



MOU KNOW thyself

The key to personal development is self-awareness, writes Eugene Yiga

Despite the advances of modern life, studies show that our levels of happiness haven't changed in years. If anything, life in the 21st century is more challenging than ever before. So what should we do? Many people turn to self-help as a way to improve their lives. But there's a problem. If you Google the term "personal development", you'll get hundreds of thousands of hits. With hundreds of courses, thousands of books and who knows how many blogs, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Yet it's not as complicated as we make it out to be. In fact, after spending the last decade of my life learning and writing about the art of personal development, I've discovered that it all comes down to one thing: self-awareness. It's about taking a deep look inwards to understand what is and isn't working and what you need to change. It's about getting where you want to go by knowing where you are right now.

Here are some useful guidelines:

➔ **Understand the good things about your life.** Make a list of all the things that are working well for you. Think about your greatest achievements, your biggest strengths and anything else you should be proud of right now. No matter how tough life might be, there's always something you can feel good about.

➔ **Understand the bad things about your life.** Of course, life isn't all sunshine and happiness.

That's why the second part of this exercise is to look at the things in your life that aren't going well. Make a list of what isn't great for you right now. Think about your biggest disappointments, setbacks and other difficulties that cause you to struggle. Write them down and get them all out. Journaling often brings to the fore things you weren't consciously aware of. It also brings clearer focus about what is and isn't working in your life.

➔ **Commit to making a change in your life.** The purpose of this exercise isn't to depress you. Yes, life's tough – even if we aren't in danger of political violence or natural disasters, we all suffer in our own ways. But is life really nasty, brutish and short? Should we believe we're meant to live in pain? The answer is "no".

We can find happiness in troubled times, but only if we're honest about the troubles we face in the first place. That's why it's so important to take a long, hard look at what is and isn't working in your life. No more denial. No more anger. No more fear. Just the truth.

My "aha!" moment on this issue came after I'd spent half an hour having a magnetic resonance imaging scan. For a long time, I was in denial about how much control I had over my life. At university, I was under a huge amount of pressure to maintain my academic performance (and the full scholarship that came with it).

So I kept pushing myself harder and harder, even when I knew I ought to slow down. No wonder I was often dealing with severe headaches, one of which was so sudden and so intense that I had to go to a hospital's emergency room to make sure nothing serious was happening.

By the time I got home from that experience, I was exhausted. All I could do was lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling. It was then that I knew I had to make a choice. I could do nothing and let my life spiral out of

control – or I could do something – anything – to change it.

Nevertheless, I was afraid to take the first few steps in case they didn't work out. Life was comfortable and it was easier to convince myself that I'd be fine. But however afraid I was of failing, there was something else that scared me more: I knew there was a better life out there, begging me to live

it. Choosing to do nothing would leave me worse off.

That's why I had to commit to making a change in my life. So I started setting firm limits on how many hours a day I spent working smarter, not harder.

➔ **Take action.** If you're ready to start improving your life, begin by being honest with yourself. As Louis William Rogers wrote in *Self-Development and the Way to Power* more than a century ago: "Happiness is the normal condition, as natural as the seasons. It's unnatural to suffer and it's only because of our ignorance that we *do* suffer."

Once you've figured out what is and isn't working in your life, consider the single most important change you'd like to make. Then work towards that goal, even if it's only one small step at a time. Day by day, you'll get closer to achieving it. And day by day, things will get better. You just have to make a start.

** To learn more about Eugene Yiga's personal development writing, follow @MonumentalLife on Twitter or visit: www.eugeneyiga.com*

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