



At Last! A Proven Route to Wisdom

Take a step back from the situation, the saying goes, and things will be better. As with most sayings, we tend to ignore the idea. Now, however, is the time to search the attic for any dusty plaques or grandma-looking needlepoint pillows bearing that message.

This month, researchers at the Emotion Regulation and Self-Control lab at the University of Michigan revealed that a change in perspective can lead to newfound wisdom. "In a nutshell," said assistant professor Ethan Kross, "People often experience difficulty making decisions when it comes to intensely meaningful situations."

Giving yourself some psychological distance, his team discovered, can help you think—and understand—in deeper ways. How was that distance achieved? By asking people to visualize their futures as if they were a fly on the wall—so that they could see themselves.

For example, if you couldn't find a job, thinking about your having a job in the future—as say, a software programmer—might lead to a less-charged, bigger-picture understanding of your present life, one takes into account the rough economy and your lack technical skills...instead just of how hard you're trying or how tired you are or how frustrated. Voila! Your tired, frustrated, non-technical self now has a potential avenue to explore: taking a computer class.

Another method is to ask people to think about their problem as if they lived in a different country. In Kross's work, a Republican who considered the future of America with a Democratic president while imagining that she lived in Iceland tended to be much more mature and multi-faceted than if she pictured the future of America with a Democratic president while she still lived in America. The same went for Democrats envisioning Republican leaders.

To me, all these ideas seemed very appealing. I can envision no greater future than living out the rest of my life as some kind of smaller-eared, blonder, less-wizened Yoda. "Do you try these techniques at home?" I asked Kross.

He laughed. "Yes, I do implement them. But I wouldn't endorse them for use full time. You wouldn't want to distance yourself as you walked down the street or at your son's birthday."

Hhmm... I am not sure of that. A perspective far, far, far away from the popped balloons and sugar-stunned kids and obsessive neighbor noting whether or not my son loved or loved the Play-Doh set would not be all bad. It might even be a touch enlightening.

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