

The Observing Self

One can say that the goal of any therapy is to develop an observing self. What's that you say? Well you may have heard it being called other names like witness or the executive self. Basically, it is a part of yourself that can observe what ever is going on for you - that is thoughts, feelings, body sensations or behaviour, and not be dominated by it.

First, let me explain what often happens to all of us, and why you may want to develop an observing self. Well, we all have things that upset us, make us angry, hurt or frustrated. That's part of life. It could be just a small thing, such as a person at work or a family member who has said something or done something. And before we had time to think about it, we are instantly triggered. We are having a big response to the situation much bigger than is warranted. This is a sign that something old, from another situation that has not been resolved yet, has been activated – a previous hurt or trauma. Most of the time this happens outside our awareness. In other words, we do not understand that an old unresolved hurt has been triggered. We think that our anger or hurt is caused by the current event. We may shout or defend ourselves to the point where a fight escalates. We may say things in anger to hurt the other person. Very soon the situation is out of control. Damage is being done to the relationship.

Well, if we have a well developed observing self, we can prevent such a situation from escalating. We are able to recognise how the current event may trigger an old hurt. We can observe our own reactions internal and external. We can track our thoughts, feelings, body sensations and behaviour. There is choice on how to respond. Instead of being gripped by the strong feeling, we are able to have the feeling and observe it at the same time. We are able to respond in a way that is more helpful to us and the person with whom we are interacting. We are able to sooth ourselves and diffuse the intense situation. This is helpful in any situation, in any part of life. To be in charge of our own response, to have choice as to how we respond. Rather than just reacting on automatic.

The work to develop the observing self is ongoing. The effort is well worth it and the rewards are better relationships, more inner peace, less stress. There are many ways to achieve this, some can be done on one's own, some are better done with a trusting friend or therapist. It is all about getting to know yourself better. Understanding where you have come from in your family. What has happened to you that has helped to shape you and your character now. What sort of things upset you now. This is achieved through exploration of your history and learning to be mindful in the present moment. To be mindful is to notice what is going on for you in this moment. To ask yourself – what am I feeling right now, what am I thinking right now, what sensations am I noticing in my body right now? Can I just breath or count to 10 and not react without thinking? What would be the most helpful thing to say or do right now?

At first, this is difficult to do. But with some practice of mindfulness and meditation, the task

of self observation becomes easy and natural. This is developing the observing self. This is having freedom of choice to respond to a situation in the most helpful way. This is living a more authentic life with less stress and more peace. After all, Isn't that what we all want?