

# THE ART OF INTROSPECTION

---

*by*

Edith Packer, J.D., Ph.D.



*A Publication of*

**The Jefferson School**  
of Philosophy, Economics, and Psychology

## THE ART OF INTROSPECTION

**T**he ability of a person to identify and understand his emotions is crucial to his happiness. As Ayn Rand emphasized, emotions are not tools of cognition, and they should not by themselves be a guide to behavior. Nevertheless, emotions have enormous psychological significance. They are an essential means by which we experience ourselves and respond to the world around us. We all know that by the time a person matures, he has made and automatized countless value-judgments. It is emotions which are the single most important signal indicating the nature of those value-judgments. Thus, to understand the ideas and values which underlie our emotions is to be on the road toward understanding the unique personal way each of us comes at life. Understanding your emotions enables you to get in touch with what is uniquely you: your individuality. The more you know what you value, the greater is your sense of your own identity and the more you will know who you are.

The only route to understanding your emotions is through introspection, and how to apply the process of introspection to emotions is the subject of my talk today. It is really a “how-to” speech, that will provide you with a blueprint for introspection. It will give you the individual steps involved in the process of discovering the nature and meaning of your emotions.

But, first, I want to make some brief remarks about both introspection and emotions.

Introspection is a cognitive, intellectual process directed inward, focusing on and identifying the internal processes of one’s consciousness. Just as extrospection requires a focus on the various aspects of the external world, so introspection involves an awareness of and focus on one’s intellectual and emotional life. The requirements of mental health include both—the objective knowledge of both external and internal reality.

Like extrospection, introspection can be conducted with different levels of focus. In extrospection, the levels may range from the intense concentration of a thinker pursuing a process of logical deduction to the peripheral awareness of a man walking on the street. In introspection, too, the man who maintains a generalized awareness of his emotions while attending a cocktail party will have a different level of focus than the patient and therapist attempting to identify an emotion of pain repressed in childhood. In other words, the appropriate level of focus in introspection will depend on the context.

## EDITH PACKER

It is important also to call to your attention the difference between actual introspection and what is often mistakenly believed to be introspection, namely, the continuous defensive observation of one's behavior and feelings—usually of fear—in anticipation of real or imagined disapproval. Such a neurotically self-conscious focus amounts to asking “How am I doing?” during every minute in which one is interacting with other people. This cannot be considered introspection, because introspection gives you answers to the questions of: what am I doing? and why am I doing it?

It is probably unnecessary to persuade this audience of the importance of introspection. I want only to emphasize that life can be experienced to the fullest only if you know yourself, and that you cannot know and understand yourself without a definite commitment to a conscious policy of introspection.

The process of introspection covers wide and varied areas of man's inner life. It can include an examination of the conscious mind's efficiency in thinking, the discovery of subconscious connections in making evaluations, the discovery of intermediate or core evaluations, the identification of defense mechanisms, and the discovery and identification of one's values of every kind, from fundamental to trivial.

I presume all of you know that emotions do not come from the heart and are not gifts from the heavens, but come from man's conceptual faculty. Emotions are not in conflict with, but are the product of, one's evaluations, which underlie them.

I want to remind you that emotions are psychosomatic responses to a perceived object, event, or situation, identified and appraised in accordance with the perceiver's knowledge and value-judgments. As this statement implies, each emotion presupposes perception, identification, and value-judgments. Much can be said about each aspect, but today the focus is on discovering the lightning-like value-judgments which lead to individual emotions.

Suppose then that we are ready to introspect. How do we go about it?

Introspection of emotions has to take place in a series of steps. There are, in fact, six steps to be followed:

1. Identify the type of emotion or emotions which you are experiencing.
2. Identify the universal evaluation underlying each of those emotions.
3. Identify the personal evaluations underlying each of those emotions—the particular form in which you hold the universal evaluation.
4. Judge the correctness of the underlying evaluations, both universal and personal, against the facts.
5. If the evaluations underlying the emotions are incorrect, identify the reasons for making them.

## THE ART OF INTROSPECTION

6. Consciously reinforce correct evaluations, in order to correct automated inappropriate thinking methods stemming from your psychological problems.

Keep in mind that each of these steps is an integral part of introspection and each of them is equally important. Furthermore, each step is a prerequisite of the next. Each step must be followed if the process is to succeed.

Let me demonstrate the steps with the following example.

Mr. Clark is a successful young executive who characteristically gets involved in short-term romantic relationships. He “loves them and leaves them,” within a few weeks. He generally chooses good-looking young women, but ones he considers less educated and intellectually and financially inferior to him. He pursues them ardently in the beginning, sometimes two or three at a time, and when they succumb to his charms and are totally smitten by him, he loses interest and drops them. He seems like a nice young man, and he occasionally even regrets the unhappiness of the women he abandons.

One day, a young woman, Miss Able, whom Mr. Clark believed he had swept off her feet, tells him that she is not interested in him and has in fact found a man she truly admires and is seriously interested in. Mr. Clark becomes so upset that it impairs his driving, and he ends up being involved in an automobile accident. He is very disturbed by the accident, and now wishes to understand why he is so upset about the abortive affair, especially in view of the fact that he was going to drop Miss Able very soon himself.

Starting with the first step in introspection, Mr. Clark has to identify the type of emotions he is experiencing. It is clear that “being upset” is a negative emotional state, but “upset” is more an emotional summary, indicating a negative state of mind, rather than a specific, concrete emotion. Like most people, Mr. Clark does not bother to identify in detail the individual emotions that merge into “being upset.”

As the first step, good questions to ask in order to figure out what type of emotions you are feeling are: Am I feeling positive or negative emotions or a combination of both? Do my emotions concern other people or myself? It may also be helpful to make a list of the different emotions that you are experiencing and what you think you are reacting to. Even people who are completely inexperienced at introspection will be able to name some emotions if they try. Do not worry at this point that you may not know all the emotions you may be experiencing. You will probably discover others as you proceed.

Suppose Mr. Clark tells me that he is furious at Miss Able and that he is anxious. He reluctantly admits that he may even feel jealous of the man she likes and that he seems at times to be depressed.

We now have four emotions: anger, anxiety, jealousy, and depression. Since emotions have causes, what we now have to look for are the conclusions which Mr. Clark drew and which result in these emotions. This brings