

Awareness as a Three-part Experience

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Note: the following article addresses a concept established and used in psychotherapy. For coaches, this concept is not intended to be utilized in a therapeutic capacity, but as inspiration for a framework to support coaching clients in their work around awareness development.

As coaches, we're familiar with that moment of witnessing our clients in mental overdrive: brow furrowed, wheels of the mind spinning furiously, a hand to the forehead, pen poised to write, tapping the paper. It's easy to picture because it happens all the time. In fact, regardless of our coaching specialty, clients often come to us because they've hit a wall with their thinking. They can't mentally muscle their way to a new solution.

A primary piece of the Leadership and Career Coaching I offer revolves around developing awareness. A couple of years ago, a mental health practitioner introduced me to a framework that I have found to be exceptionally effective in helping clients to cultivate greater awareness. The framework, called "Zones of Awareness," comes from the [Gestalt therapy tradition](#) and breaks the full experience of awareness down into three parts: middle zone, outer zone and inner zone.

The Zones

The middle zone is comprised of our thoughts and mental processes. It's the zone where most of my clients sit with their experience of awareness. Judgment, interpretation, anticipation and remembering all occur in this zone. While the mind is the seat of logic and reason, it is complex, complicated and often cryptic, which leads our clients to that inevitable sense of being stuck. Phrases beginning with "I think" or "I can't figure out" are clues that often point to middle zone awareness.

The outer zone is where we objectively observe the world around us through our senses. It's the zone we most commonly strive to settle into when we engage in meditation. In this zone, we are merely witnessing the present setting. Judgment and interpretation are absent. Phrases that begin with "I see" or "I hear" without a narrative attached demonstrate outer zone awareness.

The inner zone is made up of emotions and physical sensations within the body. Like the outer zone, the inner zone is also a place of witnessing without judgment and interpretation and can also be a useful zone for meditative focus. Phrases beginning with "I feel" often signal inner zone awareness.

Applying the Zones to Coaching

In the coaching space, when we work with clients to develop awareness, they are typically well-versed in the middle zone experience and looking for support around mindfulness, so it's helpful to build a practice around shifting from the middle zone to the inner and outer zones. However, the full experience of awareness relies on a balanced integration of all three.

Developing presence using outer zone awareness is particularly helpful if clients are encountering challenges around leading/managing others, social problem solving and relationships—all of which require using the senses to notice body language, movement, facial expression, tone and volume of voice, appearance and setting. Developing a greater capacity to understand one's emotions and physical sensations using inner zone awareness can be helpful when working with clients around uncovering values and learning to identify physical and emotional clues for harmony, which occurs when we are acting in alignment with our core values, and dissonance, which occurs when we are acting out of sync with our core values.

Building a practice of toggling among these three zones begins with curiosity. When we notice our clients are operating from their middle zone, we can ask questions

such as, “What’s happening in your body right now?” or “What’s alive for you emotionally right now?” or “What’s happening around you in this moment?” These questions emphasize the present, and being in one of these mindful zones requires a client’s undivided attention, much like meditation.

After practicing this toggling in a session, challenging or requesting a client to continue the practice for a short period each day outside of the session can be a helpful way to build this new skill. Once the client becomes familiar with the experience of stepping into the inner and outer zones, we can integrate questions that encourage moving among all of the zones in a single experience. To incorporate the middle zone, we can ask questions such as, “What was that experience of being in your inner/outer zone like for you?” or “What might this emotional clue be telling you?” Eventually, with practice, the client will be able to move seamlessly among the zones and capture the holistic experience of awareness, enriching their perspective and capacity for creative thinking and problem solving.

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Bio

Emily Mitnick, MCP, ACC, is a Leadership and Career Coach, strategy consultant and the founder of EHM Coaching, which serves a global client base and operates out of San Francisco, CA, USA. Emily is a passionate relationship builder and champion of holistic well-being who utilizes her design background to amplify the role of creativity in the coaching process. She earned her coaching certification from Philosophy IB at American University, and she is also a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (MCP) and Northwestern University (BA). To connect with Emily, visit her website at www.emilymitnick.com.