

My journey to self-awareness and healing during COVID-19 lockdown

Dr. Suja. M.K.^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Self – awareness is about getting to know the self in terms of character, feelings, personality and individuality. It not consciousness. Consciousness is being aware of one’s environment, lifestyle and one’s body. Self-awareness is the awareness of being conscious. We are self-aware when we focus on our actions and critically examine if they align with our internal standards. What I present here is a case study of my experiences and experiments which lead to self-awareness and healing. This is my journey of self-awareness and healing which I found during the lockdown. Looking back, life was not an easy journey for me as it is seldom for many of us. My childhood was spent in rural Kerala and remember it as being happy. We were poor but to a child that was least of botherations Moving from rural, I grew up in sub-urban Tamil Nadu completing my schooling, graduation and Post -graduation. I was a good student and excelled in college. Post education I endured Physical and Mental trauma for nearly 20 years. It hit me like thunderbolts. I was educated but not empowered. I had a good job. I was a pillar of strength for my students and colleagues. While continuing to work, I completed my MPhil and PhD. I was the college counsellor. But I was restless. I was stressed, anxious and depressed. I was everything that others could not see. Everything was normal or so it, seemed but I was lost inside. I tried various methods of treatment. I had nightmares and disturbed sleep. It was like I was living with 2 individuals. One inside me and one outside. The outside one was strong and bold. The inside one was fearful and sad. Sometime during the year 2012 I decided to start my journey on self-awareness. I believed this would heal me. Thanks to school and college friends on WhatsApp, I gathered strength and fought back. Every day from then on it was a journey to self-awareness. Taking those baby steps towards the goal. But I would fall back into stress because of the tug of war between role and job stress. Somehow, I always crawled back to normalcy. I changed my job in 2015. With adjustments to a new environment, came more stress. Then came COVID-19 and we got locked down in march 2020. I had lots of time to think. Logic and reason dawned on me. I pulled out my old books on self-awareness topics. I practice meditating, energy routine, exercise, breathe and dance. Slowly things began to change. My friends helped me in this journey. They support and guide me still when I get stuck. I am on the way in finding my inner self and the purpose of my life. Like the world is clear of pollution due to COVID-19

¹ Associate Professor in Physical and Mental Health, Department of Social Work, Amrita School of Engineering, Coimbatore, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India

*Responding Author

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Lockdown, my mind too began to clear. Calm and peace have finally emerged through self-awareness and healing.

Keywords: Covid-19, Self-Awareness, Healing, Exercise, Trauma Healing, Meditation, Energy routine

Self – awareness is about getting to know the self in terms of character, feelings, personality and individuality. It not consciousness. Consciousness is being aware of one’s environment, lifestyle and ones body. Self-awareness is the awareness of being conscious. We are self aware when we focus on our actions and critically examine if they align with our internal standards. It helps us to understand our emotions and the emotions of people around us. In that way we are at a better level to find neutral solutions to problems. We see ourselves more clearly by reflecting and introspecting. If our actions don’t align with our internal standards or values we experience negative feelings. We also engage in destructive behaviours. “The human dilemma is that which arises out of a man's capacity to experience himself as both subject and object at the same time. Both are necessary--for the science of psychology, for therapy, and for gratifying living.” (May, 1967p.8.). Here we are looking at Objective Self-awareness. "When attention is directed inward and the individual's consciousness is focused on himself, he is the object of his own consciousness--hence 'objective' Self-awareness" (Duval & Wicklund, 1972, p. 2). I believe that objective self-awareness can lead to subjective self-awareness when a person understands self and then focuses on the outside world like his environment.

When you become aware of what is happening inside you and take steps to correct it ,you start to heal. Our thoughts are visitors. If we treat them that way we can avoid a lot of stress and tension. When we invite them to take permanent residence in our mind they start to control our actions. Objective Self-awareness helps us to look inside us and find the patterns of negative behaviour. This can help us correct them through various methods thus leading to healing, happiness and calm. It is not as if we are not stressed at all. Rather we learn to handle our stress better.

Healing starts with Self-awareness says Marisa Jones (2019) a childhood abuse survivor. She has a blog named “Everyday Being, Together, we are not alone.” She reaches out people who are suffering and teaches them to become self aware. She says that Self-awareness is a great way to start your healing journey. She uses techniques like mindfulness, journaling and meditation to help maintain Self-awareness. It about slowing down to listen to your thoughts, emotions and signals of the body. This awareness she says will help us make positive choices in our physical, mental and emotional health. With practice, default reactions will become thoughtful actions. With Self-awareness we can become our own advocate and our own trusted friend. Her recently published book “The Lotus Tattoo” traces her journey from an abused child to a strong and self aware women who helped many women like herself heal and balance.

Hilery Lauren Jastram(2017) a freelance writer and author says that understanding our limitations is critical because it frames our confidence. Knowing your triggers allows you to plan for your deliberate reaction, and it gives you invaluable information about yourself. Triggers, when confronted are actually our biggest avenues to emotional prosperity. When we define and accept our fears, we can develop plans to move past them, to practice making them smaller and less damaging to our lives. We can have internal conversations with

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ourselves about being afraid and identifying where fear comes from, that we are humans and instead of seeking to avoid, we can use our histories to teach us, and when we get stronger we can teach others what has worked for us as well. Understanding limitations, recognizing triggers and accepting and working on our fears creates Self-awareness.

Self-awareness develops acceptance and openness to self and others. Developing self-awareness is the necessary beginning to developing skillful ways to respond to situations. If we are not aware of our motivations, feelings, and beliefs we cannot make different choices about how to behave. Until we know how we are actually reacting, we can't adapt. But once we are self-aware we can choose new behaviors. With more choices, we develop a broader behavioral outlook. This outlook enables us to act with authenticity and responsiveness even in difficult situations, and to invite others to do the same. (Bakken, E, Earl, (2019)

The researcher found that this was an apt topic during Covid 19. This pandemic has produced considerable amount of panic and fear of the unknown among people. Stress and anxiety levels are generally high. One due to the fear of the pandemic, second adjusting to work from home situation and third the thought of job insecurity and loss due to the negative impact on the economy that the lockdown has created. Hence Self-awareness about what can be changed and what cannot, can bring about calm. Practicing techniques of Self-awareness is good for the body and mind. It reduces stress and anxiety which in turn helps people to stay more focused and reality oriented. Self-awareness leads to self reflection and thus produces healing of the mind. This in turn has a positive impact on the body by reducing the incidence of psychological and psychosomatic disorders. Hence the researcher selected this topic for the study.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The objective's of this study were to do an in depth analysis into the various Self-awareness activities carried out during the lockdown, results of such activities in improving Self-awareness and to propose such activities to help other people during and after lockdown.

Research Design

Case study method was used in this research and in depth investigation was done on a single individual for this study. "A case study is a research strategy and an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. Case studies are based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group or event to explore the causes of underlying principles" (Press Academia, 2018)

Instruments

The author practiced various methods to gain Self-awareness such as: Exercise, Trauma healing exercises, Energy routine, Meditation & Mindfulness. This will be explained in detail in the procedure and results & discussion.

Procedure

As said in the use of instruments for the research the author practiced various methods to gain Self-awareness and to heal the self and others through the process. The activities undertaken by the author is given below:

- **Exercise**

Leslie Sansone is a fitness trainer of Walk at Home Programme. She uploads her videos on youtube. They are fun to do exercises with real fast beats. The highlight of this exercise is

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that you can do it at home, requires very less space and it takes only 5 minutes and you walk 500 steps. Its brisk and gets your heart beat up in 3 minutes. There are exercises starting from 5 minutes to one hour. I chose to do the 5 Minute Health Boosting Walk. There are four types of exercise's which has to be done one after the other. You have to walk on the spot and keep the rhythm with the music. Because of the music you really start to get into pace. After a week of looking at the video I was able to do it easily. I do it every day in the morning, sometimes during office work just before lunch or in the evening at home.

- **Trauma healing exercises**

I often practice the Trauma healing exercises of Dr. James S Gordon an expert in working with people and communities, who have undergone trauma from loss to disasters. I practice his shake and dance and soft belly breathing especially when I am stressed. It really calms me down. "Shaking & Dancing" helps release chronic tension in the body. All you need are two pieces of music and a pause between them. I like to play five minutes of fast, driving music for the "shaking" followed by two minutes of silent relaxation and being aware. Then 5 minutes of upbeat music for the dancing and soft music for relaxation.

Turner Catherine (2018) says that "The limbic system in the brain produces the neuro chemicals that tell your body what's good or bad for you. It's a survival mechanism: in the presence of something good, the brain releases four main 'feel good' chemicals – endorphin, oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine – and in the presence of danger, the 'bad feeling' chemical – cortisol – comes in. Constant stress can increase the cortisol level in the blood which in turn reduces the feel-good chemicals. This is the reason that when we are faced with threatening situations we become stressed or anxious. Prolonged stress and anxiety can lead to mental and physical health issues.

"Soft belly breathing" is the most fundamental technique we teach. It balances the "fight or flight" response with the relaxation that comes from our parasympathetic nervous system. Breathe deeply, in through the nose and out through the mouth. This will improve the exchange of oxygen, even as it relaxes your nervous system. Say to yourself "soft" as you breathe in and "belly" as you breathe out. Do this for five minutes two or three times a day — not right after meals, you may fall asleep — and at bedtime, if you're having trouble sleeping." (Gordon S James 2005) . This I do this exercise when there is lot of tension at work.

- **Energy routine**

A little about energy medicine for those who are new to the concept. Energy medicine (or biofield therapies) is the act of channelling and manipulating the energy that courses through your body in order to heal it. This can be done with hands-on practices, such as acupuncture and Reiki, as well as sensory-based experiences, like the use of crystals, sound baths, and aromatherapy. Once ridiculed as too mystical, energy medicine is becoming more common and even trendy. Energy practitioners believe that your body is instilled with a subtle energy, or animating life force, the flow of which must be balanced for good health. In the West some of the best hospitals are hiring energy healers. The Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and Duke University Health System employ acupuncturists, while Reiki masters are available at the Mayo Clinic's campus in Rochester, Minnesota. UCSF Medical Center offers qigong for breast cancer survivors, and New York-Presbyterian provides aromatherapy for stress reduction to name a few. (Dun Jancee 2019).In India many health centres use yoga and meditation to improve client outcomes.

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I practice the '5 minute energy routine' by Donna Eden (edenenergymedicine.com) and also include certain energy exercises by Prune Harris(pruneharris.com). Spending a total of 7 minutes every day get my energies in place. Donna Eden is the pioneer of energy medicine. She is regarded as the world's leading energy healing practitioners. This routine includes taping and rubbing (with finger tips) various points in your body to activate the organs (Stomach, Kidney, Thymus and Spleen). Stretching is also part of the routine. This helps in energy flowing freely through your body and its organs. We have to practice it for a minimum of 28 days to get the benefit. I have been practicing this for the last 2 years and it really has brought positive changes in my mind. Slowly I could see that my body is energetic and mind calm.

• Meditation and Mindfulness

The terms "meditation" and "mindfulness" are tossed around quite a bit these days, highlighted in studies touting their health benefits, or yoga studios declaring new ways for you to find inner peace in your busy life. The terms are often used interchangeably, and sometimes, in their simplified forms, refer to the same general thing - the idea of calming your frenzied mind. There's plenty of evidence to support that harnessing your mind to be in the present can improve your mental and physical health. (Bushak Lecia, 2016)

Mindfulness is actually a form of meditation. It is being in the present moment or being mindful of what is happening at the moment. As simple as savoring a cup of coffee, having a warm bath, enjoying a good scent. Its taking in the complete experience. I used to practice meditation and mindfulness on and off. Meditation was a little difficult for me because of my stress. Concentrating on a single thing for a period was difficult for me. The mind wanders especially into the negatives of life. Bring it back to concentration was a tough job. I used to rock and shake during meditation. Rocking is said to be a way to relieve stress from the body. Shaking the masters say is the physical body aligning with the spiritual self. I rock and shake lesser now. I enjoyed mindfulness more than meditation because it was mostly savouring the moment. Mindfulness also lead me into concentrating for meditation. What I do for Mindfulness is simply feeling the breath when it goes in and out of your body. If you look you will feel that the air you inhale is cool and the air you exhale is warm. Feeling your feet on the ground, feeling the cloth against your body, eating a fruit, all is mindfulness when savored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regular practice of Self-awareness through exercise's and techniques has helped me to look at the world in a positive way even in times of crisis like Covid 19 pandemic. I remember the saying" the centre of the storm is always calm". Let me discuss the benefits that I got from the techniques that I have mentioned in the procedure of the research.

Leslie Sansone a fitness trainer of Walk at Home Programme says that brisk walking even for 5 minutes every day can burn calories, is good for the heart and helps you stay young. It helps in cutting breast cancer risks and aids sleep. 5 minutes of brisk walking helps to bring blood pressure down and reduce stress and anxiety. If you can get all that in 5 minutes what would you do? Practice it right? That's what I did and I see the benefits. My body is more flexible, I can touch my feet. Gradually I made my own music and started to teach this exercise to my students and other people.I even included it in my women wellness programme. It was a runaway hit.

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I practice Dr. James S Gordon's shake and dance and soft belly breathing especially when I am stressed. It really calms me down. "Shaking & Dancing" helps release chronic tension in the body. Severe trauma and abuse is a kind of boundary invasion. Victims experience a loss of control over their own bodies and lives. People with damaged boundaries find it difficult to say no to others, are often indecisive, feelings are strong and overwhelming, have poor concentration and don't learn from their mistakes. This exercise helps to create boundaries which are absent in people who have experienced trauma and abuse. Dancing is my all time favourite activity. I was a dancer and I still am. The interest and enthusiasm never goes away. Dancing without a care in the world releases negative emotions and bring in positive feelings. It takes you back to your younger days of dancing and makes you feel good. It makes you feel good. When you feel good happy chemicals like serotonin, oxytocin, endorphins and dopamine gets released into your blood which makes you feel happy. Dopamine also increases our movement, memory and focus. So why not dance your way to happiness.

"Soft belly breathing" balances the "fight or flight" response with the relaxation that comes from our parasympathetic nervous system. Breathing actually breathes life into everything instantly. Deep breathing especially (at your comfort level) reduces stress and anxiety. Even chanting helps. I used to be on SOS medication whenever anxiety strikes. The scenario before was like I had to apply leave from work and stay in bed for half a day. But now when the symptoms show, I go into my room, breathe and chant. Slowly my anxiety comes down and in 10-15 minutes I am ok. Is it not Self-awareness? The awareness that you can control a condition by breathing deep and chanting your favourite spiritual mantra. In the process of Self-awareness you learn to recognise the triggers and control them. You heal yourself and in the process share your knowledge for the benefit of others.

The energy routine of Donna Eden and Prune Harris helps in energy flowing freely through your body and its organs. We have to practice it for a minimum 28 days to get the benefit. I have been practicing this for the last 2 years and it really has brought positive changes in my mind. Slowly I could see that my body has become energetic and the mind calm. When I saw myself going overboard with tension I would do the energy routine to calm me down. I have done some in-depth study on energy medicine especially Reiki due to my interest. Now, I also help clients to do simple exercise like pressing various points in the arms to calm down. Hugging a tree for five minutes grounds you and is a very liberating exercise. Being with a tree is being with nature and it really heals you. I became aware of my 'self' and what has to be done to keep it safe and happy. As the ancient sages say, our body is a temple keep it that way. What motivated me to follow Donna and Prune is that they are full of life, serenity and joy.

Meditation and Mindfulness complement each other. In fact they are two sides of the same coin. Meditation originally involved rhythmic chants and is found in Hinduism and Buddhism. Earliest records of meditation was found in the Vedas from India. Ancient meditation focused on spiritual growth. It was realigned to the modern world as a practice to reduce stress and improve overall health. Meditation is a bigger umbrella term which has many practices. It is basically focusing your mind on one thing for a specific period of time. Eg: A light in your heart, a point between your eyebrows. In modern times many types of meditation can be found like walking meditation, chakra meditation, movement meditation, meditating with eyes open. The list can go on. Meditation experts say that when you are stressed or anxious you cannot concentrate for long periods of time. Hence other forms of meditation evolved.

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Santos Laurie (2019) a Professor in psychology from Yale university says that savoring is just the simple act of stepping out of your experience, to review it, and really appreciate it while it's happening. Savoring can boost our mood in at least three ways. First, savoring can thwart hedonic adaptation and it can make us remember the good stuff in life. Second, savoring can help thwart mind wandering, keeps us in the moment and third, savoring can help us increase gratitude. It can make us thankful for the experiences we're having as we're having them. This I call as a practice of mindfulness.

It was during Covid19 lockdown when I started to meditate for 20 minutes a day. This was part of the Global peace meditation practice which started on April 4th and 5th 2020 in order to heal all living beings and mother earth from the grip of corona virus. I was drawn into it. I had a purpose- meditate to heal our world. This purpose drives me to meditate every day. It was a tough task and it still is. My mind wanders, but I am able to pull it back into concentration more easily now. During this meditation which I do from 6.00pm to 6.20pm every day, has changed my thinking. I have gone inwards and answers to my questions are becoming clearer, I realised that most of the anger and frustration in me was because of my negative thoughts. Thoughts are visitors and must be treated so. If we give them a permanent place in our mind they will control us. I believe that mass meditations and positive thoughts help bring healing and happiness to all living beings. If we look at it from modern point of view it is “power of positive thinking.” The view expressed here is from my experience and it cannot be generalised.

CONCLUSION

Basically in mental health situations, when thoughts come up, emotions follow within 90 seconds. When negative emotions come up, if you can turn your mind to something positive in those 90 seconds you will save yourself from a big emotional outbreak and the terrible feelings thereafter. Dr. Joseph M Carver (2011) a clinical psychologist calls these thoughts as “Files”. Each file is an experience stored in our memory he says. It has two parts one is the information about the event(thought) and the other is the emotions experienced at that time. Hence when a memory file is pulled out so are the emotions associated with it. Its not easy to stop the files from coming up or the emotions thereafter, it needs practice. But with patience you can do it.

When I analysed the past negative thoughts (files), I realised that I was living in the past which cannot be erased. Thoughts about future brought in uncertainty and anxiety. The best way is to live in the moment which is where we need to be. That’s mindfulness - being in the moment. All these contemplations that I have been doing all these years saw a certain insight during the Covid 19 lockdown. Uncertainty is everything now. Thinking about the future only creates anxiety and stress. Self-awareness on what can be and what cannot be controlled brings in clear thinking. It also makes us look at things rationally. The physical and mental trauma I underwent for many years has only made me a stronger person. Take what life throws at you and convert it into something beautiful- for yourself and for others. I have created the world I want, through my journey of Self-awareness.

We don't do certain practice's regularly because we don't have a specific purpose that can motivate us. I had enough motivation now. Covid 19 lockdown has taken my journey into Self-awareness and healing to a deeper level. I find myself more balanced emotionally. My physical ailments have reduced. My friend Nivya who is a Reiki healer always told me “talk to your stomach” you create the disease by your thoughts. I have started to believe her. I later realised that she was talking about positive affirmations and manifestation. When the entire

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world went crazy over a book “The Secret” I got one too. What the author Rhonda Byrne talks is also about the power of positive affirmations and manifestations. Ultimately it all boils down to one thing the power of our mind. This is my journey into Self-awareness and healing. I am still learning better ways to Self-awareness and to help others through my knowledge and skill as a social worker. You could try some of these techniques and find out what works best for you. In case you have a physical or mental health condition do not forget to consult your doctor before starting a new routine. Wishing us all healing, calm and peace.

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Conflict of Interest

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