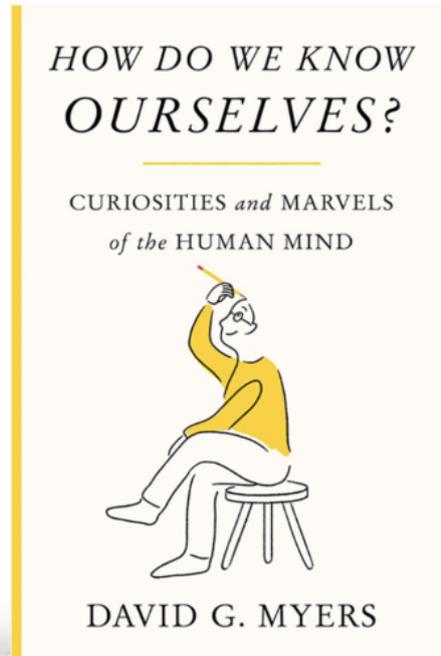


How Do We Know Ourselves? Part 1 of 3 With David Myers

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Social psychologist David Myers, a professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan, is the author of seventeen books, including psychology's most widely read textbook. But he doesn't write only textbooks. For the last several decades, he has translated findings from psychological science for the general public as well, in books on topics ranging from the scientific pursuit of happiness to the powers (and perils) of intuition.

In his new book, [How Do We Know Ourselves? Curiosities and Marvels of the Human Mind](#), Myers presents a collection of short essays on how psychological science contributes to so much of what we can and should know about ourselves and the world around us.

In the first of three discussions on *Under the Cortex*, David Myers joined APS's Ludmila Nunes to speak about his career, his new book, and how we really do know ourselves.

[Read more about David Myers's new book, including an excerpt of the chapter Failure and Flourishing.](#)

Unedited Transcript

[00:00:13.390] – Ludmila Nunes

David Myers is a social psychologist and professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan. He is the author of 17 books, including psychology's most widely read textbook, which has sold more than 8 million copies worldwide. But he doesn't write only textbooks. For the last decades, he has translated psychological science findings to the general public in books on topics ranging from the scientific pursuit of happiness to the powers and perils of intuition. *The pursuit of happiness: Who is happy and why* is one of these books. He just released a new book. *How do we know ourselves? Curiosities and marvels of the human mind*. This book is a collection of essays. Some are now published for the first time and others have appeared on David's Talk Psych blog. It's our pleasure to have David Myers with us for a series of three episodes in which we will talk about his career and his new book. Welcome to Under the Cortex, David.

[00:01:18.870] – David Myers

Thank you so much. I'm honored to be here with you.

[00:01:21.130] – Ludmila Nunes

Ludmila, I would like to start with a quote from the preface to your new book in which you say as a researcher and professor of psychological science, I am animated by two aims to enable people to think smarter about their lives and to help them savor the wonders within and around us. How have these aims been shaping your career?

[00:01:46.460] – David Myers

In a big way? Ludmila, I'm fond of an old quote by EB. White I arrived in the morning torn between the desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. And both of those goals animate my writing and my professional life. So I want to save the world from misinformation, from conspiracy thinking, from all that threatens democracy when people believe things that just are not true. So I hope to help my readers, including my student readers, to think critically, to base their thinking on evidence. And that's the goal of others who are communicating psychological science. Steve Pinker has a recent book entitled *Rationality* that speaks to the need for evidence based critical thinking, smarter thinking. And my own book on the Powers and Perils of intuition, certainly had that aim as well. But I also have a second aim, and that is to help my readers develop a sense of wonder and respect for the human creature. Take something as simple and mundane as what's happening right now between us and our listeners hearing. So there are ideas in my mind that I'm converting into vibrations of my vocal apparatus, which is sending pulsating air molecules through space, which are reaching you, striking your outer ear, which converts them into fluid filled waves that go down your cochlea, triggering hair cells to send electrochemical messages up to your brain, which decodes it.

[00:03:22.120] – David Myers

And as a result, we have mindtomine communication occurring wirelessly through space, as if we were alien creatures communicating with each other. It's spectacular it's mundane, it's ordinary, and yet it's a wonder, and it's just the first of many, many wonders. And so I hope students and readers of this new little book of essays come away not just with an ability to think smarter and more rationally about important things, but also to savor the wonder of their lives and of their humanity.

[00:03:54.260] – Ludmila Nunes

And you've been teaching for more than 50 years now, right?

[00:03:58.660] – David Myers

Well, yes, I've been professing psychology since 1967, so I'm one of the senior members of APS.

[00:04:08.140] – Ludmila Nunes

And speaking of APS, you also contribute to the observer magazine, APS's magazine, with a very interesting column that you developed with Nathan DeWall, about teaching. And what you do is you take articles from the magazine, from the journal Current Directions in Psychological Science, and you transform those into teaching activities.

[00:04:36.410] – David Myers

Yes. This was an idea that Alan Kraut, the past director of APS, had for Nathan DeWall myself to take cutting edge research that's been reported on in Current Directions in Psychological Science to use that to inspire little essays that digest this research and then suggest activities through which teachers of psychology could communicate this research to their students. And reading this new research is just part of the pleasure of my life because I'm charged with reading psychological science, all of it. And I get to learn something new every day and then to discern its most humanly significant findings and communicate those to a larger audience. And that's my teaching mission.

[00:05:20.530] – Ludmila Nunes

I love that. I also read all of the articles we publish in our journals and write short summaries that I hope are more digestible to everybody, to the general public, and that's the most rewarding activity I do.

[00:05:35.860] – David Myers

Yeah. So we're doing much the same thing because we're both communicators of psychological science.

[00:05:41.890] – Ludmila Nunes

But you also have developed a lot of research, right? You've published dozens of scientific articles. Do you want to talk a little bit about your research?

[00:05:53.660] – David Myers

Well, just very briefly, I went to graduate school at the University of Iowa, and I began studying as a social psychology student how group discussion influences attitudes. And that led into research on what came to be called group polarization, which is the tendency of discussion among like minds to amplify or magnify or make more extreme people's opinions. And so if, as happens today, people separate themselves into, likeminded, enclaves on the Internet or in real life, that discussion could lead to greater

social polarization. And doing that research led to an invitation to attend a conference of small group researchers in Germany where I got to know some other very distinguished social psychologists, and one of them suggested me to author a social psychology text, which was not my idea at all. And that led to an invitation to write an introductory psychology text, and that led to all my efforts to communicate psychological science. So it all began by doing research in social psychology on group polarization.

[00:06:59.440] – Ludmila Nunes

And your research is what led to writing for the general public and also writing your blog.

[00:07:08.610] – David Myers

Yes. And sometimes writing in textbooks and digesting the best fruits of psychological science leads me to think that, oh, this is so interesting, other people should know about it. And that has then led to my writing about books on the scientific pursuit of happiness, which was, it seemed to me this is really interesting research the world should know about, or about the powers and perils of intuition, or about hearing loss and the psychology of hearing, which happens to be of special interest to me as a person with hearing loss. And then to digest that research in blogs and essays which have yielded this new book.

[00:07:49.010] – Ludmila Nunes

I have a question for you. So I have read some of your more scientific work and also some of your work geared more towards the general public. Do you think that there is a big difference between the way we communicate to students, for example, and to the general public?

[00:08:09.040] – David Myers

Are you saying do we communicate to students differently than we communicate to the general public? In that instance? I would say generally no. Because the students that I'm teaching who are taking their first course in psychology often are the general public. So I see those as very much the same, but also very different from the kind of writing we do in our professional journals when we're talking to.

[00:08:29.910] – Ludmila Nunes

Each other, which is more full of jargon.

[00:08:33.840] – David Myers

Yes.

[00:08:34.770] – Ludmila Nunes

But also more precise and detailed because we are talking to people who know those details.

[00:08:41.410] – David Myers

Yeah, absolutely. And so when I started writing for the general public and for students, I really had to train myself in a different kind of writing voice. And I did that by reading great manuals of writing, by reading great writing and by being mentored by a poet who was my writing coach and guided me through some 5000 manuscript pages, helping me to develop a voice, to have a sense of rhythm and cadence, to know how to order words in a sentence for maximum impact. Because it didn't come to me naturally. And I'm not saying I'm the greatest writer, but I certainly benefited from focusing on developing my skill as a science communicator even as you have as a science communicator for APS.

[00:09:25.760] – Ludmila Nunes

I totally agree. And I think it matters. So now, speaking of your new book, this book has three sections. The first one you called. Who am I? And this one focuses on the self. The second one. Who are we? And this one explores our relationships. And finally, the third section, what in the World? Takes a psychological lie to the larger world around us. So I figured we could talk about each one of these sections in each episode of the three in this series. So let's start with who am I? And in this section you discuss things like the amazing power of attention, fearing the right things the new it all along phenomenon, also known as hindsight bias, judging others and judging ourselves, among other topics about the self. But unfortunately, our time is limited. So I selected one chapter for us to talk about. And of course, I chose the chapter that gives the title to your book How Do We Know Ourselves? So here you focus on our actions and how our actions reveal who we are and how it's by observing them that we can achieve self knowledge.

[00:10:46.990] – David Myers

Yes, and that actually was inspired by Cornell University social psychologist Daryl Bem, who some decades ago proposed a theory he called self perception theory. And it's an answer to the question, how do we know ourselves? And the answer is, partly we know ourselves the way we know other people. How do we know other people? We observe their behavior and their words and we infer what their attitudes must be. And so likewise, said Ben, we observe our own behavior, which can be very revealing, even to ourselves. So if we're uncertain of our views, we observe our actions, we observe our words and groups, and then we infer how strongly we must feel. So hearing ourselves talk and observing ourselves acting gives us clues to who we are. That's one way we know ourselves, said Darrell Ben.

[00:11:41.960] – Ludmila Nunes

You mentioned a specific experiment about hearing. Do you want to talk about that one? Yeah.

[00:11:48.360] – David Myers

Well, it's just one of several lines of research that gives some support to self-perception theory. And this research referred to was done in Sweden at Lund University by Andreas Lund, his colleagues. It's a clever experiment that asks if you said one thing but you heard yourself saying another thing, what would you think you said? And so in this simple experiment, what they did is use a headset to allow participants to communicate with them and to hear what they were saying in their own voice as they read the names of various font colors. So, for example, if they saw the word green in a gray color, they were to say the word gray. But then after doing this on a few trials, the Wiley researchers occasionally

would take the participants previously recorded voice saying in incorrect words such as green. So people were saying the word gray. That was what was coming out of their mouth. But simultaneously, they heard their own voice saying green. So what did they think they said? And surprisingly, on two thirds of the trials, people experience the inserted word as what they had actually said rather than what they actually said.

[00:13:07.470] – David Myers

A nice example of their knowing themselves by observing themselves rather than by what they'd actually generated.

[00:13:14.810] – Ludmila Nunes

But this is valid also for emotions. The way we feel something has a lot to do with what our muscles do and how we perceive them acting.

[00:13:26.060] – David Myers

Absolutely. And so that's illustrated in research on, well, for example, the facial feedback effect. If you can induce people to make a frowning expression by telling them to pull their brows together so you can attach certain electrodes. They then find cartoons less funny. They're in a grumpier mood, whereas if you can manipulate them into a facial expression of smiling, they feel happier. And this has been done in one famous experiment that invites people to hold a pencil or pen with either their teeth, which activates their smiling muscles, in which case they feel happier, than if they're holding that pen with their lips, which activates the frowning muscles. So it seems that when frowning, we feel sadder, when scowling, we feel angrier, when smiling, we feel happier. And it works with our body postures too, by the way, and these are.

[00:14:23.440] – Ludmila Nunes

Relatively recent findings, but in your chapter you also mentioned old findings that come from William James, one of the founders of psychological science.

[00:14:34.690] – David Myers

Oh, absolutely. So William James, the philosopher psychologist, was somebody who struggled with depression and the regulation of his own emotions. And he observed and advised that we could tweak our emotions by going through the outward motions of whatever we want to experience. So he said, quote, to feel cheerful, sit up cheerfully and act as if cheerfulness was already there. And Darwin, by the way, had the very same idea that outwardly expressing an emotion intensifies it. And our listeners can experience this after this podcast. Get up, walk down the hall and do it either with short shuffling steps and their eyes downcast, or take long strides with your arms swinging and your face high and see if you can feel the difference inside you from observing your own behavior, what Darrell Ben called a self perception effect.

[00:15:32.890] – Ludmila Nunes

And knowing ourselves is so important that it will also sometimes increase our empathy towards others.

[00:15:45.190] – David Myers

Absolutely. So the way to experience what somebody else is experiencing is to mimic what they're doing, to mirror their expressions, to synchronize our movements with theirs. So to some extent, we do this naturally. We call it emotional contagion. But if you want to feel what another is feeling, mimic their posture. And that will help you empathize with them and will help them understand that you are doing so, that you are empathizing. So it comes back to the basic principle that our expressions, our actions, can be self revealing. So one way in which we know ourselves to use the title of the book, is by observing our own actions.

[00:16:33.190] – Ludmila Nunes

David, thank you so much for joining me.

[00:16:35.470] – David Myers

And thank you, Ludmila, for having me.

[00:16:38.740] – Ludmila Nunes

This is Ludmila Nunes with APS and I've been speaking to David Myers, author of the book *How Do We Know Ourselves? Curiosities and marvels of the human mind*. Today we talked about knowledge about the self. Tune in next week to hear us speak about how we know our relationships, specifically, why we think everyone else is having more fun than us.

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