

Overcoming Doubt, Understanding How It Comes About

Reframing the meaning of yourself without doing it yourself.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri
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“It takes two to know one” — Gregory Bateson

*“But when the universe becomes yourself,
when you love the world as yourself,
all reality becomes your heaven,
reinventing you as your own heaven.” — Lao Tzu*

A dear friend of mine who teaches mindfulness recently confided in me that he attended a silent retreat and could not experience a meditative state. His self-doubt reached such a level that he thought of leaving and felt himself a failure in the art he so strongly loved. He requested a verbal moment with the retreat mentor who asked him what he was sensing. My friend described his fear, insecurity, and consequent constricted physical manifestations. The mentor listened, reminded him of his fallibility, and paraphrased what she heard in a comfortable volley of empathy and compassion. Her message was to simply create a new larger joyful space for his self when meditating.



Inside Out

Source: Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

My friend shared with me what occurred in his next sitting. He was immediately visited by his doubt and happily told it that it was not necessary for them to be together. He explained that they were now in a larger wider place and they were both free to experience it. His constriction dissipated and he no longer reproached himself while being able to achieve long periods of satisfying meditation.

The pattern of self-doubt

I have seen this pattern many times with those I counsel, myself included. Given these trying times, we are all fallible and vulnerable to self-doubt and criticism. The ensuing fear is a natural occurrence and is exacerbated by a feeling of lost self-esteem. There can also be a painful mind/body reaction or an ongoing negative mindset as the sympathetic "fight or flight" part of your nervous system goes into action.

When this occurs your blood flow is constricted, most of it sent to your arms and legs so you can run to safety. However, if this episode is not resolved in a reasonable amount of time, your brain and gut will be compromised. Consequently, we become in a sense dumber. It becomes difficult attempting to reason your way out of this place because your subconscious seems permanently revved up. We do not need to be saving ourselves 24 hours a day.

The biology of self-doubt

Here is an explanation that can help one recognize what is happening biologically and create a means to transitioning out of this situation. There is an incredibly important part of your nervous system that travels through your gut, brain, and heart which is rightfully called the Vagus Nerve. Its Latin origin means wandering and it is the nerve of compassion, (see Dacher Keltner's book *Born to be Good*) regulating your metabolism and digestion among other functions. But for those in a doubting and an insecure state, it constricts and can freeze you.

Many researchers (see e.g. Polyvagal theory) believe that this can be the origin of destructive social patterns. I personally try to stay away from labels/nouns, many of which perpetuate fragmentation and unsuccessful solutions by not paying attention to context. I prefer to encourage the use of active verbs to resolve problems. In the case of our nervous system, it is important to know that there is only a limited segue to altering any injurious patterns. This is primarily because it is autonomic, and by design automatically maintains what may be good or bad.

A few techniques, which I encourage you to explore, can adjust the nervous system. The most effective in my experience is breathing in with a six-second inhale and expelling it from your lungs with a six-second count while thinking a positive thought to enhance the Vagus Nerve as well as strengthening your Heart Rate Variable (see Stephen Elliott). Tai chi movements also assist one's mind and body simultaneously, while Yoga, Aikido, and certain other mindfulness activities can reboot your nervous system.

Transitioning from self-doubt

With knowledge of the biological workings of self-doubt and some skills to help resolve the negative consequences of it, how do we transition into a wider framework? My friend's experience is a template to refute doubt and the resulting insecurity which affects self-esteem and eventually parts of your body.

Solutions clearly need to focus on the present, since you cannot change the past. It takes mutual learning from non-judgmental relationships to soothe the Vagus Nerve in order to transition into new, wider supportive contexts that are less injurious and more secure. There may not be predictable outcomes but there surely will be many exciting possibilities. No matter what, the process and plan have to be responsive and relevant to your individual uniqueness, which will allow the spirit of compassion and interdependency to be nurtured.

Here are some questions and suggestions that can be addressed with a trained therapist or a trusted friend to develop a plan:

- How might you describe the evolution of your sense of "self"?
- What resources, relationships and other contexts would be supportive of your journey to feel emotionally secure?
- Start a short poem or narrative by completing the phrase; if I can make changes in my life, I would be _____
- What sensations best describe you?
- What makes you better or worse with regard to being comfortable with yourself?
- How would you describe your temperament? (introverted, extroverted, thinking, feeling, angry, passionate)
- What barriers have you encountered (i.e. family of origin, relationship issues, etc.) that have hindered your self-development as you strive to make your life work the way you would like it to work?
- How would you answer the question: "What it is that you're not getting in life?"

I wish you all the best in your endeavor to widen your perspective.

When you recognize and reflect on even one good thing about yourself, you are building a bridge to a place of kindness and caring.—Sharon Salzberg, from her book *Real Love*