning.

The Holy Quran says; *“O you who believe! Take care of yourselves; he who strays cannot hurt you when you are on the right path.” (5:105)* In this verse Allah tells us to pay attention to ourselves. We must be careful about the well-being of our spirits and be aware of the diseases of our souls. Then those who are misled will not harm us. From this we understand that our first duty is to take care of ourselves spiritually.

Many Hadith tell us about the importance of knowing the self. Imam Ali (a) says; *The one who has attained inner knowledge of his own self has obtained the greatest victory indeed.* He also says; *How can one who is ignorant of his own self expect to know others?*¹

In Ancient Greece, the philosopher Socrates declared that the unexamined life was not worth living. When he was asked to sum up all philosophical commandments he replied: ‘Know yourself.’

Reaching possible perfection

Perfection is the maximum conditional use of all inner faculties (innate and acquired) to achieve the highest possible stage of development.

Every being has a different level of perfection, closely matched to that being's inherent characteristics and purpose in the scheme of things in the universe. For instance, an ordinary shade tree which does not bear fruits compared with an apple tree which does the latter as well as the former, is considered of a lower status of perfection in the scheme of things. It is for this reason that an apple tree in an orchard, which grows enough leaves to provide ample shade but for some reason does not bear fruit, is most likely cut down and replaced with one that does. It has not lived up to its potential, its level of perfection. In other words, although the tree remains useful in many respects, it has failed in that aspect that distinguishes it from the less perfect trees which do not bear fruits.

The same analogy works when comparing humans and animals. If a human being does not exhibit characteristics which rise above those shared with animals, i.e., eating, drinking, seeking comfort, shelter, pleasure, and the continuation of the race, then that human being has not reached his or her full potential, or perfection.²

Process of Self Knowledge

1) **Identify yourself.**

What are your:

a) Strengths and Weaknesses

¹ Hadith taken from *The Scale of Wisdom* by Muhammadi Rayshahri, pg 705

² From: <https://www.al-islam.org/self-knowledge-mohammad-ali-shomali>

- b) Temperament – type of personality
- c) Goals in life – vision for yourself
- d) Interests – what you enjoy doing
- e) Discipline – control over yourself

2) **Work on your yourself**

- a) How can you enhance your strengths?
- b) What can you do to overcome your weaknesses?
- c) Plan steps to achieve your vision

3) **Inspire yourself with noble teachings**

- a) Verses of the Holy Quran – choose verses that you remind yourself of often.
- b) Hadith – inspire yourself with a daily hadith, a vitamin for your soul.
- c) Excerpts of duas – Makarimul Akhlaq, Munajaat of Sahifa Sajjadiyyah, Abu Hamza Thumali . .
- d) Books – religious and secular

4) **Persist** – the process is continuous. Don't give up after some time, or take it lightly. It is a serious matter of grave consequences.

5) **Take gradual steps** – Focus on small ways of understanding and watching yourself. Repeat them often and make changes accordingly.



Your cure is within you but you do not know

Your illness is from you but you do not see

You are the clear book through whose letters the hidden becomes manifest

You think that you are a small insignificant mass but within you unfolds an entire universe

You would not need what is outside of yourself if you would reflect on the self

but you do not reflect.

Imam Ali (a)³

³ See: <http://www.islamquest.net/en/archive/question/en22122>

Mindfulness

Understanding Mindfulness

- Awareness of the present moment
- Being fully engaged in the present
- Paying attention
- Focusing without judgment
- Shutting off the mind to all else
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Mindlessness

- Living in the past and future
- Continuous judging and inner talking
- Moving constantly from one thought to another

Hadith

Surely the friends of Allah when they are silent their silence is thoughtful, when they look their sight is insightful, when they speak their talk is wisdom, and when they walk their walking among people is blessed.

Holy Prophet (s) – al-Kafi, 2/237

Tawhid and the Mind

The true acceptance of One God creates a perspective of life that is mindful of the connection between God and the self. Every action and thought is referred to and connected with God. This consciousness is energized by following a program of activities sent as guidance by God.

Advantages of Mindfulness

- 1) Creates appreciation for life
- 2) Makes a person fully aware and alert.
- 3) Increases well-being and reduces stress.
- 4) Brings awareness of thought patterns and habits
- 5) Allows for healthier ways to respond to life's challenges

Stimulus → Reaction

Stimulus → Mindfulness → Response

The Inner state of a believer

- Submission to God
- Khushu; Awe of God
- Taqwa; God consciousness
- Gratitude
- Hope/Fear

Steps to becoming Mindful

- 1) **Observe your mind** - Watch your thoughts like an outside observer. What do you notice? How often do these thoughts repeat themselves?
- 2) **Control your thoughts** - When a negative thought comes up, counter it with a positive thought.
- 3) **Live in the now** - Most people live in the past or the future. By being conscious and aware of the present, you cleanse your mind of a lot of negativity.
- 4) **Fill your mind with positive messages** - The mind picks up negative messages from the environment. It could be people, media, books . . . etc. Inspire your mind through constant exposure to positive messages.

Quotes from: *Mindfulness in plain English*, Bhante Gunaratana

There is a difference between being aware of a thought and thinking a thought. The difference is very subtle. It is primarily a matter of feeling or texture. A thought you are simply aware of with bare attention feels light in texture; there is a sense of distance between the thought and the awareness viewing it. It arises lightly like a bubble and it passes away without necessarily giving rise to the next thought in that chain.

Normal conscious thought is much heavier in texture. It is ponderous, commanding, and compulsive. It sucks you in and grabs control of consciousness. By its very nature it is obsessional, and it leads straight to the next thought in the chain, with apparently no gap between them . . .

‘Discipline’ is a difficult word for most of us. It conjures up images of somebody standing over you with a stick, telling you that you’re wrong. But self-discipline is different. It’s the skill of seeing through the hollow shouting of your own impulses and piercing their secret. They have no power over you. It’s all a show, a deception. Your urges scream and bluster at you; they cajole; they coax; they threaten; but they really carry no stick at all. You give in out of habit. You give in because you never really bother to look beyond the threat. It is all empty back there. There is only one way to learn this lesson, though. The words on this page won’t do it. But look within and watch the stuff coming up – restlessness, anxiety, impatience, pain – just watch it come up and don’t get involved. Much to your surprise, it will simply go away. It rises, it passes away. As simple as that. There is another word for self-discipline. It is patience.

Building Self Esteem

O You who believe! Take care of your own selves; he who errs cannot hurt you when you are on the right path. (5:105)

Understanding self-esteem

Our self-esteem is how we value and perceive ourselves. It encompasses what we believe about ourselves and our abilities.

Why self-esteem

If you have low self-esteem you:

- feel you do not have much worth
- are unable to make decisions or assert yourself
- blame yourself for things that aren't your fault
- are unable to recognise your strengths
- think others are so much better than you in everything

Appreciating the Human being

- Representative of Allah - 2:30
- Dignified by Allah - 17:70
- Responsibility in the world - 33:72
- Capable of great things - 2:31
- Potential to change - 55:29
- Loves to do good - 49:7

Losing self esteem

- 1) Not understanding the position of the human being
- 2) Lack of self-knowledge
- 3) Comparing/Conforming to others
- 4) Need for popularity
- 5) Memories of the past

Gaining self esteem

- 1) Reflecting on the self; understanding your strengths and your uniqueness
- 2) Having a goal in life
- 3) Paying attention to personal grooming
- 4) Being careful about your diet

5) Being grateful

6) Challenging yourself

One way to measure self-esteem is to evaluate your ability to authentically be your true self. Often people look for self-confidence and self-respect everywhere except within themselves. They are constantly seeking approval and respect of others. This quest is doomed to failure because it is only in the way we respond to ourselves that creates the feeling of peace and success.

The Critical inner voice

Most of us are familiar with those nagging thoughts that tell us we are not good enough, that cast doubt on our goals and undermine our accomplishments. Every person is divided; part of us is goal-directed and self-possessed, while another part is self-critical, self-denying, and even self-destructive. This "anti-self" perpetuates a negative thought process

The critical inner voice is formed out of painful early life experiences in which we witnessed or experienced hurtful attitudes toward us or those close to us. As we grow up, we unconsciously adopt and integrate this pattern of destructive thoughts toward ourselves and others. When we fail to identify and separate from this inner critic, we allow it to impact our behavior and shape the direction of our lives. It may sabotage our successes or our relationships, preventing us from living the lives we want to lead and becoming the people we seek to be

(Extracted from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201305/4-ways-overcome-your-inner-critic>)

Self-esteem and the Past

A lot of what we think about ourselves comes from past experiences. It is based on what people have told us about ourselves, since childhood. Some of these memories, especially the negative ones, get ingrained in us and it is difficult to overcome them. To truly understand ourselves we will have to break free of those limitations and counter the memories of the past.

Learn from the mistakes of the past and remember that change is always possible. Things were probably not as bad as you think they were. We often don't think about the positive things about ourselves from the past. Reminding yourself of those can help you feel better about yourself.

Self-esteem and Pride

An inflated sense of self-esteem becomes pride, when you think you are better than anyone else. A healthy sense of self-esteem is a realistic realization of your own self-worth along with an acceptance of your faults and limitations. A low sense of self-esteem is not realizing your strengths and abilities.

Emotional Intelligence

O people, take charge of the disciplining of yourselves and redress them from the wildness of their habits. Imam Ali (a), Scale of Wisdom, H#6194

Intelligence is of many different types and can vary across individuals. It is important to know how intelligence can improve well-being and speed progress on the path to achieving life's goals. Without that there is not much use of brilliant intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence is being smart about how you navigate yourself through life and achieve maximum success in your self-development and personal interactions. It includes the following;

1) **Emotional Awareness** – being conscious of what you, and others, are feeling.

This requires an alertness to the self. When you are able to watch your thoughts and emotions from a distance almost, it is possible to see them as others would. Then there can be action on them as required. Imam Sadiq (a) says; *Be like someone who has shed his soul from his body or like someone who is attending the great parade on the Day of Reckoning, not distracting yourself from the obligations which your Lord has laid on you . . .* (Lantern of the Path, pg 31)

2) **Emotional Understanding** – knowing where the emotions spring from. Self-consciousness includes identifying the roots of an emotion and knowing why you are experiencing that particular emotion. It could be baggage from the past, assumptions, or unreasonable fears . . . etc. This knowledge equips you to counter the emotion if necessary or channel it

appropriately. Sometimes some emotions mask other emotions. Understanding them may reveal the hidden emotions.

3) **Emotional Management** – overcoming negative emotions and harnessing positive ones.

Although the initial emotion is often involuntary the decision to indulge in that emotion lies with us. We can stop and control the emotion as necessary. This is difficult and can come with prayer and practice. It has to be done in the initial stages for it to be effective.

Imam Khumayni says about controlling anger;

Among the practical remedies the important ones involve withholding the self in the initial stages of anger. This is because it is ignited little by little, becoming more intense until its furnace is set burning fiercely and its flame becomes violent and furious. When that happens it gets completely out of control and shuts off the lights of one's faith and intellect. . . . therefore one should be on one's guard so as to disassociate oneself by some means before its fierceness mounts and its fire becomes more violent.

The Internal Capacity

Internal capacity of a human being can be compared to a vessel. How much can it take? Just as human beings differ in their physique, in their characters, they also differ in their capacities. Imam Ali (a) says: *O Kumayl, these hearts are like vessels and the best of them is the one most aware (understanding).* Reactions of human beings to situations and people depend on their inner capacities. The bigger the vessel the smaller the reaction.

Signs of Emotional Intelligence

- 1) **Pleasant Manners** – Good manners even with those who don't deserve it shows a large inner capacity. The Holy Prophet (s) says; *Good Nature is half of religion* (Scale of Wisdom, H#1928) Imam Sadiq (a) says; *There is no life more wholesome than that lived with good nature* (Ibid, H#1933)
- 2) **Balanced Temperament** – does not get overly sad or excited about things in life. That is the ultimate inner equilibrium recommended for a believer. Allah says; *So that you may not grieve for what has escaped you, nor be exultant at what He has given you* (57:23)
- 3) **Tolerance and Forbearance** - The ability to endure without responding. Some people have a low threshold for tolerance. Forbearance has been described in Islam as the friend of a believer, his Minister, his beauty and adornment.
- 4) **Not focusing on small things** – Realizing that there is a lot more to life than petty things which don't matter much.
- 5) **Knows their triggers** – Understanding what causes certain emotions and being able to plan accordingly.
- 6) **Does not blame others** – It is a sign of low emotional intelligence to avoid responsibility and look to shift the blame on others. A mistake must be acknowledged, amended if possible, and learned from for the future.

Increasing Emotional Intelligence

- 1) Take time to focus and contemplate.
- 2) Reflect on your interactions. How could you have behaved differently? Practice it net time.
- 3) Think of others. Empathise with others and learn to prefer others over yourself.
- 4) Keep things in perspective. Having the big picture helps to increase internal capacity.
- 5) Learn from inspiring examples in history. Great leaders such as the Imams demonstrated high levels of emotional intelligence.

Dua to help increase emotional intelligence

رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي
وَاحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِنْ لِسَانِي يَفْقَهُوا قَوْلِي

O my Lord! Expand my chest for me, and make my affair easy to me,
And loosen the knot from my tongue that they may understand my word

(Sura Taha, no.20, verses 25-28)