



At a Glance: Develop the self-awareness (strengths, weaknesses, interests, values, preferences) and the self-efficacy (confidence) to live a life that is more meaningful to you. Identify factors that contribute to your happiness.

Understanding Self-Knowledge

Self-knowledge is a broad term which implies the awareness of one's feelings, attributes, motivations, and abilities. It is important to note that self-knowledge is not a static type of information to acquire, but rather is as dynamic and constantly changing as you are. As you learn and grow throughout the course of your life, your ability to know yourself and to become aware of who you are constantly changes.

While learning about oneself is an enlightening journey on its own, it is not necessarily a straightforward one. Our minds skillfully craft mechanisms to keep unpleasant or anxiety-provoking thoughts and feelings outside of our consciousness.¹ These mechanisms, such as intentional forgetting or unconscious repression, can cause us to avoid the reflection necessary to obtain self-knowledge. This is because we have a stronger desire to maintain a certain internal image of ourselves than to learn about who we truly are.² The end result is that we often lack self-knowledge and remain unaware of its merits in our personal and professional lives.

Another important consideration in the understanding of self-knowledge is the concept of coping self-efficacy. Introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977, coping self-efficacy refers to your belief in your own ability to succeed in a specific situation.³ High levels of coping self-efficacy have been linked to enhanced goal achievement,^{4,5} decreased stress, and better self-care.⁶ Thus, in the same way that the title character in the children's book *The Little Engine that Could* succeeds in getting up the hill by chanting "I think I can! I think I can!" cultivating the belief that you are capable of achieving what you set out to do (coping self-efficacy) means that you are more likely to succeed. The capacity to bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events (such as increased responsibility, or progress), therefore adapting to changing circumstances^{1,2}.

Why does it matter?

Graduate students come to McGill from diverse backgrounds with their own unique sets of strengths and challenges. Developing an awareness of the strengths and challenges particular to you allows you to make the adjustments you need in order to succeed. For example, an awareness that you do your best work in a quiet place with no distractions will help you to make wise choices about when and where you decide complete tasks that require your full attention. Developing an awareness of your maladaptive behaviours or problematic thought processes is the first step to making healthier choices because you can't change what you don't know. Additionally, gaining knowledge of your values and skills helps you to pursue goals that are meaningful to you and to design a life that is full of the things you love most.

In a professional context, self-awareness and self-efficacy are prized qualities and important factors to individual growth and leadership, allowing leaders to empower themselves and their organization as a whole.⁷ When asked about the most important capability for leaders to develop, seventy-five of Stanford's Business Advisory Council nearly unanimously answered: self-awareness.⁸ There is also a significant link between self-awareness and productivity in the workplace. A meta-analysis of more than 300,000 employees showed that workers who were allowed to use their top strengths daily had 38% higher productivity and 44% higher customer loyalty and employee retention scores.⁹ Thus, cultivating an awareness of your strengths can allow you to leverage them in a professional context and compensate for their complementary weaknesses.

Cultivating Self-Knowledge

Writing your thoughts and feelings out in a private journal is a powerful tool to help you get to know yourself better. Expressive writing has many mental and emotional health benefits including improved critical thinking skills,^{10 11} goal prioritization,^{12 13} and reduced depression and anxiety.¹⁴ It also serves as an archived reflection of who you are, and allows you to track your personal growth over time.

Developing a mindfulness-based meditation practice can allow you to gain intimate awareness of your thought patterns, emotions, and experiences of stress and happiness.¹⁵ However, mindfulness practices are not limited to the context of meditation. Any activity can be done mindfully, from washing the dishes to attending a meeting at work. The key is that you participate in whatever it is that you are doing with attention and non-judgemental observation of the elements of the present moment. When your mind starts to wander away, just bring it back to the task at hand with kindness towards yourself and voilà! You are practicing mindfulness. Please note that meditation and mindfulness practices are not for everyone. Those with a history of trauma, PTSD, and/or suicidal thoughts are encouraged to proceed with caution.¹⁶

As your mind creates obstacles in the way of self-knowledge, you will need to find ways around them. One way to do this is to seek feedback from a colleague or supervisor whom you trust to give you an honest option. This can be a great way to gain a perspective which is free from your own personal bias.

Finally, it is important to note that in the process of cultivating self-knowledge you may not always like what you see. However, in order to cultivate an authentic knowledge of yourself, it is important to embrace the negative along with the positive. Negative emotions are natural and serve an important purpose in helping you to become more aware of your surroundings. For example, fear can help you react to danger, anxiety heightens your senses, and guilt can help you to reconsider past actions that may have been harmful to others.^{17 18} Additionally, negative emotions, such as anger, can be great motivators as they prompt us to act upon our current circumstance and generate positive changes.¹⁹

Self-awareness is at the origin of leaders' success and authenticity, as it allows them to:

- ✓ Find the right role that enables them to reach their potential
- ✓ Increase their confidence by recognizing their strong skills and abilities
- ✓ Be consistent in various situations and to treat colleagues equally
- ✓ Be realistic of their strengths and weaknesses to identify individuals who can complement them and who can fill in their gaps
- ✓ Connect with others and build strong relationships by being open and transparent (e.g. by sharing their vulnerabilities for example)

A Quick Guide to Self-Knowledge

Learn about your strengths

- Take surveys such as [The VIA Survey](#). Looking at your top 5 strengths, ask yourself: Is this the real me? Do I enjoy using this strength? Do I find it energizing and exciting? Once you've reflected on your strengths, try using one of them in a new way every day over a week^{20 21}
- Write a "Positive introduction" of yourself in which you tell a concrete story illustrating your strengths.
- Tell a trusted colleague or your supervisor about a situation in which these strengths have helped you.²²
²³ Ask them for feedback to promote a more tangible form of self-knowledge such as skills and abilities.

Explore your life goals

- Identify your most important life events and turning points.
- Reflect on what your most important life goals are right now. What are the main activities or actions you need to complete in order to achieve them?
- Plan the path towards achieving your goals while also considering alternatives and potential challenges.
- Share your reflections with someone and ask them if they would share theirs.
- Write a "goodbye party speech." What would you like to be remembered for the most? Do you need to do more or less of certain things in your life to make it more satisfying and fruitful?^{24 25}

Check in with yourself often

- Explore your values using exercises such as the Value Card Sort on myPath
- Explore your interests and preferences using the Skills Assessment exercise on myPath
- Explore your preferences by asking yourself: When I have free time, what do I spend time reading about or looking up online? What causes or issues am I passionate about?

Practice self-compassion

- The more you learn about yourself, the more you may feel tempted to judge yourself critically or become preoccupied with changing your perceived weaknesses. Remember that there is value in being exactly who you are right now. Balance your desire for self-improvement with self-compassion and self-acceptance. Take time to appreciate how much hard work it took for you to get here and celebrate your accomplishments, big and small.

- **Increase your self-efficacy** by setting small goals and recognizing your progress towards them, by asking for input from a professional or watching someone you admire complete a task similar to the one you are struggling with, and by reflecting and celebrating your past accomplishments²⁶

Ask for help

- If you are experiencing difficulties, it can be hard to differentiate between a period of time you can endure and a situation in which you would benefit from speaking to a counselor or mental health professional.²⁷ There are a wealth of mental and emotional wellbeing resources available for McGill students, and the professionals who work there will be just as happy to answer your questions as they will be to schedule an appointment for you. Get curious! Check out the "Taking Action section" for resources.

Empower Yourself through Self-knowledge

Now that you've learned more about yourself, consider the following:

- **Employ your strengths** to reach your full potential
- **Know your limitations** and set a plan to improve on your weaknesses and deficiencies for the purpose of attaining a specific goal
- **Let your interests and preferences guide you** in doing what you enjoy (e.g., if you are interested in music, try learning a new instrument!)
- **Let your values influence** your decisions (e.g., if you value autonomy, consider self-employment or a work environment that promotes independence)
- ...and **be yourself**, the self that YOU know

Taking Action

Professional Development & Training

- Check [myInvolvement](#) for upcoming workshops and programs under “Be well: Self-knowledge.”
- Workshop - [McGill School of Continuing Studies - Working with Emotional Intelligence](#): A workshop to improve participants’ understanding of emotional intelligence.
- Courses - [McGill Executive Institute - Powering Growth Through EQ](#): This program helps participants build interpersonal skill through self-awareness and Emotional Intelligence skills.
- [McGill Counselling Wellness and Life Skills Workshops](#) - 1 or 2 session workshops on topics such as “Skills for Managing Anxiety and Stress, ” and “Happiness: The Workshop.”

Websites & Videos

- [McGill Counselling Services](#)
- [Positive Psychology Program Resources](#)
- [The Power of Vulnerability](#) - a TED talk by Dr. Brene Brown

Groups & Associations

- [McGill Counselling Services - PhD support group](#)
- [McGill Peer Support Groups](#)

Books, Articles & Reports

- Harris, D. (2014). *10% happier: How I tamed the voice in my head, reduced stress without losing my edge, and found self-help that actually works : a true story.* <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/858355317>
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- Greene, R. (2013). *Mastery.* New York, N.Y: Penguin Books. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/934814015>
- *HBR's 10 must reads: On managing yourself.* (2010). Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/606783872>
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness.* <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/829446137>
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). *Mindfulness for beginners: Reclaiming the present moment--and your life.* <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/747533622>
- Tan, C.-M. (2012). *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace).* <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/956350588>

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- ¹⁰ Integrating Reflection and Assessment to Capture and Improve Student Learning. Ash, S.L. (2005).
- ¹¹ Problem-based learning and self-efficacy: How a capstone course prepares students for a profession. Dunlap, J.C. (2005).
- ¹² Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation. Locke, E.A. (2002).
- ¹³ Setting, Elaborating, and Reflecting on Personal Goals Improves Academic Performance. Morisano, D. (2010).
- ¹⁴ The Oxford handbook of health psychology. Friedman, H.S. (2011).
- ¹⁵ Wildmind: A Step-by-Step Guide to Meditation. Bodhipaska. (2010).
- ¹⁶ Varieties of Contemplative Experience Project. (2018).
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- ¹⁹ The Upside of Your Dark Side: Why Being Your Whole Self--Not Just Your "Good" Self--Drives Success and Fulfillment. Kashdan, T. (2014).
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