



SUPPORTING THE HEALTH AND
WELLBEING OF THE ARMED
FORCES COMMUNITY AND
CIVILIAN FAMILIES IN
CORNWALL



The freedom to choose can liberate your true self

From infancy we are exposed to incoming data and stimuli. We have to learn to negotiate our way through this barrage of information and learn in the process how to respond. Imagine just how much information we have to deal with daily, (sights sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings). Unsurprisingly, we have to develop coping mechanisms and short cuts.

One such short cut is called a “schema”. A schema is a group of learned responses to repeated stimuli. When a situation occurs, we will rarely think our response through from start to finish. Instead, we go to our library of schema. We will have schema for everything from pruning the garden to dealing with a distressed human being.

These responses are coupled to thoughts and feelings about ourselves and the world. They become a part of both our behaviour and our belief system. We adopt them as programs we run, to negotiate life more easily.

Schema are useful shortcuts. The problem is that over time they form part of our self-concept. We judge the world and ourselves based on them; good or bad. So, if you see yourself as prudent, you will be shrewd and somewhat risk averse. You will see the world through prudent glasses and act accordingly. You will focus on all the times you avoided catastrophe but will down-play the opportunities missed, and chances not taken. You will have a prudence “confirmation bias”.

A self-concept could be made up of a number of attributes, such as, I am a 'good father', 'excellent sports person', 'bad driver', etc. They can be quite rigid and mechanical in steering our thoughts and choices. For example, if we have a self-concept of being 'tough', we may say to ourselves: 'I am tough and should not show emotion.' If we believe we are not clever enough to hold down a good job, chances are we won't go for that job. In effect, we are being manipulated by our self-concepts. This prescribed way of reacting may also be because we associate an event with a past experience, and we have been programmed to react in a certain way.

So, what can we do to liberate ourselves and make more informed choices? One way is to become aware of these self-concepts and incidents which set us off and reacting in prescribed ways, through meditation. Whilst focussing on the breath in a meditative position and observing our emotions and thoughts (called 'decentring') we have the opportunity to create space in the mind to make an informed choice. We can choose our response rather than react to a self-concept or trigger. In so doing, we are more able to get to know our authentic selves.

So what then is our authentic self?

It is our true self and in order to know this self, we need to be honest about our values (ideals) and beliefs, which are put into practice by flexing our character strengths and abilities, and moreover, accept the responsibility of using these resources whilst pursuing our needs and dreams in life. Mindfulness meditation can create space and focus in the mind, to know these resources.

For example, my value might be 'to develop places of peace and quiet in my community' and my character strength of 'spirituality' and 'appreciation of beauty' could assist me to achieve this. However, not doing anything to live the value is not being my true self. What do I do if I don't know what my values are? A good place to start is to become aware of my top character strengths, and develop values from these. For example, if leadership is my top character strength,

perhaps I could attempt to get onto the local town council or head up a project to improve the local community in some way. In this way, my value of leadership could emerge.

If you would like to become more aware of your character strengths, you can do an online survey at <https://www.viacharacter.org>. Once these are known, you can do a mindfulness meditation for 10 minutes, and visualise yourself using your character strengths, in different ways. In so doing, your purpose in life may be revealed and purpose attracts energy and commitment.

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