YOU GET GOOD AT WHAT YOU MEASURE

> *Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it.* - H. James Harrington

Our ability to learn is based on feedback.

If I bump my head on a cabinet, the pain lets me know to duck next time... or to change the layout of my cabinets! If a conversation sparks my interest, that spark lets me know to pay closer attention. If I feel awful whenever I spend time with a particular acquaintance, that awful feeling tells me to reconsider spending more time with him.

There is a whole field of study of psychophysiology and biofeedback that is dedicated to helping people learn to control aspects of their physiology, including certain brainwaves, in order to achieve greater relaxation, lowered blood pressure, and other psychological and health benefits.

But we don't need that level of sophistication in order to make use of biofeedback. Our own bodies, and many common devices, give us plenty to go on... if we pay attention. This holds the key to taking charge of much more of our psychological and physiological existence than many of us know.

For example, how do you know when you're angry? The common answer is, "Well, because I *feel* angry!"

But there's something else that happens besides the emotion of anger. We have physical sensations - our muscles tighten, our heart rate climbs, our breathing changes, our teeth clench.

The specifics will vary to some degree for different people, but the more aware we can be of the physical sensations that accompany feeling angry, the easier it will be for us to sense that emotion coming on, and the better able we will be to catch it before we feel too consumed with emotion to think straight.

Panic attacks are often preceded by a shift in breathing as much as 45 minutes before most people are aware of any feelings of panic. Becoming more aware of our breathing can help us catch those shifts and gently deepen our breathing long before our shallower breathing would have triggered a panic attack.

Situational awareness is noticing what's going on around us, paying attention to our perceptions.

When we tune in to our surroundings, we can more easily notice signs of potential danger. We might be driving and notice a car that's weaving ever so slightly, and know to keep some extra distance in case they're texting, or they've been drinking - or they're maybe just a rotten driver.

When we don't pay attention to our physical sensations or perceptions, we can be easily blindsided - by our own emotions or reactions, or by external threats that seem to come out of nowhere.

Thomas Jefferson once said that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. I would say that goes for the price of self-ownership and effective living, too.

More subtle physical sensations often can precede the more intense emotional reactions that can cause so much trouble. Once our heart rate goes above about 100 beats per minute, we lose some of our cognitive ability - which means that the kind of intense, angry arguments that some of us can get caught in have - at best - zero useful effect in solving anything.

The more we can come to recognize our own physical sensations, the more quickly we can identify what's happening, and the more effectively and consciously we can respond. We can grow all of these capacities through practice.

Take a moment right now to notice what you're sensing physically in your body - tension, relaxation, warmth, cold, vibrations, your breathing, the beating of your heart... This is different from our emotions, these are purely physical sensations; but they accompany and can help us track our emotions - like spoor can help us track an animal.

The more we practice noticing these sensations, the more attuned to them we can become, and the sooner we can notice when something's different.

We can also grow our situational awareness through practice. Just take a moment any time you enter a room to consciously take in some of the details. Pay a little closer attention to the people around you, notice what they're doing; notice specific details like hair color, height, tone of voice.

But there's another facet to explore here. What if there's something about our current situation that we would like to change? Our behavior, our knowledge or our physical condition?

Simply put, if you want to change something, measure it.

If you want to lose weight, one of the most effective - and very simple - things you can do is to weigh yourself every morning. It helps you to keep tuned to your goal, and the feedback keeps you conscious of your own behavior as well.

If you want to be more frugal, write down what you spend. Not just the things that are easy to write

down; *everything* you spend. Writing it down diligently means you can't keep secrets from yourself.

Do you want to be better at your work? Measure your activities and what comes of them.

Do you want a better relationship? Write down how many kind things you do, how many times you respond positively and actively to good news - and how many times you respond to good news by ignoring it.

Do you want to become more physically fit? Write down exactly what you do each day for physical exercise.

Carpenters have a saying, "Measure twice, cut once." Paying attention, and measuring what we do that we'd like to improve, puts our personal feedback system on alert. It engages our conscious awareness in the project of building ourselves into better people.

Carly Fiorina, now a presidential candidate, was the CEO of Hewlett-Packard, one of the world's largest technology companies. She is fond of quoting HP founder Bill Hewlett as saying, *"What gets measured is what gets done."*

He meant what gets done in business, in a company. It's equally good advice for one's personal life as well.

Take the time to pay attention to your body's signals, and to measure the things you want to improve. It can significantly sharpen your skills of self-improvement, and give you the precious feedback you need to flourish.

P.S. My new Master's Course in Happiness is designed to help you learn the skills and habits that will help you build a flourishing life now. For a limited time, I'm offering this to Oxford Club Members at a special discounted rate of $39 a month.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D. is the author of Mastering Happiness*. He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around the world via phone and Skype. You can get a FREE Learning Optimism E-Course if you sign up at his website,* www.drjoelwade.com*.*

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