

# The Relationship of Nursing and Self-Awareness

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SELF-AWARENESS is a broad concept that can be used as a framework for a holistic approach to nursing and desired client outcomes. It involves awareness of the psychological self, including emotions, motivation, values and capabilities.<sup>1-3</sup> Self-awareness is the dynamic, conscious, continuous and active gaining of knowledge about the psychological, physical, environmental and philosophical components of the inner self. It is also the interrelationships of the components, and the interactions between the self and outer environment that create symbolic, meaningful formulations of this knowledge and form the basis for self-protection and self-enhancement. The psychological self also includes the unconscious, which, elusive though it is of definition, needs to be acknowledged, investigated and at least partially understood for complete self-awareness.<sup>4</sup> The concept also includes awareness of the self in relationship to all of a person's environment: nature, society,

interpersonal relationships and current knowledge.<sup>5-8</sup> The physical self must be included in one's awareness.<sup>2,9</sup> Finally, self-awareness needs to include cognizance of history (personal and collective), death and the larger questions of meaning in order to make sense of one's existence.<sup>2,10</sup> Self-awareness demands introspection, and a coupling of this introspection with a realistic, informed look at the world. This kind of self-awareness cannot be static; it must continue to expand and reformulate.

#### FOUR THEORISTS

This description of self-awareness combines the works of four major contemporary theorists from different disciplines, selected for the newness of their ideas and the absence of sexist bias.

##### *Jean Baker Miller, Psychologist*

Jean Baker Miller describes her work as a beginning step in the evolution of a new psychology based on an understanding of women.<sup>3(px,48)</sup> Her premises include the idea that women are in a "permanent inequality" situation with men. Because of this, they have assumed the psychology of a subordinate or the oppressed. Their inequality discourages women from exploring or fulfilling their own needs; instead, they are expected to fulfill others' needs—a low-status occupation.<sup>3(p18,53,60)</sup>

Miller ascribes these formulations to the past. She finds that attributes of women that have traditionally been linked with passivity and weakness can be a source of strength in the future. These are the acknowledgments of vulnerability, experi-

encing emotions, contributing to the development of others, recognizing the importance of relationships, cooperation and creativity.<sup>3(p29-47)</sup> Miller's definition of creativity is "a continuous process of bringing forth a changing vision of oneself, and of oneself in relation to the world."<sup>3(p111)</sup> Miller believes that even though these strengths are a base, women must add self-definition, authenticity, power, self-determination and the constructive use of open conflict, in order to reorder society so that it becomes more healthy.<sup>3(p124,132)</sup>

##### *Robert Jay Lifton, Psychologist*

Central to Robert J. Lifton's basic theme is the sense of growth, continuity, evolution and renewal reflected in the formative process that he sees the individual as constantly undergoing—a process of self-awareness. The formative process is the "creating, maintaining, breaking down and recreating viable form" that Lifton believes is necessary for mental health.<sup>10(p70)</sup> He feels that history and a person's place in historical time and environment are essential to understanding the individual's psychology.<sup>10(p17,91)</sup>

Lifton bases his model on the "survivor"—defined as "one who has come into contact with death in some bodily or psychic fashion and has himself stayed

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alive."<sup>11(p479)</sup> Lifton feels we are all survivors in some sense because of rapid social change, the catastrophic life experiences we all encounter and the very real possibility of nuclear extinction. Death is a very important concept for Lifton. When one has been touched by death in actuality or has allowed oneself to experience the meaning of death psychologically and has made the resulting images into a meaningful form, the person moves toward health or renewal.

One sense of death especially important in the Lifton conceptual frame is "psychic numbing," defined as "desensitization" or "the breakdown of symbolic connectedness with one's environment."<sup>10(p114)</sup> Psychic numbing is a living death and the basis of many forms of mental illness.<sup>10(p43)</sup> To Lifton, the opposite of psychic numbing is a sense of "vitality," which is equated with the formative process as outlined above.<sup>10(p51)</sup>

#### *Hans Selye, Physician-Scientist*

Hans Selye's theory of stress is more closely related to biology than psychology. Selye's theory begins with his operational definition of stress as "a state manifested by a specific syndrome [that] consists of all the nonspecifically induced changes within a biologic system."<sup>9(p64)</sup> The set of changes Selye describes is called the "general adaptation syndrome," or GAS. It consists of three stages. The first stage, "alarm reaction," is the mobilization of defenses of the body—hormonal, inflammatory, generalized or localized.<sup>9(p36,55)</sup> It cannot continue for long without death ensuing. It is followed by "the stage of resistance," in which the body tries to

adapt to the particular stressor and during which resistance to most other agents is lowered.<sup>9(p329,330)</sup> The third is the "stage of exhaustion," which occurs after long-term or excessive exposure to the stressor.<sup>9(p163)</sup> This stage is characterized by much the same signs as the first and results in death.<sup>9(p38)</sup>

The central concept of GAS is adaptation. Selye feels that adaptation is necessary for life, and when the stress reaction fails to "cope adequately with a potential disease-producing situation," diseases of adaptation, both mental and physical, will result.<sup>9(p170)</sup>

He sees self-awareness and self-analysis as keys to prevention of unhealthy stress reactions. When one is aware of the physical self, the personal signs of distress in one's own body, one's internal conditioners (e.g., heredity, diet) and what one wants out of life, Selye feels that diseases of adaptability can be prevented and many of the aging symptoms retarded.<sup>9(p171,433,452)</sup>

#### *René Dubos, Microbiologist*

René Dubos writes from the vantage point of a more classically "pure" science. He is concerned with the interplay between the environment and human beings. His main concept is an "ecological attitude" or "ecological philosophy," which he argues is necessary for human beings to adopt if they are to avoid "increasing the likelihood of disasters and cheapening the quality of the living experience."<sup>5(p237)</sup> This attitude or philosophy consists in using "deliberate, rational judgment" based in part on an awareness of history and a creative "vision" of the future.

The concept of evolution is important to Dubos. He sees all human beings, cultures, physical environments and societies as being part of the total environment.<sup>5(p199)</sup> He insists, however, on the need to be aware of the limitations of this evolution and at the same time the need for exploration of the unexploited *human* resources.<sup>5(p211)</sup> Without this self-awareness, in relation to the complex interrelationships of all of the environment, Dubos feels we will continue to have technology that is impervious to the quality of human life.<sup>5(p213,216)</sup>

## THE MODEL

The points made by each of the four scholars are herein synthesized into a holistic model of self-awareness that will be seen to relate in important respects to nursing (see Figure 1). The self as illustrated consists of four main, interconnected parts. The broken lines indicate the expandability of the self that is within conscious awareness as it learns more about the world that surrounds it. The broken lines also suggest the interactions between the self and the outer world, which are an important part of self-awareness.

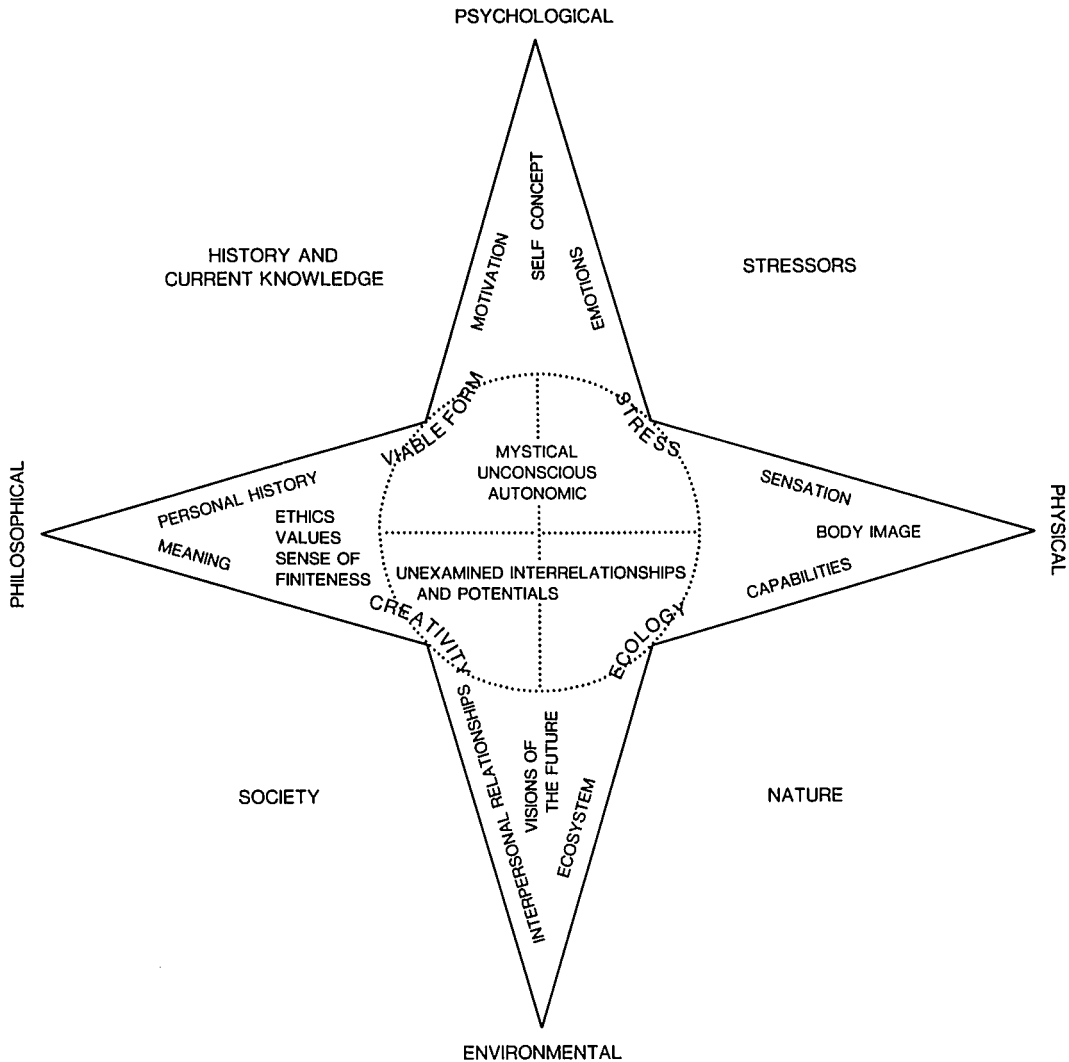
There is another realm of information that is somewhat accessible to conscious awareness into which self-awareness can expand. Depicted by broken dots to signify the potential movement of its borders, this is the core of the self, consisting of the unconscious, the physical aspect of the autonomic regulation of the body, the commonly unexplored genetic and human potentials and the usually

unexamined interrelationships of all the components. All of these are at least partially available to conscious examination. Access may be gained by studying about the various phenomena as they relate to all human beings or by bringing more personal components into consciousness by dream analysis, biofeedback, concentrating on sensory messages, value clarification, analyzing personal experiences and so on. In such endeavors the boundaries of the inner core would shrink at various points.

Conscious awareness contains only a finite amount of information at any given time. The dotted lines of the inner core allow for an expanded amount of unconscious or unnoticed knowledge in certain areas at any one moment. The model must be interpreted as dynamic, constantly changing over time. The four components are separated only for illustration and analysis. In reality all four are overlapping and interwoven, as is consistent with a holistic interpretation.

### *The Psychological Component*

The psychological component of self-awareness implies a knowledge of one's emotions, motivations, self-concept and personality. Being psychologically self-aware denotes a sensitivity to one's feelings and the external emotional stressors that affect those feelings. The idea describes a knowledge of how one is personally able to deal with crises and emotional difficulties. All the traditional terms describing a psychologically "healthy" individual are contained in this component. May asserts that a "widening and deepening of consciousness" is neces-

**FIGURE 1. THE SELF**

sary for health and that neurosis is an increase of the unconscious.<sup>2(p98)</sup>

### *The Physical Component*

The physical component of the self consists of both more and less conscious knowledge of personal and general physi-

ology, one's own bodily sensation, the body image one holds of oneself and the physical potentials that one is capable of attaining. The more fully the self is consciously aware of these aspects, the more it can pay attention to these messages of the body in order to protect

and develop what is positive and detect early and correct negative signals. The analogies to more traditional concepts of health are again rather obvious.

### *Stress*

Selye's concept of stress can be used as a linkage between the psychological and physical components. As Selye maintains, the concept of stress can be used in relationship to both the physical and psychological. It also concerns much of the part of the self outside of conscious awareness. The hormonal and inflammatory biological stressor-reacting processes are usually called into play without the

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person's knowledge, as are psychological defense mechanisms. However, more of this cycle can be brought into conscious awareness than most people usually try to do. An individual *can* become more aware of the early subtle sensations that signify the "alarm reaction" through knowledge of the process and increased attentiveness to the signals of the body and mind. The person can also reflect upon what stimuli his or her physical constitution and emotional makeup are more or less sensitive to, at what level of intensity the stressor "alarm reaction" is set off and what combination of minimal stressors is

likely to become significant. Armed with this knowledge, an individual can make choices about which stressors to avoid, which to adapt to and which to creatively challenge and overcome without incurring unacceptable risk of disease.

The physical and psychological "arms" of the self are particularly exposed to stressors although there is interplay of stressors with all of the components. This is true of all of the external aspects depicted in the model.

### *Ecological Philosophy*

Dubos's concept of "ecological philosophy" (shortened to "Ecology" in the model) traverses the physical into the environmental and transcends what is usually conscious into the realm of the inner unknown. We usually do not have much awareness of human evolution in response to environment or of the far-reaching human impact on nature, but this information is becoming more and more available and needs to be combined with Dubos's idea of "vision" of the future in order for us to understand these complex interrelationships.

On a more personal level, all individuals need to understand that when an environmental agent is introduced to the body (e.g., medications, chemically treated foods or a walk in the autumn woods), long-term and potentially significant mechanisms will be set in motion. There are potentials for health and disease, growth and blockage, "eustress" and "distress," evolution and destruction that accompany each of the environmental stimuli and their infinitely varied combinations that we encounter. The same poten-

tials exist in nature as we act upon it. We need to reflect upon these potentials, both the unknown and all that has been discovered, in both an inner self and outer scientific knowledge sense, in order to make healthy choices about what of the environment we choose to let affect us and what of nature we choose to avoid or alter.

#### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

This environmental aspect of the self includes the social environment, our relationships to others and our knowledge of the relationship between humans and nature. Interpersonal relationships also need to be reflected upon. There are unconscious forces that affect all of our dealings with people. The effects of one's parenting, the power relationships between people and the influences of one's culture are just a few. Reflection and introspection coupled with information about human interactions can shed light on these usually dim forces and facilitate their constructive use rather than allow them to drive the person's affiliations toward exploitation and nonsupport.

#### THE EFFECT OF SOCIETY

Dealings with society as a whole are also included in the environmental arm of the self. Society can be an oppressive or a facilitative force upon the development of self-awareness, and is usually a combination of the two. The net effect depends mainly on the individual. The person who is being oppressed needs to become cognizant of the oppression, in terms of recognition of his or her destruction and an understanding of the roots of the oppres-

sion.<sup>6-8</sup> This kind of awareness gives the strength necessary to work toward reordering society without needing to emulate the oppressors.<sup>7</sup> Introspection and learning about the culture to which one is exposed allows people to seek out what is facilitative in their society in order to enhance their personal growth. The applicability of this formulation to a more healthy dealing with society on the part of women and other putatively oppressed groups is obvious. It is also conducive to the health of all individuals. Those who are being oppressive—to women, to the poor or to minority groups—must also examine the intrapersonal and cultural roots and effects of their behavior in order to be healthy. The oppressor is using psychological defense mechanisms to an extraordinary extent; the unconscious portion of his or her self has grown too large to be healthy.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Creativity*

Miller's concept of "creativity" spans the environmental arm into the philosophy area of self-awareness.<sup>3</sup> This creativity has the traditional meaning of the word as one of its aspects. Individuals can be creative in their interactions with both the physical and human environment. We need only look around to see that the traditional ways of dealing with people and nature—either passively allowing them to wreak havoc or actively forcing them to conform to our will—are unhealthy, both for the self and for the environment. Creative parenting, unique social relationships, works of art, musical compositions, new and different machinery, innovative architecture—all can be ways of enhancing

both the self and the environment. They also contribute to finding a sense of meaning to human life. A creative vehicle allows explanation of the "essence of being," beyond the ability of logical thinking to grasp, that is comprehensible to the inner, usually unexplored, person.<sup>13</sup> These acts of creation, whether or not they are recognized by the world at large, also help to make an individual's life significant.

### *Philosophy*

The part of the self labeled "Philosophy" refers to the sense that one's life has meaning. Without this sense, the individual must despair, or else be afflicted by Lifton's idea of "psychic numbing." In either case the person cannot be considered healthy. We are constantly confronted with the knowledge of our own finiteness. If we deny this knowledge and push it into the unconscious, we cannot deal with it in a healthy way. Only by examining the fact of our impending death and realizing the impact of that fact on our behavior and how we interact with society, can we begin to find a meaning for our life.<sup>10</sup>

### RELIGION

Traditional religion may offer answers to the dilemma of meaning. However, a blind acceptance of religious dictates necessarily excludes the ideas of true self-awareness that are being presented. Religion has led people to inquisitions, witch burnings and destructive cults, which cannot be considered healthy. Conversely, self-awareness entails active thinking-through coupled with an appreciation of the unknown and mystical. Traditional

religion has, in the views of Daly and Ruether, been used as an instrument of oppression against women and minorities.<sup>14,15</sup> A sense of meaning that involves self-awareness must be a very personal philosophy that may or may not include a formulation of a superior being but must take into account the world in which we live and the ethics of the behavior that evolves from it.

### KNOWLEDGE OF SELF, KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD

To formulate that sense of meaning an individual must be aware of his or her own personal history and the history and current knowledge of the world. The person needs to examine his or her past life and influences to see patterns, to appreciate the significant actions, to counteract the damaging forces, to formulate meaning. As with all the aspects of self-awareness being presented, this formulation is dynamic. As situations and knowledge change, so must the values of the individual. Again, this aspect of the self has the potential for growth both into the realm of the inner, forgotten or unexplored facets of the self and outward to encompass a more complete knowledge of how the personal self affects and is affected by history. An individual must not only never ignore information that confronts him or her but must also seek out what knowledge is available.

### *Viable Form*

Robert Lifton's idea of "viable form" links this area of meaning or philosophy with the psychological aspect of the self.<sup>10</sup> Viable form includes the messages from



the unconscious and mystical, which, although not totally comprehensible, must be appreciated, explored and taken into account. These perceptions of one's experience, as they relate to history, current knowledge and the usually unexplored, are made into symbolic representations of one's sense of meaning. This personal philosophy provides a self-concept that is a healthy basis of psychological functioning. Branden defines self-esteem as "a sense of personal efficacy and sense of personal worth."<sup>1(p110)</sup> His view of self-esteem includes a knowledge of reality, inner and outer, without a psychological reordering of that reality.<sup>1(p15)</sup> A defensive kind of self-esteem that denies shortcomings or projects weaknesses onto other persons or groups is neither valid nor healthy.<sup>1(p147)</sup> Valid self-esteem, based on true self-awareness, provides motivation and autonomy.

#### *An Interdependence of Components and Concepts*

The model is now complete. As is consistent with a holistic approach, this analysis points out more similarities in the components than differences. The components are all part of one whole, the self. The four bridging concepts of the model—stress, ecology, creativity and viable form—are also more closely linked than dissimilar. They all necessitate action and movement. All four demand awareness of inner and outer interrelationships. They all encompass a discovery and fulfillment of the furthest stretches of the person's potential. Each includes a delving into the realms of the unknown, the usually unexplored. All are necessary for

health in a holistic sense. When not all are functioning together, impairment ensues.

#### IMPAIRMENT

Cassell has described the importance of conceptualizing what ought to be the concern of medicine as illness and healing rather than disease and cure.<sup>16</sup> He sees the person who is ill (but who may or may not have a disease) as being affected by "disconnectedness, loss of the sense of omnipotence and omniscience and loss of control."<sup>16(p35)</sup> He describes healing in terms of drawing the person back into effective interpersonal relationships, helping him or her understand his or her relationship to the universe and reconnecting the mind, body and soul.<sup>16</sup>

This author finds Cassell's views useful, but feels that physicians should continue with a disease-and-cure model. Nursing must perform the healing. Nursing can use a model based on (1) diminished self-awareness as impairment (comparable to Cassell's definition of illness), (2) increasing self-awareness as the process for prevention of disease and impairments and (3) facilitation of self-awareness as the achievement of Cassell's formulation of healing. Such a model establishes a holistic approach to nursing and desired client outcomes that are meaningful.

#### *'Impairment' Defined*

The word *health* has been overworked, overdefined and used so often that it has become practically meaningless. The word *illness*, too, has too many common language connotations; thus the author will use the term *impairment*. Any limita-

tion in the aspects of self-awareness constitutes impairment. With reference to Figure 1, impairment would consist of a habitual or significant expansion of the inner core of the self so that knowledge of the concepts of the four components recedes into the unconscious. For example, when a person is completely denying the knowledge of personal finiteness, impairment is occurring. Impairment is also present when an individual is "disconnected" or fails to recognize his or her holistic nature or relationships to the outer world.

#### *Expanding Client Self-Awareness*

To reconnect, to encourage the sense of being or meaning, to help the client discover a feeling of self-direction, of purpose, to help him or her relate more

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*Using the tools of teaching, therapeutic relationships, clinical skills and group process, the nurse can facilitate expansion of the impaired person's inner and outer reality.*

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effectively to his or her total environment—in other words, to heal—nursing needs to help clients expand their self-awareness. Using the tools of teaching, therapeutic relationships, clinical skills and group process, the nurse can facilitate expansion of the impaired person's inner and outer reality. The challenges of life, including disease, can be interpreted to the client as potentially growth producing rather than diminishing. The emphasis must be on the client's actively meeting these challenges by searching for inner

resources and making informed choices. The nurse provides needed information, support for the often painful process and skillful manipulation of the environment to make increased self-awareness feasible and stimulate its occurrence.

The model can be used in all nursing settings. It provides a useful approach to the often nebulous concepts of prevention of illness and promotion of health. The concepts of stress, ecology, creativity and viable form give a more concrete structure to primary prevention nursing activities. These processes can be stimulated and facilitated by nurses to help make people more resistant to impairments and disease. Clients are challenged by the nurse to look closely at themselves and become more sensitive to the messages from within. They are helped to deal creatively with changes by internal adaptation or changing the environment (nature, other people or society) or by a combination of these activities. They are supported in their search for a sense of personal meaning. Primary prevention is therefore a nursing-encouraged self-healing, self-promotion and self-protection process. It is enhancing self-awareness.

## HEALING

Human beings are subject to impairments from society, from nature, from other human beings and from inside themselves. When they face overwhelming stressors, pathological situations or organisms, or other disabilities, diminished self-awareness is inevitable. When an impairment or disease first occurs, there is

temporary psychic or physical numbing, in treatment for which nursing can provide physical and emotional support while the individual gathers his or her resources. If the impairment is a disease, the physician can set about his or her business of curing. Meanwhile, the nurse helps the individual begin to define the meaning of the illness to his or her total self and begin to use previously unexploited potentials to deal with it. The process involves a realization about what in the person's inner and outer environment needs changing. The nurse may provide the information about stressors, nature, society and history that the person needs to effect those changes. The

nurse facilitates and encourages the client's exploration of the components of the self. Nursing is a promotion of the client's use of stress, ecology, creativity and viable form. The nurse is then healing, whether or not the disease is being cured. The illness may even lead to death, but by facilitating self-awareness, the client can be healed. He or she can be helped to find meaning in life; feel more at one with nature, society, his or her body and his or her psyche; form and utilize effective interpersonal relationships; and create a symbolic representation of his or her experience that is in harmony with the total self.

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