

Looking Beyond Ourselves

A human being is a part of the whole called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

Here we are going to explore looking beyond ourselves at bigger-than-self goals. Often our focus is on ourselves: trying to impress others so they will like us, or to prove ourselves, or to suffer less.

Bigger-than-self goals are defined as a purpose that goes beyond the goals of personal gain and success. It's about how you see your role in the family, with friends, at work, and in the community. It's about what you want to contribute and the change you want to make.

A research project by Jennifer Crocker at the University of Michigan looked at both the US and Japan found that when people connected to bigger-than-self goals they feel better: more hopeful, curious, caring, grateful, inspired and excited. When people are operating from self-focused goals, they are likely to feel confused, anxious, angry, envious and lonely.

The emotional consequences of these goals builds up over time. So people who pursue self-focused goals are more likely to become depressed, while those who pursue bigger-than-self goals show greater well-being, have a greater sense of meaning, and more satisfaction with their lives. They also end up building a stronger social support network.

These two ways of pursuing goals are not fixed personality traits. Everyone has both types of goals and these motivations fluctuate over time. Just a small shift in how we think about things can make a difference. There is no need to strive for these goals as they will emerge naturally from reflecting on them.

Reflection

Take a few minutes to think about what kind of person you want to be in the future.

What kind of positive impact do you want to have on the people around you or on society in general?

How do the MBSR practices help with these goals?

Practice Cultivating Common Humanity

1. Start by connecting with your current thoughts, emotions and sensations in the body in a kindly way for several minutes.

2. Then noticing the thoughts or feelings that come up when you think about a stressful or painful experience of yours. Acknowledging whatever the underlying pain is.
3. Considering the possibility that this source of suffering is part of human experience.
 - a. Just like you, countless other people know what it's like to feel this pain, regret, sadness, injustice, anger or fear.
 - b. Allowing yourself to feel a natural sense of empathy for these people, an understanding of what they must be feeling.
4. Saying to yourself a phrase that captures the sense of shared experience. For example, 'May we all know our own strength', 'May we all find peace', 'May we all be supported through this suffering', 'May we all know that we are not alone'.