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Mark Manson on

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Introduction

The Greeks are said to have inscribed “Know Thyself” on their ancient temples, inviting their people to take a moment and question their motivations and their actions on occasion.

The pursuit of self-knowledge is at the heart of most religions and philosophical pursuits across the world. It seems that an unfortunate side effect of the brain’s marvelous ability to question everything is the brain’s ability to question itself.

“Who am I? Why do I do the things I do? Can I change?”

These are questions that inevitably plague us all in one form or another. And while I don’t believe there’s ever a permanent answer to any of them, we can become better at investigating ourselves.

(That sounded kind of dirty.)

It turns out that psychology has uncovered numerous ways in which our beliefs about ourselves affect not only our behaviors but our successes in this world. People who believe they are smarter, actually do better on tests, even though they aren’t smarter or haven’t studied any more. People who believe they are given an energy drink are able to lift more weight than normal, even though the drink they were given contained nothing. People who believe they need less sleep actually do perform better under less sleep than those who do not.

Beliefs are powerful. And because they are so powerful, we must learn to train our mind to observe them and question them.

This short ebook contains three ideas that are designed to help you do that.

1. Your Two Minds
2. Believe What’s Helpful, Not What’s True
3. The Prime Belief

Hopefully, by the end, you will find yourself much more comfortable questioning yourself and opening to new ideas you had never considered before.

Enjoy.

Mark Manson

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IDEA #1: The Two Minds

Close your eyes. Wait, don't close them yet. Finish reading this paragraph, then close them. OK, close your eyes and try to think about nothing for 30 seconds.

Ready? Go.

(Waiting...)

Wasn't easy was it? Chances are various thoughts and images kept popping into your head.

Now, I want you to try the same exercise again, except this time I want you to pay attention to which specific thoughts and images pop up. Try to keep track of them. Notice them, note what they are, and then let them go. See if you can do that for a minute.

Ready? Go.

(Waiting...)

What were they? Maybe that fight you had with your brother the other day. Or the assignment that's due tomorrow but you're reading this instead. Or maybe a movie you saw recently, or some sort of fantasy.

Chances are you were able to notice them for a little while but then you quickly find yourself getting sucked into thinking about them involuntarily.

If you've ever meditated, even a little bit, you're familiar with the experience you just had.

You closed your eyes and tried to shut your mind up, even if for 30 seconds, and despite your best efforts the spigot of thought vomit just kept pouring out.

If you've ever attended meditation retreats or been involved in some movement such as Zen, like I was for a while, they talk a lot about this "mind chatter" that you suffered through.

And the thing is, that “mind chatter” never stops. It’s always going on in your daily life.

A lot of these eastern philosophies aim to “quiet” that chatterbox of a mind that we have, and I suppose it’s useful to put a little damper on it.

But I’ve actually found practicing these sorts of techniques have another benefit, a benefit psychologists are just catching on to and starting to write about here in the West.

That benefit is what I call the “Two Minds.”

When you close your eyes and try to eliminate any thoughts (and fail miserably like the rest of us), obviously your mind is thinking.

But if your mind is thinking, then who is observing the mind thinking?

Whoa...

When you did the exercise and your mind kept wandering back to what you had to do at work tomorrow, who was it that was watching your mind worry about work tomorrow?

It was your mind watching your mind.

In Zen they refer to this as the “Thinking Mind” and the “Observing Mind” – the two minds.

It’s a common concept in Buddhism, and new western therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) are catching on to how useful it is and how it can solve *a lot* of our every day emotional problems.

I’ll break down the Two Minds further and then show how they can be applied to solving many of the emotional problems we deal with in our every day lives.

The problem with the Thinking Mind is that we don’t completely control it.

Don’t believe me? I’ll prove it.

Whatever you do, do NOT think about a pink elephant. Don't think about a pink elephant holding a blue umbrella with his trunk. Don't think about a pink elephant once over the next two paragraphs.

OK, not only did you picture a big pink elephant with a blue umbrella, but you were *watching yourself* think about a pink elephant while you were reading the past two paragraphs.

Your Observing Mind was watching your Thinking Mind indulge in pink elephants repeatedly, despite the fact that it was telling your Thinking Mind NOT to indulge in said elephants.

The Thinking Mind is always chattering away, while you're waiting in line, while you're in bed trying to sleep, when you "tune out" of conversations with people, or when your mind wanders while reading (which I'm sure will happen at least once with me... asshole).

Our Thinking Mind is like a horny dog on a leash that keeps running after things and if we aren't used to using our Observing Mind, then our Thinking Mind drags us along with it.

If our Thinking Mind starts obsessing about reaching level 30 in Diablo or the last episode of *Mad Men*, our Observing Mind is helpless to reign it in.

The same goes for emotions. And that's actually where most of our suffering comes from – not from the negative emotions themselves, but from the fact that we're helpless from getting sucked into the negative emotions.

Most of our psychological and emotional stress happens because our Thinking Mind and Observing Mind are "fused" and we don't recognize the difference.

People ask me all the time, "How do I stop feeling so jealous?" or "How do I stop feeling so angry?" or "How do I not get nervous in this situation anymore?"

The answer: you don't. You can't control your Thinking Mind. Those emotions pop up and will continue to pop up.

The trick is to not fuse with those emotions when they arise.

In Zen, they advise that instead of saying, “I am angry,” to say, “I feel anger.” Instead of saying, “I am nervous,” say, “I feel nervousness.” Instead of saying, “I am jealous,” you say, “I feel jealousy.”

It may seem like a subtle difference, but try it. Think of a time recently when you felt a negative emotion, a lot of anger or nervousness or insecurity.

Now, instead of thinking, “I was angry at my brother,” think instead, “I felt anger towards my brother.” You *had* anger, but you weren’t controlled by the anger.

Emotions are not a choice. Behavior is.

People ask me all the time, “How do you deal with being afraid of failure?” or “How do you not worry about being rejected?”

I deal with fear and worry by dealing with fear and worry.

(I know, that’s a really annoying answer.)

I feel the same fear and worry like anyone else does; I just don’t identify with it. I accept it and move on despite it.

I don’t let my Thinking Mind control me. I defuse from my emotions. When I feel fear, I consciously choose to act despite it. When I feel worry, I consciously choose to act despite it.

For instance, when I have to sit down and write a lot (like writing this PDF), I often get nervous. I want to write something really great because I know thousands of people are going to read it.

One result of this nervousness is procrastination.

When I was younger and I was in situations where I got nervous and procrastinated (i.e., a big term paper in school), I would decide, “I can’t do it because I’m too tired,” or “I can’t focus like other people, I must have ADD or something.”

This was me being fused with my Thinking Mind. There was no separation between my emotions and my identity.

I felt nervous and had a thought of “I can’t do it for X, Y or Z reason,” and I accepted it at face value. I was a slave to my Thinking Mind, tugged by its leash.

These days I’m often able to sit down and write 5,000 words or more in a single day. I still feel the same anxiety. I still hear the same thoughts (“I need to eat first,” “I should take a nap,” “I’m not in a writing mood right now.”)

But now instead of identifying with these thoughts, I acknowledge them:

“I feel nervousness about writing today.”

“I have the thought that I need to eat first.”

“I have the thought that I need to take a nap first.”

And then I turn to my Thinking Mind and promptly tell him that it’s full of shit and that I don’t need a damn thing except to sit my ass down and start writing.

We all produce excuses and negative emotions involuntarily. **Guess what? That’s *never* going to change.**

I don’t care how many positive thoughts you conjure, what kind of therapies you do, or what kind of New Agey spiritual crap you come up with – negative thoughts and emotions are natural processes of the human brain.

You can’t get away from them. None of us can.

What you CAN do is accept them. Defuse from them. And then act despite them.

When people come to me ask how to “Stop feeling angry,” or “Stop getting nervous,” this is their problem. **As soon as you try to eliminate a thought or emotion, you make it stronger.**

The more you focus on an emotion, the more powerful it becomes.

Negative emotions are like quicksand: the more you struggle to get out of them, the further into them you sink.

The trick is to accept them and then let go. This is a skill and it is a process, but it cannot be practiced *until you recognize that there are two minds and you only control one of them.*

Here are some exercises you can do that will help you separate your two minds and therefore take more control of your behavior *despite* your thoughts and emotions.

1. Whenever you feel a strong emotion or thought, disidentify with it and then take possession of it.

“My boss is not an idiot. But I am having the thought that my boss is an idiot.”

“I don’t hate my ex-girlfriend. I am feeling hatred toward my ex-girlfriend.”

“I am not lonely and depressed. I am feeling loneliness and depression.”

Language is very powerful. Notice when you disidentify from these emotions and thoughts in this way it 1) implies that they’re temporary states, and not permanent conditions and 2) forces you to take responsibility for them. They’re nobody’s fault, they just are.

2. Thank your Thinking Mind for negative thoughts and emotions. This is a technique from ACT and it is effective. It may sound absolutely nuts, but it’s effective because it FORCES you to accept your negative emotions instead of fight them.

“Thank you Thinking Mind for feeling nervous before my date tonight. It will keep me on my toes!”

“Thank you Thinking Mind for being angry at my boss. I really appreciate how much you care.”

This is going to feel really bizarre – expressing gratitude towards negative emotions. But I think you’ll find that it diminishes the power

of the thoughts and emotions over time and actually impels you to take action despite them.

3. Finally, if you find yourself in the heat of the moment, or if there's something that's really nagging at you, try this out.

Take something that's bothered you recently and hold it in your mind. Maybe it's your girlfriend nagging you. Maybe it's being terrified of talking to that cute girl in class next to you. Maybe it's quitting your job.

Distill it into a single sentence, such as, "I feel afraid of quitting my job." Or "I feel irritated with my girlfriend."

Now close your eyes and imagine Bugs Bunny saying it, while chewing a carrot. Then Mickey Mouse saying it, while dancing and doing cartwheels. Pretend the Chipmunks are singing it to you in the form of a Christmas carol.

Now, turn it into an image, maybe your angry girlfriend, or your broke ass sitting on the curb. Put that image on a television screen. Make the colors funny, give yourself a polka dotted suit. Make your girlfriend's hair into a bunch of candy canes.

Make the thought look and sound absolutely ridiculous in your mind. Take your time and play with it. Try to make yourself laugh.

After you've done this for a minute or two, stop. How do you feel?

Chances are you feel much better about it and the negative emotion isn't nearly as potent as it was before.

Separating your Observing Mind from your Thinking Mind is a habit that takes practice. But once you begin to do it, you'll feel yourself becoming less and less of a slave to your thoughts and your emotions. You'll take more control of your internal daily life and feel better about it.

In my opinion, this is the single most important step to developing self-discipline and acting despite whatever neuroses or mental hang ups you may suffer from.

Once you've differentiated your two minds, you can begin to evaluate your thoughts and feelings from an objective place and decide which ones are helpful and which ones are hurtful (which is something we'll get to in Idea #3).

Idea #2: Believe Not What's True, But What's Helpful

Two men were in a bar in Alaska drinking and talking about God (two things that naturally go together).

One of them men said:

“Look, there is no God and I’ll prove it. Just a few weeks ago I got caught in a blizzard without any supplies. I was surely going to freeze to death. So I decided I would try out the whole God thing. I got down on my knees and prayed. I told him if he saved me, I would promise to always believe in him.”

The other man looked at him perplexed, “Well, you’re here, right? He obviously saved you!”

The man replied, “No he didn’t. Some Eskimos came by a few minutes later and picked me up to take me back to town. God didn’t do anything.”

This apocryphal story is passed around quite a bit as an example about how two people can come away with completely opposite interpretations from the same exact story.

How you perceive the above story, or any other story for that matter, depends on the beliefs you choose to accept.

Kind of like the glass half full, glass half empty thing.

Anyone who’s spent enough time on the internet knows that just about anything can be debated.

You may believe that you need to get good grades in university to get a good job. That belief can be debated. You may believe that you need to save a certain amount of money each month to ensure your future. It can be debated. You may believe that being respectful and honest is the best way to create good relationships with people, and even that can be debated.

One thing that disheartened me when I dug deep into the psychological research on things like attraction, happiness, success, motivation, growth and development, was that there's almost never a consensus. There's just data. And a lot of that data is debated.

It was the same thing when I dove into the gender debate. What are the neurobiological differences between men and women? What parts of gender roles are innate and what parts are cultural?

There's no consensus. Just a lot of data, and that data is... yeah, you guess it, debated.

The same is true with nutrition to a large degree. The same is true with fitness.

There are even still large gaps in the knowledge of physics and biology. Scientists in even the hardest sciences have been shown to affect the outcomes of their experiments through unconscious biases.¹

Their own beliefs influenced the results they wanted to find and therefore they unconsciously influenced the way the experiment was carried out.

And I'm not even going to touch religion – but let's just say that when “faith” is proclaimed as your number one virtue, you're surviving on belief.

The point is, whether we realize it or not, at some point we choose all of our beliefs.

Sometimes we choose them consciously for very specific reasons.

Sometimes we choose them unconsciously (parents pushed them on us, or they met an unconscious need of ours).

Everything we think and believe today at some point along the way we made the decision to buy into it, to decide it was true for us.

¹ Jeng, M. (2006). A selected history of expectation bias in physics. *American Journal of Physics*, 74(7), 578–583.

This applies to everything.

You and I never actually saw the Napoleonic Wars. We didn't witness the Holocaust or the Moon Landing. We just accept them on fact because enough people have said they happened.

(And sure enough, there are some loons who question that these occurrences happened. They have, once again, chosen to adopt different beliefs.)

Almost everything we know is secondhand and based on belief.

But even when it comes to experiences we have firsthand, recent psychological research shows that our perceptions of our own experiences are often unreliable.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman demonstrated that we actually remember very few specifics about experiences and that at later dates we “patch holes” in our memories with our assumptions and, yes, our beliefs.²

Other researches have demonstrated that we often adapt our beliefs to what conforms to our emotions and impulses, not based on what actually happened or what the evidence suggests.³

But so what?

What's wrong with believing whatever we want? What's wrong with having inaccurate memories and seeing experiences the way we want to see them and not really knowing for sure what's for certain or not?

² Redelmeier, D. A., & Kahneman, D. (1996). Patients' memories of painful medical treatments: real-time and retrospective evaluations of two minimally invasive procedures. *Pain*, 66(1), 3–8.

³ Kardash, C. M., & Scholes, R. J. (1996). Effects of preexisting beliefs, epistemological beliefs, and need for cognition on interpretation of controversial issues. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(2), 260.

Why can't we just go with whatever we feel like believing, with what we've always believed?

The problem is that not every belief helps us. And some beliefs hurt us.

The problem is also something in psychology called the *confirmation bias*. The *confirmation bias* is the human tendency to only notice and observe phenomena that support our prior beliefs.⁴

For instance, an Indian person who believes white people are racist will only notice instances of white people being rude towards minorities and not notice the hundreds of instances where they're kind to minorities.

They don't do this on purpose; it's an unconscious bias.

A person who believes they're ugly will only notice people who react negatively to their appearance and not notice people who react positively.

A person who thinks they're dumb will dwell on all of the mistakes they make instead of noticing and accepting the recognition and praise for the smart work they've done.

I worked as a dating coach for a few years. I met and helped all over the world, men of all ethnicities, from ages 18 to 59.

There were numerous times where a client would hire me, I'd fly out to his city and meet him at the airport, and there he'd be: tall, chiseled chin, good physique, well dressed. He'd stand up tall and shake my hand firmly. He'd be a software engineer or a lawyer or a financial analyst or some other impressive profession.

My immediate reaction would be "What problem does *this guy* have with women?"

But I would soon find out. We'd go out and meet some women together and within minutes you could see it, he *believed he was unattractive*.

⁴ Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175.

From my perspective, women would be all over him, flirting with him, eyeing him from across the room, smiling at him.

To me the signals were obvious. But in his mind he was ugly, unattractive and undesirable, so all he saw were women being polite, tolerating his presence and showing no interest in him.

As a result, not only would he not act on the opportunities he had with women, but also his attitude would actually become negative and turn women off.

I saw this time and time again.

It was an amazing lesson in confirmation bias that I was exposed to over and over again.

I've run into similar debilitating biases in men when it comes to race, height, money and even their personalities. In all cases, they sabotage themselves with their poor beliefs.

I've sat and had engaging, interesting two-hour conversations with men who honestly told me that people didn't like them because they couldn't engage them in conversations well enough.

A lot of times our problems are not actually problems, but rather symptoms of unhelpful beliefs.

It doesn't matter whether a belief is true or not; what matters is whether it's helpful.

Believing you are ugly, or undesirable, or not interesting enough – these may or may not be true in various circumstances. But they can never be proven one way or another. So why not assume they're untrue? What do you have to lose?

I realize that choosing what you believe is not as simple as switching on a dime. It's a much more complicated process which I can get into another time.

What I'm trying to do here is plant seeds.

The next time you feel stupid or insecure, ask yourself if that's a useful belief to have.

The next time you feel incompetent or like you're incapable of accomplishing something, ask yourself if that's a useful belief to have.

The next time you feel unattractive and undesirable, or that a situation is impossible, ask yourself if that's a useful belief to have.

Because it doesn't matter what's true or what's not. The truth is up for endless debate in most circumstances. So why not debate on the side that helps you?

Idea #3: The Prime Belief

In the mid-19th century, a boy was born into a wealthy family. From the beginning, the boy suffered serious health issues: an eye problem that left him temporarily blinded as a child, a terrible stomach condition that forced him onto a strict diet, and back pains that would plague him throughout his life.

Despite his father's disapproval, he aspired to become a painter when he grew up. He practiced his craft, but for years and years every attempt ended in failure. Meanwhile, his brother went on to become a world-renowned novelist. As he entered adulthood, many of his health problems worsened, his relationship with his father fell apart, and the young man began to struggle with severe bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts.

Desperate to fix his son's situation, the young man's father used his business connections to get his son admitted to Harvard Medical School.

Fortunately, the young man was smart. He could handle the coursework. But he never felt at home or at peace at Harvard. After touring a psychiatric facility one day, the young man mused in his diary that he felt he had more in common with the patients than the other doctors.

Dissatisfied with his medical training, the young man looked for other opportunities within academy that may suit him. He was desperate. He was willing to try anything, even something radical and completely different.

He soon discovered an anthropological expedition to the Amazon rainforest. The young man signed on, excited to get away and start fresh, to perhaps discover something new and interesting about the world and about himself.

In those days, intercontinental travel was long, complicated and dangerous. But the young man made it to the Amazon. There he promptly contracted smallpox and nearly died alone in the jungle. He was rushed back to civilization and the expedition left him behind. Upon recovering from smallpox, his back spasms returned worse than ever. He was emaciated from the disease, stuck in a foreign land alone with no way to communicate, and continued to exist in a daily excruciating pain.

The young man managed to return home to a disappointed father, nearly 30 years old, still unemployed, a failure at everything he had ever attempted, with a body that betrayed him and wasn't likely to ever get better. Despite every advantage and opportunity he had been given in life, he had failed them all. The only constants in his life seemed to be suffering and disappointment. The man fell into a deep depression and planned to take his own life.

But first, he had an idea.

He made an agreement with himself. In his diary, he wrote that he would try an experiment. He would spend one entire year believing that he was 100% responsible for everything that occurred in his life, no matter what. During this period, he would do everything in his power to change his circumstances, no matter the outcome. If, he wrote, at the end of one year of taking responsibility for everything in his life and working to improve it, if nothing in his life had actually improved in that time, then it will be apparent that he was truly powerless to the circumstances around him. And then he would take his own life.

The young man's name was William James, the father of American psychology and one of the most influential philosophers of the past 100 years. Of course, he wasn't any of these things yet, but he would go on to become them in large part due to his experiment. James would later refer to his experiment as his "rebirth," and would credit it for *everything* he would later accomplish.

There is a realization from which all potential personal growth emerges. This is the realization that you are responsible for everything you do in your life, no matter the external circumstances.

In 1879, fifteen years after making the deal with himself, William James gave what was perhaps his most famous lecture, titled "The Will to Believe."

In it he argued that whether religious or atheist, capitalist or communist, everyone is forced to adopt values on some degree of faith. Even if you don't believe in faith, that is itself a value requiring faith. He went on to say that if

we all must value something, then we may as well orient ourselves to value what is most beneficial for us and others.

When we become responsible for our own values, we no longer have to struggle to make the world conform to our needs, rather we can adapt our own values to fit the circumstances that confront us in the world.

It's that simple choice to take responsibility for ourselves and our own values that allows us to feel in control of everything that happens to us. It allows us to transform our negative experiences into empowering experiences. It's completely counterintuitive – the idea that being responsible for all of the horrible misfortunes that befall us could somehow liberate us from them – but it's true. Our responsibility for ourselves unleashes a deeper fulfillment by allowing us to construe whatever we confront into a value that fulfills our needs. Unruly kids grant us the opportunity to be a good parent and instill discipline and responsibility. A layoff at work grants us the opportunity to experiment with new career paths we always daydreamed about. A terrible breakup gives us the chance to take an honest look at ourselves and how our behaviors affect our relationships with loved ones.

Yes, these experiences still hurt like a motherfucker. But negative experiences are part of life. The question is not whether or not we have them but what we do with them.

Responsibility allows us to leverage our pain for empowerment, to transmute our suffering into strength, our loss into opportunity.

James wasn't dumb though. He knew that values require more than a simple choice to believe them. You don't just wake up one day and decide, "I'm a happy successful person!" and become it. Values must be cultivated, consciously tried and tested and steeled by experience. Values are worthless if they don't contain some sort of real-world manifestation, some tangible benefit in the form of positive experience.

We don't always control what happens to us. But we *always* control a) how we interpret what happens to us, and b) how we respond to what happens to us. Therefore, whether we consciously recognize it or not, we are always

responsible for our experiences. Choosing to not consciously interpret events in our lives *is still* an interpretation of the events of our lives.

Whether we like it or not, we are *always* taking an active role in what is occurring with ourselves. We are always interpreting the meaning of every moment and every occurrence. We are always creating values about ourselves and others. And we are always choosing our actions based on those values. Always. Whether we realize it or not, we are *already* choosing our actions. We are *already* responsible for our negative experiences. We just aren't always conscious of it.