



## What Exactly is Insight?

### Insight:

- > The capacity for understanding one's own or another's thoughts, feelings, motives, and problems
- > "Sight with the eyes of the mind," mental vision, understanding,"

### *Some factors included when looking at the concept of insight:*

#### ➤ Keep in mind the Three R's – Recognition, Realization and Readiness

**Recognition** that there is a problem at hand. (Remember that it is important to be able to recognize that the problem itself may not be so simple especially where coexisting issues are involved. Recognizing just *part* of the problem may not be enough when the problem is complex or multi-faceted)

Open **Realization** of the critical belief that some change is going to have to occur in order for things to get better (regardless of whether or not one is ready to actually start making that change happen)

**Readiness** to try to understand and learn more about yourself and to try to understand why we do what we do, regardless of how uncomfortable that learning process may be.

When overcoming a problem, it is helpful for those with insight to identify potential obstacles to progress as well as supports and areas of strength to draw upon. Insight is like an open door to examining ourselves in order to see our potential as well as honestly weighing our abilities and our circumstances in order to gain understanding and improve our perception and focus.

It is important to keep in mind that having insight does not inherently mean having motivation too. There are many people who are actively demonstrating problematic behavior (such as substance use issues) and they are completely aware that it is ruining their lives (insight). That alone, does not mean that there is a desire to take action any time soon. Unfortunately, there are people who use drugs or alcohol to the point of their own demise, knowing all along that their lifestyle is quite possibly leading them to an early grave.

It is critical to remember that insight is not a fixed measure. Unfortunately insight is a lot like a window that closes and opens with changing life experiences. Someone may have a full understanding of an issue one day but after only a few days or weeks later, excuses can creep in as to why what was once believed to be true no longer applies. For example, soon after someone gets a Driving Under the Influence arrest (DUI) that person may suddenly gain full insight into the belief that their drinking is a problem and therefore make a decision to abstain from alcohol completely going forward. Over time, however, it is not uncommon for that same person, to decide later that the DUI was just based on a poor decision or just unfortunate circumstances as opposed to an actual loss of control of alcohol use. That same person who initially decided it was best for them to abstain from alcohol due to their DUI may change their decision and instead identify that their use of alcohol is no longer the problem. The person may reason that they do not have to be abstinent from alcohol but instead they can keep drinking and just try being more careful. For many this revised plan works as some people are able to make arrangements to keep drinking and not drink and drive again in the future by using driving services and designated drivers. Others, however, with more serious alcohol issues often get a second DUI because they failed to maintain their initial insight which told them that when they drink, they lose control of good decision making. The problem is that everyone who gets a first DUI wants to be in that more fortunate group who can keep drinking without consequences by simply being more careful. In reality, not everyone is so fortunate, as some individuals who return to drinking again experience consequences despite a desire to avoid them. The main point here is that insight is often a just a temporary state if one is not careful. People often recognize for a time what they need to do about their substance use but later change their minds based on false rationalizations and steady loss of insight over time. In AA they refer to this changing of insight in terms of a "return of denial"



## **BELIEF Does Not Equal TRUTH**

When it comes to insight this simple equation for many involves unlearning some deeply rooting concepts that trace back even to childhood. From an early age many of us are taught:

- *“Just believe in yourself and anything is possible” or*
- *“If you just believe hard enough, you can make all your dreams come true”*

These statements are well intentioned and extremely positive in nature. Sadly though, they are not always true. There are thousands, if not millions of stories of how people who believed in themselves overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to achieve amazing goals and life achievements. The power of positive thinking is indeed a beautiful and powerful thing! Still, while trying to avoid sounding too negative, realistically speaking, people often forget that for every person who believed in themselves and then experienced huge levels of success there are many more who failed or fell short, despite a strong inner belief in their dreams. Is it fair to say that the people who made their dreams come true simply believed in themselves more than those who failed? Is it fair to say that the primary reason behind those who “made it” was their unwavering faith in their ability to one day succeed? The answer may seem heartless but the answer to both questions is no. It is not fair to attribute that much weight to the level of one’s “self-belief”. Positive thinking is essential and self-belief in one’s potential is incredibly valuable however *those factors alone do not guarantee goal attainment or success*. There are many other factors that affect one’s ability to attain goals, many of which are beyond one’s control.

One example that really hits home with just about everyone is the time travel exercise. For example, many times I have been faced with a room full of marijuana abusing teenagers who swore that they are 100% sure that they will never, ever try any harder drugs such as cocaine or heroin. For many of those teens, that belief is true. There are those users who never progress past marijuana. To the contrary, however there are those many other individuals who, despite good intentions and strong belief, do end up moving on to harder drugs without originally attending to. For some in this second group, the eventual move toward harder drugs is simply a natural part of the seemingly inevitable progression of their drug problem. For even still others, they fortunately “grow out” of their drug abuse behaviors as they mature and gain responsibility in life. The problem is, that in the early stages, it is difficult to tell the three groups apart. The vast majority of teens want to believe that they are of the more fortunate group who will not progress past marijuana. You very rarely meet an early stage marijuana abusing teen who will openly state “Yes, I can see myself as a crack or heroin addict one day” Some later stage teen users may see these signs but they likely have already begun to experiment with the harder stuff. The main point is that when kids use marijuana, the overwhelming majority of them do so with the firm belief that their use will not progress toward harder drugs and fortunately for most people that is true, but it is not true for everyone. There will always be a portion of kids who will one day eventually get worse regardless of how strongly that they believe that will never happen. How strongly a kid believes they will never get worse or progress with their substance use is not the primary determining factor when it comes to the eventual outcome. Remember, in the end looking back as adults whether things got worse or not, everyone usually believed early on it was not going to happen.

The time travel experiment works like this: When faced with an early stage drug using teenager who strongly believes they will never progress to using harder drugs ask them what would happen if you could go back in a time machine to an earlier age such as age 7 or 8. Ask them what they would say if you asked them at age 8 if they would ever try marijuana or if they would ever get arrested. The vast majority of kids will remember the time when they were younger and the thought of abusing drugs was absolutely unthinkable\*! The point of the time travel exercise is to get kids to realize that there was a time that they strongly believed that they would never use drugs at all yet looking at them now, they went against their once strongly held beliefs. By the same token, are they absolutely sure that now they can guarantee that they will never try harder drugs? Some kids will hold onto their strongly entrenched beliefs but this activity will definitely get them thinking. What one believes now does not always hold up in the future despite one’s best intentions.

\* It is important to note that there are some kids from really difficult backgrounds who were exposed to a world of drugs at an extremely early age who this may not work with due to this early exposure. Some youth who have personally witnessed severe drug use such as crack smoking and heroin use in their immediate family from early childhood may have grown up from the beginning with a completely warped view of drug abuse due to such early life exposure. This activity may not work with these youth. Nevertheless, regardless of who this exercise is done with, if done correctly it can generate some valuable insight-building discussion.



For thought - How about you? Whether you are reading this for yourself or if you are a counselor, family member or other helper reading this, think about things that you once as a child believed would never happen to you but eventually did, whether or not it was even your fault. If you could travel back in time to your childhood and talk to yourself, what things have happened since then that you may have at one time believed would never happen to you but did?

In conclusion, once again to hammer the point home one last time: Strong belief can be helpful and can often influence motivation toward positive outcomes in situations that may even seem impossible at times. Nevertheless, once again: Belief alone however, does not mean truth.

## **Insight – The Honest Search for Truth**

If more than belief is needed than what is the missing piece in one's insightful search for the truth? The answer is simple: Truth is established by **evidence**. A truly insightful journey into one's self and one's motives must include a careful review of the evidence at hand. Granted, there is not always an exhaustible amount of evidence available on any given subject, however the evidence that is available should not be ignored. It is the personal responsibility of all those with insight to explore the evidence at hand and search for even more in the quest for truth.

It is important to dispel the philosophy that there is no truth. Truth can be elusive and challenging to discover but it is real. Our perceptions affect our view of the truth but it does not change the truth itself. Our perceptions also guide us in forming our own concept of reality but true insight building is about examining reality as it really is, which may often be outside of our own perceptions and comfort levels. Often this insightful examination includes considering other people's perceptions and viewpoints that we may have never considered before. The insightful search for reality and truth requires an open mind. To simply disregard the insightful search for truth based on the belief there is no truth is a cop out. Even if it is difficult to find, gaining insight is all about making our best effort to keep on searching, experimenting, studying and learning. Sometimes we need to think outside the box and we need to be open to what others may say about us.

To illustrate: there are absolutes that are true and that are unaffected by perceptions or beliefs. For example if you are reading this you are alive. That is the truth. You need to eat food and drink water or you will eventually die, that is the truth. If you are reading this you have the ability to think and reason and change. You are on planet Earth. You have a physical body that is governed by the physical laws of the universe. You have a history and a past that you can learn more about and change your perceptions on but in itself, your past cannot be changed. You are a product of your experiences to some degree. There are aspects of who you are that no one can change about you except for you yourself. Furthermore, a thousand people could believe something untrue about you but that would not automatically make it true by any stretch. Rumors and slander are so hurtful because they spread untruths about others that simply may not be true. We have seen it before in the world of criminal justice where thousands have believed with all of their heart someone is guilty or not guilty of a crime, only to later find out, as more evidence is revealed, that the opposite outcome was true despite the intense, unwavering belief of the majority.

So again it comes back to evidence. The insightful search for truth is about a fact finding, soul searching quest for evidence. Often we have to close our mouths and do a lot of listening, looking and learning. At other times opening our mouths and our minds and letting what is inside ourselves come out is what is required in our insightful pursuit of evidence. Playing devil's advocate and considering the other side of a matter is also a key element in our insightful, self-examination and search for evidence. Other than perhaps empty philosophical debates and theories, there are some truths which there is enough tangible evidence to accept. Remember, this section of the Escalator is for those who identified insight as a strength, so the following exercises are for those who possess a degree of existing insight to then use this valuable quality in order to grow and learn. Using insight can be like the key to opening the door to self-exploration and discovery leading to inspiration, progress and positive change.