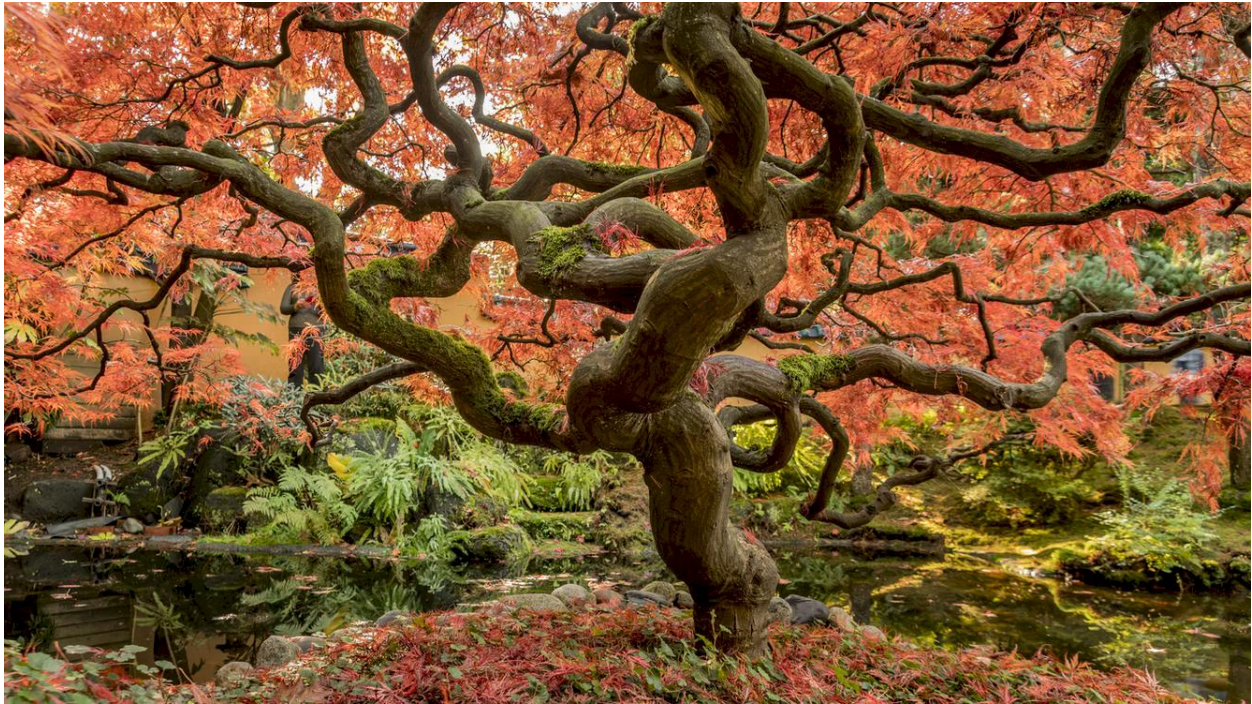


## The Nitty-gritty of Self-Reflection to Tune into the Real You

Everyday life is busy. It is so easy to lose sight of the things that matter most to your well-being first as a person, and then as a partner, parent, leader or friend. Practicing self-reflection encourages you to push *pause* so that you can tune into the thoughts feelings and behaviors that drive you forward.



Self-reflection is the willingness to learn about and understand the intricacies of your mindset, beliefs, and life desires. That means that you set aside time, ideally every day, to quietly and honestly delve into the things that you spend your time doing, what you have enjoyed, avoided, might be interested in experiencing or what gives you the most satisfaction.

Is self-reflection new territory for you? Why should you make time for self-reflection?

In our fast paced world, self-reflection is a valuable, maybe a crucial, skill. It is a healthy approach to staying informed about how well you are doing in all aspects of your life, mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Studies show that people who self-reflective on their day are happier, more productive, make better decisions, have more connected relationships, and less stress and suffer less burn-out than people who do did not. The benefits of self-reflection even include reduced stress, a better understanding of your values and dreams, and more connected relationships.

Please allow us to share an observation that we think applies to most of us and also explains why self-reflection is valuable. When asked about her toughest clients, Jennifer Porter, an executive coach told us it was not inexperience leaders. It was not leaders who think they know it all or those that shirked responsibility or belittled others. She stated:

“The hardest leaders to coach are those who won’t reflect — particularly leaders who won’t reflect on *themselves*.

At its simplest, reflection is about careful thought. But the kind of reflection that is really valuable to leaders is more nuanced than that. The most useful reflection involves the conscious consideration and analysis of beliefs and actions for the purpose of learning. Reflection gives the brain an opportunity to pause amidst the chaos, untangle and sort through observations and experiences, consider multiple possible interpretations, and create meaning. This meaning becomes learning, which can then inform future mindsets and actions. For leaders, this “meaning making” is crucial to their ongoing growth and development.”

Self-reflection is one sure way to tap into and focus on the qualities that help you move forward with ease, whether that be as a person, partner, parent, or leader. It is one of the best ways to focus on your well-being to help yourself flourish and feel good about yourself. You totally deserve those things.

If you are like most of us you want to feel good. In some form or another, the world’s greatest sages will tell you that their perception of a meaningful life, of becoming fulfilled and satisfied, is to experience a sense of joy. Like them through self-reflection you will experience joy, too.

### **Why do we shirk the practice**

So, if reflection is so helpful, why do we shirk the practice?

#### **We do not understand the process; we do not know how to reflect.**

We often reflect on our circumstances or place in this world with “why” questions which are ineffective because they tend to focus on mistakes or “whoa is me” negatives and force us to venture into the realm of the unknown where everything gets jumbled together and there is no clear-cut answer. We end up thinking dubiously about our lives, being irritated, suspicious or sometimes fearful of the unknown. We then regard introspection as ineffective.

Highly self-aware people ask, “What?” because it provides more productive focus on objectives and future goals. Asking “what” guides us to pause to recognize what works well, acknowledge what factors may be outside our control or may not align with our personal values and passions. Then we can take what we learn and use that to guide us in the future.

#### **We Assume the Purpose of Self-Reflection is to Judge Ourselves**

The purpose of self-reflection is to learn more about our inner self to understand our patterns of behavior, thoughts, and feelings and how they dictate our interactions within the world around us. We do not look inward for judgment and conclude we are one thing or another. We look objectively to understand so we can move forward with more awareness, attentiveness, and ease.

We are influenced by many things. That is absolutely okay. We use self-reflection to understand the influences and how they may be affecting our attitudes and decision so we can free ourselves from those things that do not align with our fundamental nature.

#### **We form a bias about the process:**

Reflection requires us to do things we do not typically do – slow down, be alone, be curious, adopt a mindset of examining different perspectives, and spend time thoughtfully evaluating our lives. We do not recognize the immediate benefit in contributing time or effort in reflection when compared to other uses of our time. It can be hard to find time to complete our existing to-do lists so why add yet one more thing?

We understand the to-do list, but can virtually guarantee that a few minutes of self-reflection is far more important to your sense of fulfillment or career success than any many things on your list. When busy people do not take the time to reflect on specifics of their lives they can end up floundering or losing direction and perspective. Losing sight of what is important makes it easy to expend energy in things that do not matter. Lack of personal reflection leaves many of us stuck in a job or a relationship that isn't going well.

### **We are fixated on self-improvement**

As a society we are fixated on the quick-fix for self-improvement. Self-reflection is not the same as self-improvement.

Self improvement focuses more on the external successes and qualities that we desire in life. Self-improvement usually requires changes in an attitude or behavior.

What we do not understand is that the path to self-improvement is self-reflection. In our "fast life" we have forgotten how rewarding it is to fully understand and celebrate ourselves for who we are.

Self-reflection is spending time to understanding oneself on an entirely deeper level. We are complex individuals. We use self-reflection to explore that intricate network of internal qualities – thinking, emotions, and actions – to discover and appreciate "what makes me "me", what makes me tick?"

Self-reflection leads to self-actualization which the process of reach the best version of the individual we wish to be, and are capable of becoming.

### **We shun the results:**

Introspection forces us to look at the good and not so good parts of ourselves. The process can lead to valuable insights and even breakthroughs but first we have to face the messiness of our lives, experience feelings of discomfort, vulnerability, defensiveness, and irritation. Often it forces us to take personal responsibility for those things.

Instead of recognizing and accepting our weaknesses and learning from what we could have done better, we get defensive and end up trivializing the value introspection offers. That is often how people end up leading a hodge-podge and superficial kind of life.

### **No One Else can Explore and Explain the Inner you**

If you have found yourself making these same excuses, and are not convinced, consider these three impressions:

#### **Impression #1 – Your reflection in the mirror:**

You look in the mirror and instantly recognize the person you see. You examine yourself to check out your looks and physique. You take a close look at your hair, clothes, posture, facial expressions, and anything else you see. Based on your reflection you work on yourself. You may get a haircut, put on make-up, exercise, smile more, or wear different colored clothing.

But, what about the *inner you*? Would you recognize the reflection of your *inner self or inner beauty*? Where and how do you check out those inner aspects of you? Self-reflection is the mirror to your thoughts and emotions, inner beauty and wisdom.

#### **Impression #2 – You are a machine running on autopilot**

Think of yourself as a machine, running day and night. No one performs any maintenance checks. No one ensures that it is running smoothly or effectively. No one inspects whether its energy source is adequately sufficient, or barely depleted. Absolutely no one is informed about how well this particular

machine is doing. Someone should be concerned, considering all the thinking and experiences this machine conducts. At some point won't you just breakdown? Self-reflection is the tool you use to perform the maintenance check, to tap into every aspect of any experience, hone in on the intricacies and minutiae, clarify your thinking, and keep the machine humming along almost effortlessly.

### **Impression #2 – You have a story:**

There are people you know and understand, yet you have never met. You have been touched in a real way by their story. You identified with their heartfelt moments of true emotion. You gained insight as if they sat across from you with their heart beating as they revealed one of their most sincere human experiences. You appreciate they shared their story, identify with it, and maybe even shed a tear.

You have a story, too! On what level, do you truly understand your own human experience? Your story contains facts and events. The facts of your life you know: the years you spent in school, the kinds of work you did, the people and places you know, the things you learned to do, or what you enjoyed last summer. More importantly, your story contains truths, which is the heart of your own human experience. Truth explains what all those facts and events mean and how they relate to your existence, decisions and passions. Wouldn't you like to know those truths as intimately as you do another person's story? Wouldn't it be great to fully understand and celebrate yourself on a more meaningful level?

### **What can you do to take advantage of the incredible value of self-reflection?**

No one else can see you in the self-reflection mirror; no one can delve into the workings of the inner you! No one can understand your journey. Self-reflection is one of the best ways to focus on making yourself happy and you totally deserve that.

So how do you engage in self-reflection?

First, of all you must accept that it may not be necessarily easy in the beginning because you have to take charge of a few minutes of your day. You have to be intentional about self-reflection.

In essence there are four simple steps:

1. Figure out a self-reflection activity or strategy that works for you. The only goal of self-reflection is making you pause and examine your life objectively – no judgement. You may need to try different methods before you find the one which works best for you, so don't get discouraged if something doesn't work at first. In this article we'll outline eight methods you can try. Try those that sound the most appealing first. Explore methods that what work for other people. When you find an activity that you enjoy and that helps you, stick to that activity.
2. Carve out time in your day for *you*. Put it on your schedule. The good news is that though the journey of self-discovery is taken in baby steps spread out over time – maybe weeks or months – it does not require a huge chunk of your daily time. You just need a few quiet moments and it can be done anytime and anywhere. Start with small chunks of time, even five minutes is a good beginning and one of the best ways to ensure you stick to the practice of doing it every day. As you become more accustomed to the activity, increase the time. In fact, you will get so in tune with your inner self you will want to spend more time in self-reflection.
3. Identify the important questions. Start with questions that matter to you. Take a cue from these examples:

What am I doing about the things that matter most in my life?

Who am I, really?

What worries me most about the future?



If this were the last day of my life, would I have the same plans for today?

Am I holding on to something I need to let go of?

Have I done anything lately that's worth remembering?

What have I given up on?

When did I last push the boundaries of my comfort zone?

Ask the question. Explore the question from different angles. If an answer does not come easily, let your thoughts percolate on the subject until your next session when you can hone in to explore again.

On days when your mind goes blank you can refer to our list of **136 Thought-Provoking Questions and Prompts**

4. Track your Progress – it is a way to perceive tangible growth and also to ensure your motivation. Note your responses, especially those that were the most insightful or illuminating. You might like to review them once a year or so. Keep in mind that your answers are never set in stone. They can change and grow with you over your lifetime.

Also, make notes of the days when you recognize that what you learn through self-reflection helped guide you to cope with stress, make some part of your life easier or achieve a goal. You will also distinguish moments when clarity of thought, more compassion, or less negative self-talk was due to self-reflection. You can put self-reflection on your habit tracker.

### Expectations and Pointers

If you are new to self-reflection, you probably want to know what to expect and what it looks like. Here are a few pointers to consider.

1. You are the master and the commander. You decide when, where, how, what you will explore about yourself and for how long.
2. The process does not need to be undertaken a certain way. It is a very individual process and there is no one 'right' or perfect way of doing it.
3. Self-reflection is best done at a quiet time or place. The key is to avoid interruptions and distractions.
4. Self-reflection must be a singular activity. No one else can do it. "I am the only one that can delve into my inner self. Only I can access this unlimited knowledge. I am the only one that can recognize the insights and derive meaning from what I understand."
5. If you are self-conscious in the beginning it will not take long for you to figure out that the awkwardness morphs into awareness fairly quickly.
6. Self-reflection requires 100% honesty. You have to be earnest about your imperfections to gain insight. It is a private process, so there is no sense in lying to yourself. No one else needs to know what you are thinking, saying or writing.
7. Do not pick yourself apart to find fault and make judgement. Your purpose is to learn about you and what makes you tick from the inside. Self-reflection is supposed to be constructive and beneficial. Your reflective thoughts should be factual, curious and **neutral**. When you find yourself criticizing, worrying, tormenting yourself, and dwelling on contrarily negative thoughts

such as, “I can’t believe I did such a stupid thing! Why did I do that?” it is time to take a break and try again when you can engage with yourself without judgement.

8. Self-reflection results in a certain level of self-insight which can be uncomfortable when you first begin. Should a question make you feel uncomfortable, it is probably an indication that the subject requires closer self-examination to determine what that discomfort means for you. This is incredibly valuable to your growth. So be gentle with yourself and be your own best friend.
9. There are no easy answers. Simply reading about self-reflection or asking yourself one or two key questions in one sitting only gives you a tiny inkling about what self-reflection really means. Skimming for an insight does not lead to a good understanding of what makes you tick and what makes your life truly meaningful. That kind of wisdom comes from meaningful thought.
10. Be patient. When examining some parts of your life, you may easily derive meaningful insight. Conversely, it could take days of letting your thoughts percolate on some aspects of your life and fundamental nature before you figure it out. It could take time to recover the missing parts of you that have been in hiding. At the very least you may need a few sessions of self-reflection on some subjects because any question and any insight you explore is supposed to be surveyed from different angles and that can spur you to another thought-provoking question and a new exciting direction.
11. Take yourself seriously – your inner feelings, doubts, every curious thought, even the silliness is an opening to a personal revelation. You never know what has been lying dormant within you and needs to take wings.
12. Do not fear what lies deep within you. Every emotion originates from deep within and needs to be exposed. When you are able to figure out from where your feelings stem you can more easily detach yourself from them and move forward.
13. Highly self-aware people use self-talking as a tool. They gain more from introspection when they ask questions and explain things out loud. They speak to themselves as if they were speaking with a friend. Self-talk helps to slow down your thoughts so you can be more deliberate. Self-explaining can give voice to impulses of curiosity that may otherwise remain unexplored. The act of putting your thoughts into words can promote understanding and learning. Again, you may feel self-conscious in the beginning. You can whisper or turn self-talk into a melody if it helps.
14. Words have keen effects. Even in quiet self-reflection. They have the power to energize, illuminate, excite, brighten, heal and soothe. Anything with this much power deserves attention. Pause and carefully choose a meaningful word to clarify the exact feelings that influence your perception of an experience. This is especially important when you have a positive experience because it is the positive emotions help you to find your purpose, care about others, feel connected and take action.
  - a. Here’s an example. You might default to saying, “I’m so happy! I mean ... I’m really, really happy! I’m on top of the world! It was a super experience that makes me so happy!” No matter how many exclamation marks you use *happy* or *super* does not really identify your emotions. There are literally a hundred more words that are related to happy, but actually pin-point your current state of being. I feel alive, content, excited, jubilant, proud, overflowing, light-hearted... You get the idea.
15. Keep notes. You do not need to use eloquent prose but do choose meaningful words that clarify what you understand or believe about yourself. You could include a sketch if that works better

for you to imprint your insights. Writing is a way to acknowledge your new wisdom. You can use your notes for encouragement, inspiration, or tracking how your answers to thought-provoking questions change over time. It is also a way to hold yourself accountable to the process. Besides, you do not want a thought-provoking idea to slip away or miss an opportunity to affirm what makes you “you”.

16. Keep in mind that these concepts of you, your attitudes, visions, outlooks, and passions are never set in stone. They can change and grow with you over your lifetime. That means that it is good to keep engaging in self-reflection to be aware of what is influencing those changes and what other adjustments you might like to make in your life.
17. Self-reflection is most successful if you do it regularly. Let self-reflection become part of your routine so it will be easier to stay tuned into your inner self. For example, start your day by visualizing what you can do today to achieve your goal. You can end your day by reviewing and thinking about what happened, what went well and what you might have done differently.
18. Based on what you come to understand, you may wish to explore making an adjustment to an area of your life and set a specific goal. When you do, make sure you perform a self-reflection check-up to examine that area of your life again.
19. Do not hide your imperfections. You may discover a thing or two that you may think are a blotch on your character. Maybe you have been donning a mask, saying to yourself, “This is who I want people to think I am.” The thing is it will be a relief, to throw the mask away. It is much more fulfilling to say, “This is the real me, the one that matters, and I am proud of that person.”
20. You may want to get feedback from other people about your process and what you are learning about your own image of yourself. Only ask people you trust and you can be sure will be honest with you. Keep in mind that everyone has perception filters so getting feedback from more than one person gives you better comparison points.
21. When you engage in frequent self-reflection maybe nothing changes outwardly, but inwardly, you will begin to feel alive, rejuvenated. You will wake up with a certain pep and assured motivation and things will gradually change.

How will they change? Every part of your life is intertwined. Let’s look at an example. Say you decide to eat healthy and walk more. It will not take long before you notice that you have a better mood and more energy. An elevated frame of mind results in you feeding your mind with the knowledge and challenge that it craves, and suddenly you feel more confident and self-aware. You approach situations with a different passion. You feel darn good about your life. What you will come to understand is that in reality there is no one on the face of the earth like you. You offer something special to this world whether you are aware of it yet or not.

Here is one other observation relating to your story. You already have within you all of the wisdom you need to face the challenges in our life. You know all the stories you have heard and read about when people have a near death experience and they simply decide to transform their lives. They don’t take a skills course they know what they should be doing and the types of things they won’t ever waste time on. The wisdom was inside of them just waiting to burst out.

22. Self-reflection is not one task, that when completed you can know yourself objectively and with finality. It is an ongoing practice, a lifelong journey, because you are not a thing with fixed boundaries of existence.

Self-reflection is an opportunity to sit alone with yourself, which many people can rarely get a chance to do. You can silence the outside noise, de-stress, and listen to the real you and what you would like from this life. Introspection is primarily about the ability to pay so much attention to yourself that you “get you”. Think of your journey into self-reflection as courtship or dating, where you get to know yourself on an intimate level. and fall in love with the real you. If you have ever been in love you know this is a magical time.

## **Ways to Practice Self-Reflection**

There are literally dozens of ways to engage in self-reflection. Journaling to get your thoughts and feeling out or simply assess what you are grateful for at the end of the day; a thirty minute walk to think about certain aspects of your life; meditation to see how your mind wanders; or asking yourself important questions.

Before starting a session of introspection, some people like to do deep breathing to steady their heart and be calm. Close your eyes and breathe deeply, inhaling and exhaling with robustness. You can feel stress and tension melt away.

We'll outline 8 strategies here to get you started.

### **1. Sit in Silence for Five Minutes**

Choose a comfortable place, to sit in silence with your thoughts for just five minutes each day. As you become tuned into your feelings and thoughts you can extend the time to ten minutes or as long as you need. For best results, you should schedule this time into your daily routine. However, whenever you have a few spare minutes – while you're waiting for your friend to show up, waiting for your dinner to get out of the oven, your significant other to join you, waiting on hold for customer service, even in the bathroom, stuck in traffic – instead of checking your phone, put those minutes into reflecting on just one thing. Something like:

What's is my favorite thing about myself?

How can I add more fun into my life?

What gave me joy today?

What is something I would love to learn?

When I'm telling my grandkids about my life, what would I tell them about or what wise words could I share?

What's is my favorite self-care activity?

What is my favorite topic to talk about with others?

How many people are in my inner circle?

If someone else described me, what do I think they would say?

### **2. Ask Important Questions**

Think of some questions you want to ask yourself routinely, daily, weekly, monthly. Take a cue from these examples.

#### **To start your day:**

Did I wake up this morning ready to take on the day?



How might I show up today to have the most impact?

What quality of mind do I want to strengthen and develop today?

What will I do today to take care of myself physically?

What step can I take today to fulfill my greatest desire?

**Before you go to sleep:**

How did I feel overall today?

Did I make someone smile today?

I felt most energized when \_\_\_\_\_

What did I do today that is worth remembering?

What five things made me smile today?

What three things am I grateful for today?

**3. Get to Know Yourself by Thinking about Specific Aspects of your Life**

One by one, examine different aspects of your life: your health and fitness habits, work ethic, thought processes, emotional self, beliefs, hobbies, leisure time, and your passions. This is not something you will complete in one session. Spend quality time exploring each one.

Moving forward once or twice a year you can perform a self-check up on these different areas of your life.

Let's use beliefs as an example of how you get to know more about yourself:

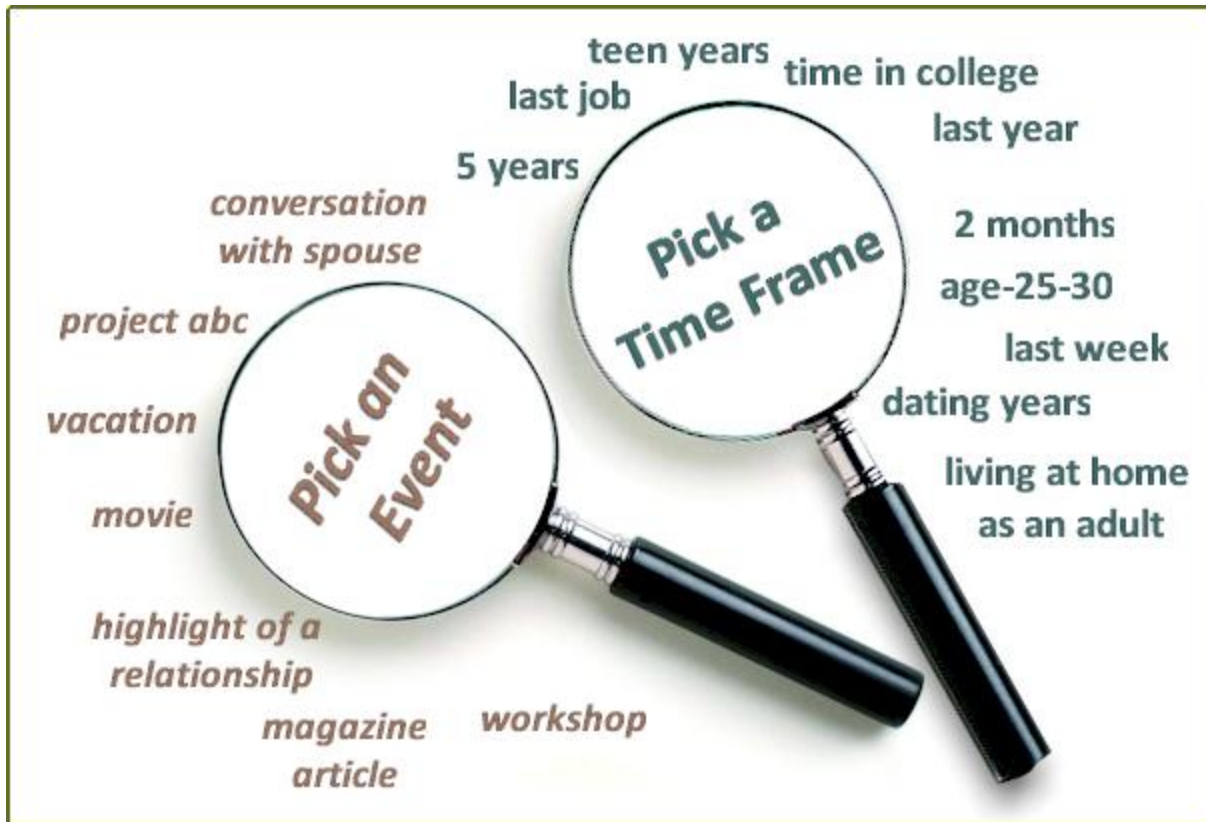
Your beliefs are not fully who you are, but they are a reference through which you interpret the world around you. Because they influence what you think and how you are functioning on a daily basis, they are a strong indicator of part of the inner you. This makes your beliefs a great place to start getting to know yourself.

Ask what makes you happy about what you see?

Which beliefs did you formulate based on your experiences and convictions?

Which beliefs were passed down to you?

Which beliefs may not necessarily be based on logic or fact?



#### 4. Analyze an Event or Particular Time in your Life

##### Pick an Event

Pick an event that you have feelings about. Analyze that event. Why do you have feelings about it. Was it something you did particularly well? What did you do well? What could you improve upon?

##### Pick a time frame

Do you want to look back on the last week? Last month? Last year? Last 5 years? This may not be something you can do in a short session. Begin by taking stock of what actually happened during this period. It helps to make a list of the best moments as well as the low points. Then go through your list one by one to examine how you acted and what drove your thoughts and actions.

#### 5. Reading

You should be able to derive more than entertainment from reading. Reading, any kind of reading, requires deliberate attention and is a very effective way to



learn about real-life situations, the vivid world and ones inner thoughts. Authors have dedicated months, years and lifetimes to formulating ideas and writing about life experiences and lessons. In a matter of hours or days, you can read or listen to their research, well-crafted descriptions of how mankind overcomes inner turmoil, reaches for a dream, or absorbs the world around them.

By empathizing with or relating to certain characters or situations, you can recognize where your inner values and aspirations lie. You may easily agree with a novel's message, or experience tension or antagonism toward the qualities and ethics of its characters. Regardless, it allows you to determine what your innate values are and how they guide you in decisions about your own life. Following the journey of a character, fictional or not, helps guide your own.

The key is to be tuned into your emotions when you read. When something stirs an emotion or aligns with your thinking, you can stop and think about what you have just read and what it means to you.

## 6. Start your day with some Powerful time to centre yourself

Faizun Kamal, a member of the Forbes Coaches Council and franchise pro calls it his *Hour of Power* and shares:

Every day, I wake before dawn to spend an hour giving gratitude for everything I am and everything I have, resetting my intentions (personal and professional), refocusing my goals and remembering my "why"—the vital reason that I am driven to my calling. This one practice has single-handedly transformed my life. Starting each day with grace, I am centered and ready to serve my clients. -

Can't spare an hour? Use 30 minutes, even fifteen to start. You could relax with your coffee and read, track your feelings in a journal, talk out loud about your dreams, or walk in nature to listen to your thoughts and feelings.

You could put our list of **132 Questions for Self-Reflection** in a hat. Pull one out at random and delve into your thoughts on the subject.

## 7. Journaling

Don't forget about word choice to pinpoint your moods, thoughts and emotions.

Debra Kasowski, graduate of the U of A, a member of Forbes Coaches Council, author and podcaster, is an advocate of journaling or "Ink What you Think About". "Reflecting on your day and noting what you are grateful for allows you to park unproductive thoughts, discover insights and solutions and identify areas of growth."

## 7. Time Travel

Tal Ben-Shahar is a leader in the field of positive psychology and author of the interesting books *Happier* and *Pursuit of Perfect*. He shares this exercise:

Imagine that far in the future Sir Richard Branson's Virgin business conglomerate creates a new company: Virgin Time Travel. Your 110-year-old-self chooses to travel back in time to meet with the current you right now, at this moment.

You and your future self only have 30 minutes together. What truths, advice, and lessons would your 110-year-old-self share with you?

And if you only had 10 minutes together? What would your future self tell you then?

And if you only had 60 seconds!? What then?

Will you pay attention to the elder you?



## 8. 100 Curious Questions

In his book *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* by Michael Gelb suggests a curiosity three-step exercise you can apply to self-reflection.

Step one: Set aside at least 45-60 minutes of quiet, uninterrupted time. Your goal is to make a list of 100 questions in that time. You will spend time in answering any or thinking about them. All that is important is that you create a list in one sitting. That is one rule you must follow. No break to wander away from your list and think about what questions to put on your list.

You can ask anything you want. Just write any questions that comes to mind. Write as quickly as possible. At this point you are only interested in a quantity of questions, not quality. The questions do not have to be deep, about you, or even something you are keen to learn. What's my neighbour eating for dinner? If a dog swallows a live insect does it tickle his stomach? Will I be healthy at age 73? Do penguins have kneecaps? When is the next full moon? You get the idea. Coming up with the last fifty or so questions will be tough, but you must follow that one rule. If you following a theme, it is okay. If you end up repeating a question that is okay too.

Step two: Review the list. Do you recognize any theme emerging: your job, hobbies, family, money, etc." Highlight them. Some themes may be familiar, but you may be surprised by a theme. That unexpected theme may reveal something important that can choose to think about in another sitting.

Step three: In the last step, review you list again and choose ten questions that are the most significant to you. The last ten or twenty questions may be the most important. So take a close look at those.

Next rank the selected questions in terms of importance from 1 to 10.

You will contemplate these ten questions in another sitting or maybe even ten sittings.

We trust you have a better idea of how self-reflection exercises can work to explore the inner workings of you mind and emotions.