

Why Emotional Awareness Alone Isn't Enough

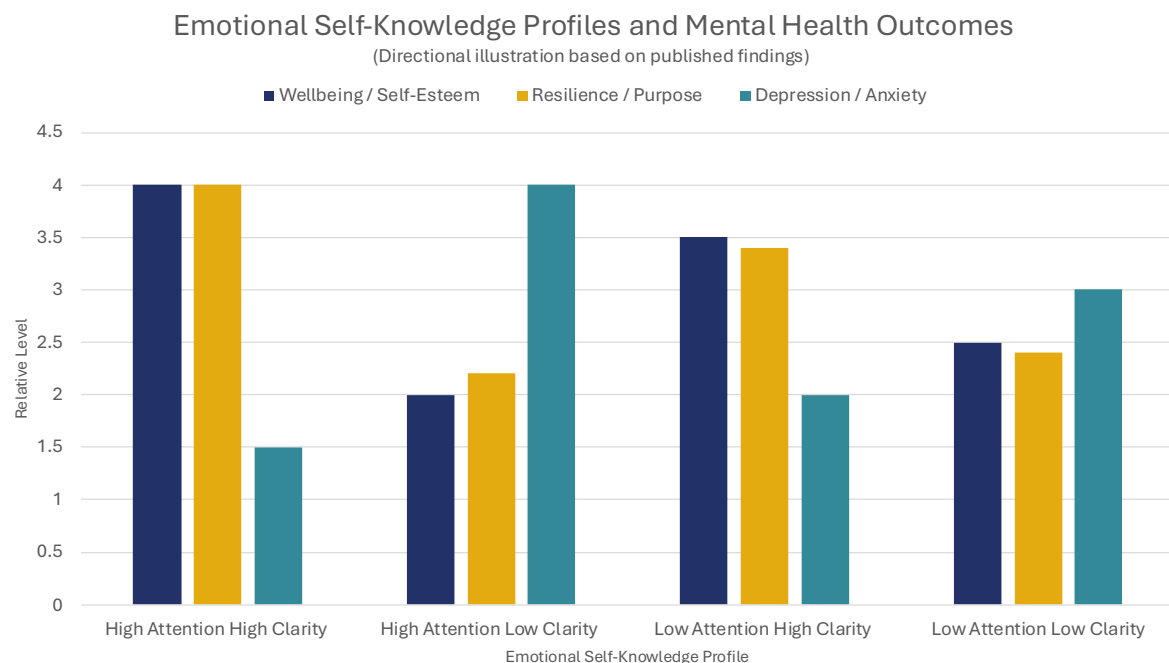
A 2024 study published in *Scientific Reports* explored a deceptively simple question: **Is paying attention to our emotions always good for mental health?**

The answer, it turns out, is **not necessarily**.

The researchers examined how two components of emotional self-knowledge work together:

- **Attention to emotions** – how much we notice and focus on what we're feeling
- **Emotional clarity** – how well we understand and can make sense of those feelings

Rather than looking at these skills in isolation, the study examined how *different combinations* of attention and clarity relate to mental health outcomes.



Nonweiler, J., Vives, J., Barrantes-Vidal, N. et al. Emotional self-knowledge profiles and relationships with mental health indicators support value in 'knowing thyself'. *Sci Rep* 14, 7900 (2024).
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-57282-w>

Relative mental health outcomes by emotional self-knowledge profile. Directional illustration based on group differences reported in a 2024 Scientific Reports study (adolescent sample).

What they found was striking.

People who showed **high emotional attention** *and* **high emotional clarity** experienced the healthiest outcomes. They reported:

- Higher self-esteem and more positive self-views
- Greater resilience
- A stronger sense of purpose and motivation
- Lower levels of depression and anxiety

In other words, **balanced emotional self-knowledge is protective**.

But the most important insight came from a different group.

Participants who paid **a lot of attention to their emotions but lacked clarity** showed the *poorest* mental health outcomes. This profile was associated with:

- Higher anxiety and depressive symptoms
- Lower self-esteem
- Reduced psychological wellbeing

Simply noticing emotions — without understanding them — appeared to increase distress rather than reduce it.

Interestingly, individuals with **high emotional clarity but lower emotional attention** fared relatively well. This suggests that *understanding emotions may be more important than monitoring them constantly*.

Why this matters for leaders

This research reinforces a critical message for emotional intelligence development: **More emotional awareness is not automatically better**.

Clarity is the moderating factor.

In leadership contexts, this helps explain why well-intentioned efforts to “be more emotionally aware” can sometimes backfire. Leaders who tune into emotional signals but lack the skills to interpret, regulate, and respond to them may become overwhelmed, reactive, or stuck in rumination.

By contrast, leaders who develop **emotional clarity** — the ability to accurately label emotions, understand their drivers, and use that information constructively — are better equipped to manage pressure, support others, and make sound decisions under stress.

This study provides a useful evidence-based reminder: **emotional intelligence is not about feeling more — it’s about understanding better**.

Importantly, this research helps explain why the development practices outlined earlier matter. Reflection and feedback are not about paying more attention to every emotional fluctuation; they are about building clarity. When leaders pause to examine their assumptions, notice their defensive reactions, and seek honest feedback about how they are experienced, they move beyond emotional monitoring into emotional understanding.

It is this shift - from awareness to clarity - that turns self-awareness into a genuine leadership capability rather than an exhausting internal focus.

Link to study: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-57282-w>