

Curiosity as a Catalyst

How an Experimental Mindset Can Transform Decisions, Learning, and Well-Being

The Underrated Power of Curiosity

Curiosity is an underrated state of mind. It fosters focus for learning, observation, and experimentation. As children, curiosity comes naturally. The world feels fantastic and new, and we want to explore everything.

As we grow older, however, our ability to remain curious often diminishes. We begin to assume we know what will happen—or, at times, we avoid discovering what might. An inquisitive nature is gradually traded for what we call “wisdom.” Yet it is worth asking whether this exchange truly benefits us.

To embody the idea that we begin again each day, we must allow ourselves to remain curious. To develop—to change, grow, and heal—we must move through life with curiosity. It is a vital force that opens us to new possibilities and ideas. Curiosity shifts us into the mental space where inspiration becomes perceptible. It allows us to recognize patterns in new ways and softens the sense that things are going “wrong.”

Curiosity requires us to set aside preconceived notions and see the world in color. In other words, curiosity challenges the rigid thinking that divides experiences into simple categories of good and bad. To live with curiosity, one must adopt an experimental mindset and suspend judgment long enough to see where circumstances might lead.

Life as an Ongoing Experiment

A friend of mine likes to say that everything in life is an experiment. The more I observe, the more accurate this statement appears to be.

Circumstances and choices rarely fit neatly into categories of good or bad. Even situations that appear straightforward seldom produce predictable chains of events. If there are no guaranteed right or wrong answers, then life becomes an ongoing observation of cause and effect—a long, unfolding experiment.

Spiritual teachers Esther Hicks and Abraham describe this idea simply: *you can't get it wrong, because you never get it done* (Hicks & Hicks, 2007). Life is never truly finished while we are alive.

One of my favorite moments in the film *The Matrix* illustrates a similar idea (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). The protagonists ride an elevator toward an important meeting that has already begun to go badly. One character wonders if they should have made different choices earlier. Morpheus

responds, “What happened, happened, and couldn’t have happened any other way.” Neo asks how he knows this, and Morpheus replies, “We are still alive.”

As long as we are alive, the experiment continues. The past cannot be changed, but new steps can always be taken. Each moment becomes an opportunity to approach life with curiosity and wonder.

Curiosity and the Freedom to Choose

When we accept that there may not be a single “correct” answer to every decision, something remarkable happens—we become freer.

Rather than becoming paralyzed by uncertainty, we can approach choices experimentally: *I will choose this path for now and observe what happens*. If circumstances change, we can adjust our course. Life is not a final exam with one correct response. It is an ongoing process of exploration.

This perspective can be especially helpful when we find ourselves trapped in mental loops—sifting endlessly through pros and cons in search of the perfect decision. Instead of circling the problem indefinitely, we can step outside the loop and apply curiosity first.

When curiosity has not been practiced for some time, however, it can feel difficult to access—especially when confronting situations we would prefer to avoid. A useful place to begin is with simple questions:

- What new information might this situation hold?
- What can I observe here?
- What do I actually think about this?
- What values are emerging for me?

Approaching life in this way creates an open psychological space where inspiration and insight can emerge.

Curiosity, Uncertainty, and the Human Body

Adopting an experimental mindset does not guarantee that clear answers will appear immediately. Sometimes curiosity simply allows us to live more comfortably within uncertainty.

At first glance, this may seem passive. Why step away from intense analysis if the result is simply sitting with unanswered questions? What good does that do when you have argued with a family member for decades, been estranged from a partner for years, or feel buried in debt with no obvious solution?

Often what finally breaks under relentless analysis is not the problem—it is the person attempting to solve it.

Human physiology is designed to maintain balance and well-being (McEwen, 2007). The body continually makes small adjustments to preserve homeostasis, a stable internal state necessary for health. Chronic stress, however, disrupts this process and places sustained pressure on physical systems.

Curiosity can interrupt this cycle. When we shift from frantic problem-solving to open observation, the body is allowed to relax and recalibrate. In that sense, curiosity becomes more than a philosophical stance—it becomes a physiological intervention.

The countercultural slogan of the 1960s, *if it feels good, do it*, contained a surprising kernel of wisdom. Although often interpreted recklessly, the deeper principle is that experiences that generate genuine relief, relaxation, and openness help regulate the body's systems and support overall well-being.

Reconsidering Our Values

Curiosity also allows us to continually revisit our beliefs and values. We may assume that our perspectives are stable, yet they often shift throughout life. Sometimes they change from year to year; sometimes they change from day to day depending on our circumstances, needs, and resources.

Maintaining curiosity toward our own thoughts allows us to reassess whether our beliefs continue to serve us.

A recent experience with a stray cat reminded me of this process.

One winter, a wild cat appeared near my home. It soon became clear that she was pregnant, and temperatures were regularly dropping below zero. I found myself wrestling with what the “right” thing to do might be. Normally, I am not someone who believes wild animals should be brought indoors. Yet I felt a strong desire to help.

After considerable deliberation, I decided to bring her inside—an act immediately rewarded with scratches running from my chin to my rib cage and down both arms. Once indoors, it became clear that the kittens were not due anytime soon.

At first I wondered whether I had made the wrong decision. Eventually I realized that the question itself was misguided. This interaction with the cat was simply an experiment—an evolving relationship and an ongoing exploration of my values. I remained free to adjust my choices as circumstances changed.

Practicing Curiosity in Everyday Life

The same process occurs in smaller moments.

Sometimes I make plans for the day when a friend invites me to do something spontaneous. My first reaction is often anxiety—*What am I going to do now?* Yet when I pause long enough, curiosity reveals something simpler: I genuinely want to spend time with them. When curiosity replaces panic, the situation frequently resolves itself in ways that allow everything to work together.

Even when circumstances appear to be going “wrong”—such as financial stress, stagnation in life, illness—curiosity can soften emotional intensity. Instead of spiraling into endless *what ifs* regarding outcomes, we simply can ask what might unfold next.

This shift may appear subtle, but it fundamentally changes how we experience uncertainty.

The Psychology of Curiosity

Psychological research supports the importance of curiosity in learning and adaptation (Kashdan et al., 2020). Curiosity motivates exploration and engagement with new information, encouraging individuals to investigate unfamiliar ideas and experiences.

Related emotional states also contribute to learning (D’Mello & Graesser, 2012). Surprise captures attention and directs cognitive resources toward unexpected events. Confusion, although uncomfortable, can deepen learning by prompting individuals to process information more carefully.

Perhaps the most expansive of these emotional states is awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Experiences of awe—moments when we encounter something vast or beyond our current understanding—can increase openness and willingness to revise existing beliefs.

Together, these emotional processes suggest that curiosity is not merely a pleasant personality trait. It is a cognitive and emotional mechanism that helps human beings learn, adapt, and grow.

The Experiment Continues

Seen from this perspective, life is not a puzzle with a single correct solution waiting to be discovered.

It is an unfolding process of observation, adjustment, and discovery.

Each moment provides new data.

Each decision becomes a small experiment.

When we release the demand to get everything exactly right, something remarkable happens: we become freer to participate in our own lives.

Instead of freezing in indecision or spiraling into regret, we can approach circumstances with a quieter question that is cushioned in open curiosity:

What might happen next?

Curiosity turns that question from an anxiety-inspiring rumination into a more relaxed way of living.

And as long as we are alive, the experiment continues – and curiosity remains the doorway through which we participate and see the world in a wholly new light.

If you would like support in cultivating curiosity or exploring your own life experiments, Dr. Jenny is available to support your process.

References

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