EXPLORE ME

Understanding Yourself, Your Patterns & How You Show Up

Tracy Henderson
Counseling

A Companion to ME | WE | US

THE STARTING POINT: GETTING TO KNOW ME

Understanding ourselves is an ongoing process of discovery. We develop an understanding of who we are through our experiences, relationships, beliefs, values, and the ways we navigate the world.

But much of how we operate happens automatically.

We develop habits, emotional responses, expectations, protective strategies, and ways of interpreting experiences that become familiar over time. Some serve us well. Others may have been useful at one point but no longer support the person we want to be.

Explore ME is an invitation to get curious about yourself.

The goal isn't to identify everything that's wrong, become someone different, or achieve a perfect version of yourself. It's to better understand what makes you, you what you bring, what you need, how you respond, and what you want to cultivate.

Within the **ME | WE | US** framework:

- **ME** represents the individual our identity, experiences, capabilities, vulnerabilities, needs, and responsibilities.
- **WE** represents how individuals interact, communicate, influence, and respond to one another.
- **US** represents the relationship or shared system we create, maintain, and navigate together.

Understanding ME helps us recognize what we contribute to our relationships and what we can reasonably manage ourselves, request from others, or develop together.

ME is my responsibility, but that doesn't mean I have to manage everything alone.

Use the following areas as opportunities for exploration. You don't need to work through everything or follow a particular order. Begin with what feels relevant, what you're curious about, or what keeps showing up in your life.

Approach the process with curiosity, compassion, honesty, and grace.

KNOW MY SELF

Identity, Values, Beliefs & Personal History

Who are you, and how did you become the person you are today?

Our sense of self develops through a combination of temperament, experiences, family, culture, relationships, opportunities, challenges, and the stories we tell ourselves.

Some parts of our identity are deliberately chosen. Others are inherited, learned, or shaped by circumstances.

Getting to know yourself involves exploring these influences without assuming they must continue defining who you are.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Family of Origin & Life Experiences

Consider the people, environments, institutions, and experiences that influenced your development. What did you learn about emotions, relationships, achievement, independence, conflict, vulnerability, and asking for help?

Some lessons may be worth keeping. Others may benefit from being updated or retired.

Identity & Personal Values

Explore what matters to you, how you define yourself, and which values guide your decisions.

Consider the difference between who you believe you should be, who others expect you to be, and who you actually want to become.

Understanding the SELFs

Develop awareness of your self-worth, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence.

These related but distinct aspects of self influence how we value ourselves, evaluate our capabilities, approach challenges, and respond to success or failure.

Confidence often develops through competence—exposure, experience, practice, and reflection.

Capabilities, Vulnerabilities & Blind Spots

Identify your strengths, skills, resources, opportunities, and what you might consider your superpowers.

Equally important, recognize your vulnerabilities, limitations, obstacles, and the areas you may not yet understand about yourself.

Understanding yourself includes recognizing both what comes naturally and what requires additional support or effort.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What people, experiences, or environments have most influenced who I am?
- What values matter most to me, and how consistently do my choices reflect them?
- Which beliefs about myself have I inherited, and which have I deliberately chosen?
- Where do I feel capable and confident? Where do I experience uncertainty or inadequacy?
- What strengths, vulnerabilities, or blind spots might others recognize that I don't yet see?
- What parts of myself do I want to keep, update, develop, or let go of?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Develop a more complete understanding of yourself without reducing your identity to your strengths, struggles, accomplishments, or mistakes.

UNDERSTAND MY INNER WORLD

Emotions, Nervous System, Stories & Interpretations

Much of our experience of the world happens internally before it becomes visible to others.

We feel, interpret, anticipate, remember, and assign meaning to what happens around us.

Sometimes these processes help us respond effectively. Other times, they can amplify distress, reinforce assumptions, or lead us to react before we fully understand what's happening.

Learning to understand your inner world creates more opportunities to respond intentionally.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Emotions & Emotional Fluency

Get to know your emotions. Embrace the "F" word—feelings.

Explore how you recognize, experience, express, and translate emotions into useful information.

Emotions can help us understand what matters, what feels threatened, what we need, and how we're responding to our circumstances.

Nervous System & Regulation

Learn what activates your nervous system and how stress influences your thinking, emotions, and behavior.

Notice what happens when you feel threatened, overwhelmed, criticized, rejected, or uncertain.

Explore what helps you calm, regulate, recover, and return to a more flexible state.

Squeeze the Sponge

Life creates emotional residue. Experiences accumulate, and not everything gets processed in the moment.

Consider how you "squeeze the sponge"—making space to experience, process, express, and release what you've been carrying.

This might involve reflection, movement, conversation, solitude, creative expression, or other healthy forms of emotional processing.

Stories, Beliefs & Self-Talk

Our minds continuously interpret experiences and fill in missing information.

We create explanations about what happened, why someone behaved a certain way, what something means about us, and what might happen next.

Explore the difference between facts, interpretations, assumptions, and predictions.

Pay attention to your internal language, including the "shoulds," "musts," and "have tos" that influence how you experience yourself and the world.

Attachment & Emotional Learning

Consider how your attachment system becomes activated in relationships.

What happens when you experience distance, uncertainty, conflict, closeness, or vulnerability?

Our responses may be influenced by earlier experiences, but they aren't necessarily permanent or inevitable.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Which emotions are easiest for me to recognize and express? Which are more difficult?
- What situations activate my nervous system, and how do I recognize that activation?
- How do I process difficult experiences rather than simply carrying them forward?
- What stories do I create when information is missing or uncertain?
- What does my self-talk sound like when I'm struggling, disappointed, or under pressure?
- When do I feel most secure, threatened, connected, or disconnected in relationships?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Learn to recognize your internal experience without automatically treating every feeling, thought, or interpretation as a fact that requires action.

RECOGNIZE MY PATTERNS

Habits, Protective Responses, Coping & Blind Spots

We are creatures of habit.

Over time, we develop familiar ways of responding to stress, uncertainty, conflict, disappointment, and everyday demands. Some patterns are productive and help us navigate life effectively.

Others may provide short-term relief while creating longer-term difficulties.

The objective isn't to eliminate every unproductive behavior. It's to understand what purpose a pattern serves, what consequences it creates, and whether other responses might work better.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Habits & Automatic Responses

Notice the routines, behaviors, and reactions that occur with little conscious effort.

What do you do when you're tired, overwhelmed, criticized, uncertain, or uncomfortable?

Consider both the productive habits that support you and the "junk food" habits that provide immediate satisfaction or relief but may create longer-term costs.

Protective Strategies

We often develop behaviors to protect ourselves from discomfort, rejection, failure, vulnerability, or perceived threats.

Defensiveness, withdrawal, avoidance, perfectionism, people-pleasing, control, and emotional distancing may serve protective functions.

Understanding why a behavior developed can help you evaluate whether it's still useful.

Parts of Me

Get to know the different parts or "characters" that operate within you.

You may recognize a part that wants achievement, another that seeks comfort, one that protects against criticism, and another that wants connection. These different tendencies can coexist, cooperate, or compete.

The goal isn't to eliminate parts of yourself but to better understand their influence and develop greater flexibility in how you respond.

Review the Game Tape

When something doesn't go as planned, revisit the experience with curiosity.

What happened? What did you experience? How did you respond? What influenced your behavior? What impact did your response have?

This is particularly valuable during transitions, breakups, divorce, career changes, conflict, or other challenging experiences.

Reviewing the game tape isn't about assigning blame. It's about understanding what happened and identifying what you might do differently.

Blind Spots & Feedback

We can't always see ourselves clearly from the inside. Other people may recognize patterns, behaviors, or impacts that we don't notice.

Practice asking what you might not know, while remembering that feedback is information to consider rather than an automatic verdict about who you are.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What patterns repeatedly show up when I'm stressed, uncomfortable, or emotionally activated?
- Which behaviors help me in the short term but create difficulties later?
- What might my protective responses be trying to accomplish?
- Which different parts of myself seem to compete for attention or influence?
- What recurring experiences might be worth reviewing more closely?
- What feedback have I received that might reveal an opportunity for greater awareness?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Move from automatic behavior toward a broader range of intentional responses.

UNDERSTAND MY NEEDS & CAPACITY

Wants, Limits, Nourishment, Boundaries & Self-Care

Understanding yourself also means understanding what you need to function, recover, grow, and feel like yourself.

We all have different capacities, preferences, vulnerabilities, and sources of nourishment. What supports one person may not work the same way for another.

And what works during one stage of life may need to change as circumstances evolve.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Wants, Needs & Priorities

Identify what matters to you and distinguish between what you want, what you need, and what you feel obligated to do.

Consider how personal values, expectations, responsibilities, and external pressures influence your choices.

Not everything we want is essential, and not everything we need is immediately enjoyable.

My Minimum Dose

Explore the regular activities, experiences, and resources that help you function and feel nourished.

These may include sleep, movement, nutrition, friendships, solitude, meaningful work, play, creativity, emotional processing, rest, and connection.

Your minimum dose isn't the least you can get away with.

It's the foundational level of care and nourishment that helps sustain your well-being.

Capacity & Load Management

Recognize how much you can reasonably manage given your current circumstances.

Life includes demands that consume emotional, cognitive, physical, relational, and practical resources.

Your capacity isn't fixed.

Stress, illness, grief, transitions, competing responsibilities, and other headwinds may change what's realistically available.

Explore when you need to say "not right now," ask for help, renegotiate expectations, or say "no."

Boundaries & Being Self-Full

Boundaries help clarify what belongs to you, what doesn't, and what you're willing or able to participate in.

Practice honoring your wants, needs, values, and limits without automatically abandoning yourself to meet others' expectations.

Being self-full isn't the same as being selfish.

It means maintaining enough awareness and responsibility for yourself that you can participate in relationships without consistently neglecting your own needs.

Scarcity, Recovery & Play

Notice what happens when important resources become scarce.

When you have too little rest, connection, autonomy, enjoyment, or recovery, you may become more reactive, rigid, depleted, or sensitive to demands.

Explore what helps replenish your resources.

And make room for PLAY.

Play doesn't always need a purpose, achievement, or productive outcome. Sometimes its value is simply enjoyment, curiosity, spontaneity, and engagement with life.

Self-Achievement Activities

Recognize when your personal standards, preferences, or desired level of effort go beyond what's necessary or mutually agreed upon.

Additional effort can be meaningful and satisfying.

However, what you choose to do for your own sense of accomplishment doesn't automatically become someone else's responsibility.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What do I need regularly to feel healthy, capable, and connected to myself?
- What are my early signs of scarcity, overload, or depletion?
- Which demands are within my capacity, and where might I need additional support?
- How effectively do I communicate my wants, needs, and limits?
- When do I confuse personal preferences or standards with obligations?
- What role do play, enjoyment, rest, and recovery have in my life?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Develop a more sustainable relationship with yourself by understanding what nourishes you, what depletes you, and what you can realistically manage.

UNDERSTAND HOW I SHOW UP

Communication, Vulnerability, Responsibility & Impact

Although ME focuses on the individual, we don't exist independently of the people and systems around us.

Our experiences, beliefs, needs, emotions, and behaviors influence how we interact with others.

Understanding ME includes recognizing how we contribute to those interactions—intentionally and unintentionally.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

My Roles & Relational Patterns

Consider how you show up as a partner, parent, friend, family member, colleague, or member of a community.

Do you tend to lead, accommodate, withdraw, support, manage, protect, compete, or avoid?

Different relationships and environments may activate different versions of you.

Communication & Vulnerability

Explore how you communicate your internal experience.

Can you identify and share what you're thinking, feeling, wanting, needing, or struggling with?

What do you keep to yourself, and why?

Sometimes we expect others to understand experiences that haven't been made visible.

We can't expect people to know what we're carrying, thinking, or needing unless we find ways to communicate it.

Intentions & Impact

Our intentions and the impact of our behavior aren't always the same.

We may intend to protect ourselves by withdrawing, while someone else experiences our withdrawal as rejection.

We may intend to help by offering solutions, while another person experiences those solutions as criticism.

Understanding your impact doesn't mean automatically accepting someone else's interpretation.

It means remaining curious about how your behavior is experienced and what you might learn from that information.

Autonomy & Interdependence

Healthy relationships involve maintaining a sense of self while remaining open to connection, support, and influence.

Explore your relationship with independence, dependence, and interdependence.

Can you ask for help without feeling inadequate?

Can you accept influence without feeling controlled?

Can you communicate a need without expecting someone else to take complete responsibility for it?

Responsibility, Accountability & Repair

Recognize what belongs to you within an interaction.

You can take responsibility for your behavior, communication, boundaries, and contributions without taking responsibility for everything that happens.

When you make mistakes or contribute to disconnection, explore what accountability and repair look like.

That may include acknowledgment, understanding impact, making amends, changing behavior, or offering a meaningful corrective experience.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How do I typically show up in my important relationships?
- What parts of my internal experience do I communicate, and what do I expect others to figure out?
- Where might my intentions and impact be different?
- How comfortable am I asking for support, accepting influence, or expressing vulnerability?
- What responsibilities are mine, and what requires participation from others?
- How do I acknowledge mistakes, repair disconnections, and demonstrate change?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Understand how your individual patterns influence relationships while recognizing that healthy interactions require participation, responsiveness, and responsibility from everyone involved.

CHOOSE WHAT I WANT TO PRACTICE

Agency, Aspirations, Habits & Intentional Development

Self-understanding becomes particularly valuable when we use it to make more intentional choices.

Insight can help explain why we do what we do. Practice helps us discover what else is possible.

We aren't finished products. We're continually influenced by new experiences, changing circumstances, relationships, challenges, and opportunities.

The objective isn't perfection.

It's developing greater awareness, flexibility, capability, and ownership of how we want to live.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

My Aspirational SELF

Consider the person you want to become and how you want to show up in your life.

What qualities do you want to cultivate? What values do you want your behavior to reflect? Where might your current patterns differ from your aspirations?

Agency & Personal Influence

Explore what is within your ability to influence.

Agency involves recognizing available choices, developing confidence in your ability to act, and understanding that your efforts can contribute to meaningful outcomes.

Not every circumstance is within your control.

But there may still be opportunities to influence how you respond, what you practice, what you request, or what you choose next.

Motivation & Forcing Functions

Understand what helps move you toward action. What motivates you? What gets in the way?

Sometimes feelings provide momentum. Other times, structure, routines, accountability, or environmental supports help us follow through even when motivation is limited.

Explore the difference between relying on motivation and creating conditions that support consistent behavior.

Metrics of Success

Consider how you define and evaluate progress.

Are you measuring yourself against perfection, comparison, external approval, or personally meaningful standards?

Develop metrics that acknowledge effort, learning, consistency, and meaningful change—not simply whether an outcome was achieved.

Practice Disfluency

Familiar patterns can feel comfortable even when they aren't particularly helpful.

Trying something different may initially feel awkward, uncomfortable, or unnatural. That doesn't necessarily mean the new behavior is wrong.

Sometimes growth requires practicing unfamiliar responses long enough to discover whether they create better outcomes.

Test & Learn

Approach change as an ongoing process of experimentation. Notice a pattern. Consider an alternative. Practice something different. Observe what happens. Adjust as needed.

Some efforts will work. Others won't.

Both can provide useful information.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who do I want to become, and what qualities do I want to cultivate?
- Where do my current behaviors support or interfere with that aspiration?
- What is within my influence, even when I can't control the circumstances?
- What structures, routines, or forcing functions help me follow through?
- How do I define progress, and are my metrics realistic and meaningful?
- What unfamiliar behavior might be worth practicing, even if it initially feels uncomfortable?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Translate awareness into intentional practice and develop a broader range of ways to navigate yourself, your relationships, and your life.

CONNECTING ME TO WE & US

Understanding My Contribution to the Bigger System

Exploring ME isn't about becoming completely self-sufficient.

It's about understanding what you bring into your life and relationships so you can participate with greater awareness and intention.

Consider three related questions:

- **ME | WHAT CAN I UNDERSTAND, MANAGE OR CULTIVATE?**
    - What are my experiences, emotions, values, needs, capabilities, vulnerabilities, patterns, and responsibilities?
    - What can I do to support myself?

- **WE | WHAT CAN I COMMUNICATE, REQUEST OR UNDERSTAND?**
    - How do I translate my internal experience so others can understand me?
    - How can I better understand their experiences?
    - Where might we need to practice communication, responsiveness, accommodation, or accepting influence?

- **US | WHAT CAN WE CREATE, MAINTAIN OR CHANGE TOGETHER?**
    - What agreements, routines, resources, boundaries, rituals, and shared experiences support the relationship?
    - What does our shared system need to remain healthy and sustainable?

These aren't separate worlds. They influence one another.

- For example, understanding that you need time to decompress after work is a ME discovery. Communicating that need and understanding your partner's experience is a WE opportunity. Developing a predictable transition routine that supports both individuals is a US practice.

The better we understand ME, the more effectively we can participate in WE and contribute to US.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Finding My Focus

You don't need to explore every area at once.

Sometimes one recurring pattern, uncomfortable emotion, relationship difficulty, or life transition provides a useful starting point.

Consider:

- **What keeps showing up?** Is there a recurring challenge, reaction, belief, or experience that deserves attention?
- **What am I curious about?** Is there something about myself I'd like to understand more clearly?
- **What's currently difficult?** Where am I experiencing stress, uncertainty, disconnection, or limited capacity?
- **What's working?** Which strengths, capabilities, relationships, or habits would I like to reinforce?
- **What would I like to cultivate?** What quality, behavior, experience, or opportunity matters most right now?

Choose one or two areas to explore further. You might reflect independently, journal, discuss your discoveries with someone you trust, or bring them into therapy.

There's no requirement to have everything figured out before you begin. Sometimes understanding develops through reflection. Sometimes it develops through conversation.

And sometimes we learn the most by trying something different and seeing what happens.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Understanding yourself is not a one-time project.

As life changes, you'll encounter new experiences, challenges, relationships, responsibilities, and opportunities that reveal different parts of who you are.

You may discover strengths you didn't recognize. You may identify patterns that no longer serve you. You may reconsider beliefs, update expectations, develop new capabilities, or recognize needs you've previously overlooked.

The goal isn't to become a completely different person.

It's to understand yourself well enough to make more intentional choices about how you want to live and relate to others.

Know yourself. Understand your patterns. Recognize your impact. Practice who you want to become.