

Awareness: A critical skill for the pursuit of Excellence

In Atomic HabitsJames Clear speaks of the importance of awareness – I’ve long pondered this. He makes a couple of sweeping very profound statements.

“we must begin the process of behavior change with awareness”

Then he tells us why –

“if a habit remains mindless you can’t expect to improve it.”

I have an awareness exercise for you. I invite you to try the following experiment. This experiment will span two areas.

1. it will demonstrate the concept of small things matter.
2. it will be an exercise in awareness.

Here is the exercise:

For the next week, when you ask your new client (one you have never seen before) about pressure, follow this recommendation exactly.

When you are asked about pressure say:

“how are you doing with this pressure, would you like me to go deeper.”

Remember, the above question is really two questions. Don’t allow any time between, “how are you doing with this pressure?” and, “would you like me to go deeper?” Say it as one long question.

The next step in this experiment is to change the tone of your voice. Instead of simply asking in a normal tone of voice, change the tone of your voice to a very inviting tone. The tone would be as if you were holding a plate of cookies at your grandmothers Christmas party and asking a little old lady if she would like a cookie. The pitch of your voice will be slightly higher. Imagine it now with the higher, more inviting tone.

“How are you doing with the pressure, would you like me to go deeper?”

Then, your next task is to be aware. Remember this is mostly an awareness exercise. I’m trying to help you become more aware that little, tiny things, like the tone of your voice, matter. Do this exercise for a week and see if more people don’t take you up on your offer for more pressure.

I’ve pondered this issue as it relates to improving our skills a therapeutic bodyworker. Asking team members to be aware of what is working and what is not. What are they doing with clients today, that has changed over the past few days, weeks, months that is helping them impact their clients at a higher level?

My reasons for this are slightly selfish. If they can be aware of what they are doing, they can tell us, and we can all benefit – if it’s done without awareness – it’s still good, but the value to the group goes down.

A word to couple with awareness in this context is “intentionality”. As we become “aware” of what impacts clients at a high level – we can do more of that (provided our goal is to be more impactful with our clients).

If you are a teacher, awareness of what you are doing (or not doing) is critical. We can’t teach things that have not found its way into our awareness. We can be doing the most marvelous things with our clients, and it can be showing up in our request rate, but unless and until we can become aware, we cannot help others understand how we are making our impact. My experience tells me this process, the process of becoming aware so we can teach it, can take years, even decades.

A variation of becoming aware of what we are **doing** – is to become aware of what we are **thinking**. Therapists who are impacting their clients at a high level “think” differently. These therapists may not be aware of the differences or be able to articulate the differences, but the differences are there, waiting to be elucidated and made clear. These differences in thinking can be taught just as soon as they can bubble up to the surface of our awareness.

Very often I meet therapists who are awesome, with no idea or awareness of how they accomplish their awesomeness. I called these folks the **mindlessly awesome**.

Mindlessly awesome is the condition of doing great things, with no idea how you do it. This condition is caused by a total lack of awareness of how you are impacting your clients.

What is the solution to this problem?

The answer to mindless awesomeness is awareness. With awareness, we become “**mindfully awesome**.”

I ask therapists to start the process of being awake. Note every subtle aspect of what you do, and how you think about your work.

Remember, awareness comes in two categories. Technical awareness, awareness of what you do, and mental awareness, awareness of how you think. We are talking about how you approach massage and bodywork from a thought and mindset point of view.

As you start to become more aware, I can promise you this; your practice will improve. It will blossom right before your eyes. Your practice will improve because as we become aware of what we do that impacts our clients we can do more of those things that have a positive affect and less of the things that have a negative effect. We become more intentional.

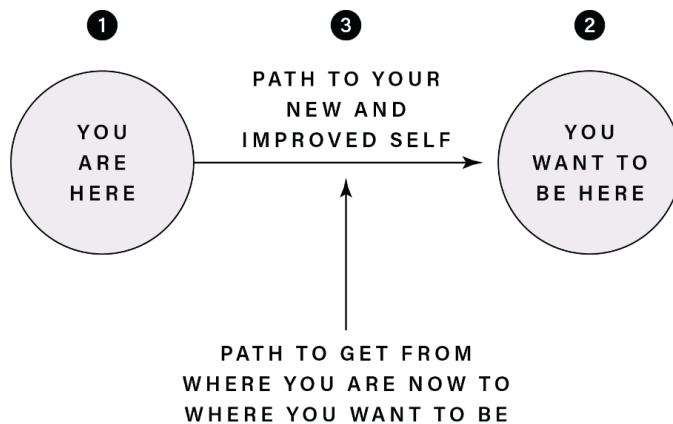
Let me give you an example. If we noticed that setting expectations about what to expect regarding soreness after a treatment helps to decrease complaints about soreness, we can be more intentional in this area. We can take care to do it more often. The list of possible areas where this could happen are endless.

Carl Jung said,

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life, and you will call it fate.”

Awareness is valuable as we look at serving our clients. There is another very important area where awareness can make or break a therapist, and that is in your general professional development.

Professional development, your growth and development as a massage therapist, might be graphically illustrated like this:



You need to know three things to grow and develop professionally and all three require awareness.

First, you must know where you are currently (#1 on the graphic). You need an accurate assessment of your strengths and weaknesses currently. Next, you must know where you want to go, what is your aspiration as a bodyworker. What level of excellence do you want? (#2 on the graphic)

Once you have an accurate assessment of where you are, and you know where you want to go, the next step is to develop a plan to get you to your goal. (#3 on the graphic)

It's important that you don't minimize any of these three areas. You need accurate feedback in all three areas to progress professionally.

While it's theoretically possible to do your own assessment of the three areas, most of us don't have the awareness to know where we are currently. It's very hard to watch ourselves perform with any kind of objectivity. We need a coach, someone to analyze our current condition and show us the path to higher performance.