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2 Getting to Know OUR MINDS Better

2C LESSON
Alertness Improves Self-Awareness



"Never neglect details. When everyone's mind is dull or distracted, the leader must be doubly vigilant."

Colin Powell, distinguished US military officer and statesman. (1937 -)

By applying the direction in this lesson, you will sharpen the skills for better navigating your mind. Alertness is a valuable mind function that helps us identify and access a complex range of possible influences.

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ADDRESSING THE VALUE OF ALERTNESS

Lesson 2A introduced a group of journaling questions to assist you in becoming more self-aware. Then Lesson 2B enhanced your understanding of potent emotions and the darker side of the ego. In Lesson 2B, you also learned how to prepare your mind for potent emotions— *ahead of time*— enabling you to better choreograph your actions and reduce ill-effects on others. This Lesson 2C now introduces how *alertness* also improves self-awareness. You will be learning to better understand alertness and then practice such scrutiny while involved in your regular daily activities. As self-awareness implies, continued study and practice will help you become more attuned to your feelings and behavior, especially in recognizing emotionally unhealthy habits.

Alertness may be defined as being *keenly attentive, watchful, or actively observant.* Alertness also implies being *totally present, mindful, consciously concerned*, or more casually, as *being on the ball.* Alertness is thus about developing sharper thinking and a quicker sense of rational reaction. Such an optimum habit plays a significant role in memory retention and overall emotional growth. By combining the investigative EQ practices you learned in previous lessons with active alertness, you will have a clearer basis to work from in order to improve most any skill pertaining to emotional intelligence.

Being so keenly attentive may be compared, from an emotional intelligence perspective, to using sophisticated scanning radar or other tracking devices. However, even while alert, we can't catch every detail or tidbit. Instead, we search for what is valuable to recognize, emotionally, yet too easily goes unnoticed.

The multi-tasking involved for responsibly managing our daily lives could compare to the efforts necessary for an airline pilot to pay close attention to the number of gauges on an instrument panel. Similarly, for responsibly managing our lives, we must learn to pay close attention to a number of behavioral directives. By questioning the quality of our thoughts and behavior, we learn to improve how we decide priorities, validate decisions, and treat others.

"The first and best victory is to conquer self"
Plato, Greek philosopher (c. 428 BCE–c. 348 BCE)

It is no wonder that alertness is among the most important mind functions to practice, considering all the benefits. Yet, knowing what to be alert about for becoming more self-aware may compare to needing eye glasses, while not even knowing that glasses would help us see any better. As we improve our understanding about self-awareness criteria and in practicing alertness, we more clearly grasp how healthfully or unhealthfully we are applying the psychological workings of our minds. Without such knowledge and scrutiny, grading our level of self-awareness with accuracy is almost impossible.

Addressing the value of alertness reminds us *that our concern for such discipline provides better insight into the psychological workings of our minds. Not unlike the purpose of a compass, radar equipment, or particular practices that improve precision and safety, alertness enhances similar power in the mind. When we do not apply alertness for improving self-awareness, we greatly limit our capability for emotional growth.*

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CONSIDERING THE OBSTACLES TO ALERTNESS

The mind, unfortunately, does not automatically become as alert as we would like it to be, or warn us when our attention has become too casual. Without being purposeful about alertness, anyone's mind can subtly and erratically wander, shifting in and out of a high, medium, and low range of attention.

When we become complacent about alertness, our performance becomes more lethargic and indifferent than we realize. We do not easily rationalize the practicality of accepting the discomforts of alertness. Yet, poor attention habits contribute to more careless behavior than we realize and are often associated with poor employment performance and even life catastrophes.

Such catastrophes occur every day because of peoples' unintended shifts *to* a more casual mode of thinking. Oftentimes, we only realize in hindsight that we were not as alert as we thought after experiencing our own unfortunate consequences. An example of great consequence is reflected in one of the deadliest US airline accidents. In 1972, a commercial airliner crashed because the pilot spent an excessive amount of time changing a stubborn light bulb in the cockpit. He failed to shift his attention *back* to flying the airplane and didn't realize that someone had bumped the autopilot control and turned it off, until too late to prevent the crash.

The lack of attention that causes us consequences may not be as self-evident immediately or even later. Yet for those who want to practice improving mind development, such discipline is a necessary part of the growth process.

Reflecting on the obstacles to alertness reminds us *of the need to recognize and take heed to navigational cues. In some ways, we too easily operate our minds in a similar manner to driving without adequate road signs or other navigational tools. As with many obstacles in life, once we have directional cues to guides us, we have a better chance to avoid their consequences in the future.*

INCREASING ALERTNESS REQUIRES PRACTICE

Wouldn't it be great if someone could invent an *attention intensity gauge* that would attach to our heads and alert us whenever our attention strayed? Without such a hi-tech tool, directing the mind more strategically than we normally do requires heightening our audio, visual, and physical senses. We may also, in many situations, utilize helpful day-planners, logs, lists, and other guidance tools for measuring important criteria.

"To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."

Mary Oliver, American poet who has won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. (1935-)

The complexity of practicing alertness might compare to the multitasking skills of an orchestra conductor, who must rely on written cues, rather than memory alone, for directing the many members of an orchestra. Thus, the more related cues we learn to consider while alert, the more harmoniously we may guide our thoughts, words, and actions. Honing our alertness could also compare somewhat to being computer savvy. Knowing the subtle cues that provide healthy direction is similar to knowing what our computer's numerous directional icons mean and how to use them.

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No doubt, many activities in life require vigilant attention. We often practice alertness while playing competitive games or taking important tests. Talented players of most any game are usually taught by highly knowledgeable coaches who understand the rules and various skills required. Without well-directed instruction, players rarely make the big leagues. This same kind of detailed direction and practice is necessary for improving alertness.

Without heightened alertness, we too often fail to notice subtle cues that could otherwise provide healthier direction. Nonetheless, alertness can also be of interest to those who harbor devious intentions, rather than an interest in healthy direction. Criminals know they must remain vigilant about certain factors to prevent being caught!

The list below provides a dozen ways that you can practice alertness, while engaging in regular tasks or chores throughout each day. The ultimate goal of this exercise is to improve overall attention toward the investigative factors that enhance our self-awareness.

12 Ways to Practice Applying Alertness

(*helpful to use a 5 minute timer)

1. Pause often to consider a broader scope of concerns. *
2. Make keen visual and audio observations frequently. *
3. Increase reflections upon important matters. *
4. Pinpoint and note meaningful priorities to accomplish.
5. Anticipate actions beforehand to prepare for smoother experiences.
6. Pay attention to what you forget, so that you can create reminders or improve memory.
7. Note specific awkward or inappropriate behaviors to practice improving.
8. Look for ways you can ward off minor problems as well as potential calamities.
9. Use written reminders for what needs to be remembered.
10. Identify and note bloopers and inappropriate behavior to help avoid in the future.
11. Search for exercises that give the mind a strategic workout.
12. Watch for others' behavior that is worth emulating or avoiding.

*Using a timer, set at five-minute intervals while practicing items 1-3 will help you train your mind to pause for considering these and other concerns.

The practice required to increase alertness reminds us *of how similar the discipline for self-awareness is to other precision activities. Practicing alertness sharpens our sensibilities. While practicing particular alert exercises, we are building more watchful concern for investigating disciplines that distinguish our EQ, such as cautiousness, conscience, courage, courtesy, efficiency, empathy, and fairness.*

"The universe is full of magical things, patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper."

Eden Phillpotts, English author, poet and dramatist. (1862–1960)

PRACTICING ALERTNESS WHILE DRIVING

Driving a vehicle is one of the best ways to practice increasing alertness and for understanding the active detailing involved in becoming more self-aware. Being concerned about the current quality of our driving is necessary to become more particular about how well we are driving. Similarly, being concerned about the quality of our thoughts, communications, and behavior is necessary for improving our mind development.

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While practicing *alert* driving, we alternate between viewing the road in front of us and scanning the wide-angled perspective—zooming in and out to observe the more obscure, yet important details— in a timely manner. Even if you are not a driver, understanding how the process of driving relates to self-awareness can be useful for adapting such practice to other activities you perform each day.

No matter how careful we feel behind the wheel, all drivers should occasionally reevaluate the quality of their driving for acting responsibly. We endanger roadways by failing to recognize casual or complacent driving behavior. The most common accidents that result in the most debilitating injuries occur on the roadways. Many of us have already experienced accidents that have caused tragic physical and emotional problems. Granted, driving performance may deteriorate with age, yet practicing alertness may still help improve safety and reduce chances of an accident.

No doubt, a requirement for safer driving is optimum focus on the job of driving. According to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, inattentive driving is the leading cause of most accidents; practicing to improve your driving skills is thus highly beneficial. Driving as well as self-awareness are strategic activities that require our constant perception and focus, testing our sensibilities for direction, courtesy, and caution.



We all know that driving may become complex and tricky at any time. A driver's response calls for split-second decisions when necessary to perform critical safety maneuvers. Vehicles moving out of control at a high speed can be like rapidly firing bullets— going astray and causing a tragic domino reaction. Thus, while practicing alertness to improve self-awareness, we can help to steer a safer turn, prevent an accident, or increase our tolerance and courtesy toward other drivers.

In *evaluating* our driving manner, we need to eliminate all distractions: radio, cell phone, and unnecessary conversation. Even though this may feel quite restrictive, these distractions can interfere while practicing alertness, and be dangerous.

Just as your car runs more smoothly and requires less energy to go faster and farther when the wheels are in perfect alignment, you perform better when your thoughts, feelings, emotions, goals, and values are in balance.

Brian Tracy, Personal development author and speaker. (1944 -)

The multi-tasking required for alert driving involves coordinating a wide range of rules and guidelines we learned while studying for our driver's test. Alert driving to improve self-awareness also involves particular skills that are probably not mentioned in any driver's handbook.

Consider the following common distractions that cause accidents, according to the United States NAHTSA and Virginia Tech Transportation Institute.

Top 10 Driver Distractions



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1. Daydreaming
2. Talking or singing
3. Smoking
4. Using a wireless device such as a cell phone
5. Chatting and interacting with other passengers
6. Reaching for CDs or other items within the car
7. Pointing out a billboard or other external distractions
8. Programming radio stations, tinkering with other dashboard controls
9. Unwrapping a burger or other items when eating or drinking
10. Using an electric razor, checking lipstick, and other hygiene-related actions

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Below are listed a few simple tips for exercising alertness while driving.

7 Alert Driving Tips

1. Too narrow a focus allows us a false sense of security.
2. Exercising alertness is important, but doing so while driving may initially cause a slight headache, similar to muscle aches that we incur when exercising after being sedentary for a while.
3. Maintaining good posture while driving can improve our chances of remaining alert.
4. Scanning the side/rear view mirrors frequently is an important exercise for safety.
5. Increasing our alertness is an energy investment that does not take extra time. We can practice alertness while driving or doing most any other task.
6. Vehicle maintenance problems can arise with little or no warning. Perform regular service to avoid unnecessary stress and to keep safe.
7. We must be especially cautious of our mental state while driving and listening to music or paying attention to other factors, as we can become mesmerized and feel very comfortable while reducing our attention to safety matters more than we realize.

"Take at easy driving. The life you save may be mine!"

Brian Tracy, Personal development author and speaker. (1944 -)

4 Questions to Ask Yourself as You Begin Evaluating Your Driving

1. How well am I directing my driving?
2. How safety conscious am I about driving?
3. How many courtesies do I consider?
4. How observant am I about maintenance issues, such as tire tread and inflation, noises, and other vehicle problem indicators?

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To help improve your driving, place page 5 of this lesson near your driver's seat to review the lists before you start driving. When stopped and safe, take note of other drivers' safe actions can improve your own driving skill repertoire. After a few weeks of observing your driving, complete the *Alert Driver Evaluation* supplement to this lesson, reading the CONCERNS from left to right. As you work on this project, please realize that to place in practice what you are not currently doing well might take longer than you expect, so you don't get discouraged. However, the review and notes suggested in this paragraph should quicken your improvement.

Interestingly, the United Nations named the second decade of the 21st Century as the *Decade of Action for Road Safety* to increase our attention to this important cause. Engineers preset safe speed limits for driving because they understand the important engineering factors that need to be considered, including the effects of particular road conditions. Accidents occur in milliseconds— in a threating situation, three seconds of distraction can cost us dearly.

Although we are all on our honor to stay within the preset speed limits and maintain enough attention for driving safely, the nature of the human mind, as mentioned earlier, may allow us to be less cautious and less alert than we realize. We should remember that as human civilization has evolved, motorized vehicles have only been around for one century— and at such high speeds for less time. No one can deny that driving has the potential to become hazardous; thus we need to monitor our own behavior at the wheel more often than most of us would consider.

Practicing alertness while driving reminds us *that it is a valuable way to improve self-awareness. All drivers, no matter how careful they feel behind the wheel, should occasionally reevaluate the quality of their driving for acting responsibly. Alertness may not only play a significant role in our overall self-growth, but also in saving our life while driving.*

UNDERSTANDING ALERTNESS CRITERIA

As licensed drivers, we should already be familiar with much of the criteria involved and know the value of paying closer attention to these details. Similarly, to become more self-aware, we also need to know the value of paying closer attention and the criteria involved.

As mentioned previously, many life experiences require such heightened attention; actually, any experience that requires us to be concerned about how skillfully we are doing whatever we are doing requires heightened attention.

An employee's alert attention to important details can play a major role in justifying a pay raise or even keeping a job. Our alertness while playing games can make the difference between winning or losing. Remaining alert while playing a musical instrument helps eliminate mistakes. Practicing alertness in school increases a student's ability to learn more readily and improve grades. In fact, at any time, our practicing alertness may improve or save our lives, and perhaps the lives of others.

"Attention is a little-noticed mental asset that makes a huge difference in how well we find our way in our personal lives, our careers,as parents and partners,and in virtually everything we do."

Daniel Goleman, author, psychologist, and science journalist. (1946-)

We all would like to better our odds in life. Paying closer attention, while driving, improves the odds of not having an accident. Granted, an accident today may be a remote possibility. Nonetheless, just as we would not go on the highway without auto insurance, we will benefit by heightening our alertness while on the highway. And just as we would seriously pay attention in any other job that could go awry within only three seconds of distraction, driving warrants such attention, as well— aside from being an excellent way to learn about self-awareness.

Driving disclaimer: In good faith we have provided our best suggestions for helping you to increase your alertness while driving— a serious task that, if not executed properly, can turn deadly in an instant. We cannot be responsible for driver errors that may still occur, even while utilizing our suggestions. Since we are not present for directing your actions, you will be following these instructions at your own risk. Please be most careful when practicing this exercise!

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Identifying alertness criteria while driving reminds us *of how important it is to direct our thinking process toward the priorities of caution, courtesy, and direction. Life is full of experiences that require us to be concerned about how alert we are and how skillfully we are performing similar priorities; sometimes preventing an accident, reducing conflicts, or directing us more healthfully.*

IN CONCLUSION: Practicing What Develops Healthier Minds

EII considers self-awareness to be one of the most important mind functions for improving our reasoning power and memory. Optimal experiences are those we make happen. As you practice driving with keener alertness, you will become more aware of the important rules and guidelines for driving that you may have missed to learn. You will find that focus and memorization are necessary for developing better driving habits and for becoming more self-aware.

Practicing alertness with a focus on EQ factors strengthens and sharpens our physical senses and sensibilities. Mindful attention toward improving self-awareness reveals how skillfully and appropriately we are applying our minds. Only through conscious concern are we able to track the quality of our thoughts and behavior, providing an opportunity to note our ineptitudes and work toward improving them.

EII is dedicated to providing you with our best direction, but also must remind you that practice is a necessary ingredient. Without practice, you may have understanding, but not capability— similar to learning to read music, but not having practiced enough to be able to play an instrument very well.

As civilization becomes more familiar with the complexities of the human mind, there may be many shifts in our priorities— especially the amount of time we spend educating ourselves about certain subjects. Perhaps further education on driving and better understanding of our own minds will move much higher on the priority list of those in power to make such improvements during this century.

Be sure to take note of this lesson's quiz and supplements.

PLEASE NOTE: Remember at this point to continue reading through Lesson 3 group, if you haven't previously done so, before beginning the suggested activities and quizzes.

"If I have made any valuable discoveries, it has been owing more to patient attention than to any other talent."

Daniel Goleman, author, psychologist, and science journalist. (1946-)

NOTES

"The difference between something good and something great is attention to detail."

Charles R. Swindoll, an evangelical Christian pastor, author, educator, and radio preacher on more than 2,000 stations around the world in 15 different languages. (1934 -)