



"We need to discover the root causes of success rather than the root causes of failure."

- David Cooperrider, Ph.D., co-founder, Appreciative Inquiry, and professor of management

Root Cause Analysis for the Human Condition

In the workplace, a root cause analysis may be conducted to identify underlying causes of work-related injuries, production errors or faulty engineering practices so corrective actions can be taken.

A root cause analysis involves five basic steps: 1) define the problem; 2) collect data; 3) identify causal factors; 4) identify root causes; and 5) implement solutions. Commonly used, systematic analytic methods include repeatedly asking why (the "five whys"), fault tree and fishbone diagrams, and the Pareto principle, which is based on the 80-20 rule – 80 percent of consequences arise from 20 percent of causes.

Getting to the root cause of why people behave the way they do is a more complex undertaking. Human behavior is shaped by a multitude of factors such as

upbringing, cultural influences, religious beliefs, living conditions, education, social norms, genetics and personality traits. No two people are alike, and each person views life through their own personal lens.

Roots Run Deep

Water, oxygen and fertile soil are needed for roots to establish themselves and grow. Under ideal conditions, tree roots have been observed to reach more than 20 feet deep. Roots form intertwined systems, the communal networks [Peter Wohlleben](#), a German forester who wrote *The Hidden Life of Trees*, calls the "wood-wide web."

A sole tree can survive for decades in harsh conditions. But generally speaking, trees have a better chance of survival when they have symbiotic relationships with other trees, plants, fungi, insects, birds, squirrels and other animals.

In some respects, people are like trees. They are more likely to thrive when conditions are favorable and gradually wither when they are not. The phrase "putting down roots" has positive associations with security, family and community. However, some people are less like trees and more like tumbleweeds, which detach from their tap root when they mature and are pushed randomly by the wind.

Where to Start

Whether you tend to be more like a tree or a tumbleweed, you may find that an honest self-assessment is useful when you:

- Can't pinpoint exactly why you are experiencing certain emotions
- Don't understand why you said or did something you regret
- Want to incorporate self-discovery into a therapeutic process

- Would like to repeat steps you took previously to get great results
- Have identified areas in your life that you would like to change

One place to start is with a new year or annual self-inventory. In a [Psychology Today blog post](#), Stephanie A. Sarkis, Ph.D., suggests taking time to reflect on emotions, thought patterns and behaviors that you experienced in the past year. “When we take a step back from what we have experienced, we can view it with less judgment,” she writes.

Mental Health America offers a self-assessment survey called [What's Underneath](#), which states that “people are pretty bad at identifying their true feelings.” The survey prompts users to fill in blanks, for example, I felt upset when (fill in action or event) happened. But what I was really feeling was (fill in the blanks). The survey is intended to help you identify a root cause by providing a thorough list of negative and positive feelings for reference.

When you identify an activating event that you responded to with a strong emotion, you can ask yourself: “What was I thinking and feeling when the event occurred?” It helps to write down all of the thoughts, feelings and consequences that you recall, then narrow down the list to the most significant one.

If you are focused on career development, you can do a personal SWOT analysis to identify your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. [Mindtools' Personal SWOT Analysis Worksheet](#) provides a framework. It asks questions such as:

- What do I do well?
- What do others see as my strengths?
- What can I improve on?
- What are others likely to see as my weaknesses?
- How can I turn my strengths into opportunities?
- What threats take advantage of my weaknesses?

Here are some additional tips from [Indeed.com](#):

1. Be honest with yourself.
2. Reflect on your accomplishments and how they made a difference.
3. Identify times when you were disappointed in the results of your efforts.
4. Consider your values and ways you can make a meaningful contribution.

Room to Breathe

When you ask yourself, “Why do I feel this way?” you may feel overwhelmed by what you discover. If that occurs, take a step back and give yourself room to breathe and reflect before you take the next step. Reach out to a mental or behavioral health professional for guidance.

Sometimes asking yourself why is counterproductive. In a recent [blog post about the potential downsides of repeatedly asking why](#), Wendy Lynch, Ph.D., who works with business leaders to convert analytics into actionable solutions, explains: “Why is a great way to start a question in some instances. But ‘why’ can also provoke defensiveness, irritation and a need for justification. In areas such as engineering, manufacturing, transportation – really anything involving machines, systems, processes, technology or science – the five whys can be a useful exercise. However, people are not machines.”

A person often needs to take some time to gain clarity and allow an idea to become fully formed. More often than not, the original question will morph into the “real” question, Lynch says. In that case, she suggests posing questions without using the word “why.” For example, “How did this emotional response come up for me?” or “What insights have I gained that will be useful to me?”

Whatever method you choose to use for self-discovery, it's important to remember to be patient with yourself. Personal change is a process, not a destination.