

3.11 Explore Your Different Identities

Delve inside to discover and reframe your sense of self.

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We all identify with particular aspects of our personalities or roles we play in life. For example, you may see yourself as smart, funny, or shy. You may define yourself as a husband, a wife, a father, or a mother, or you may define yourself by your wealth or achievements.

These identities act as shorthand descriptions of who you are, enabling you to communicate effectively with others and function in the world. On the other hand, sometimes you may hold on to identities that once represented your true self but that no longer feel authentic to you. You can outgrow identities in the same way that children outgrow clothing, but you won't always realize it's happening. You may even make a split-second decision that reshapes your self-definition.

Another possibility is that you confuse transient traits with core identities, building them into your personality and experiencing them as parts of yourself. If you say, "I am depressed," for example, it becomes strongly associated with who you believe yourself to be. However, if you say, "I have depression," it occurs as a diagnosis of a condition, one that is temporary and can be fixed.

By examining the characteristics and descriptors you habitually apply to yourself, you can discover which ones are still relevant and which ones require updating. You may even wish to drop some completely. By the same token, it's possible to use this tool to discover new roles or personality traits you'd like to embody more frequently or fully.

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- Develop a more thorough idea of who you are, who you want to be, and who you don't want to be.
- This exercise can bring a feeling of clarity and lightness and serve as an anchor.

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- Examining your sense of identity can feel vulnerable, even threatening, if you find yourself questioning cherished identities.
- Your critical mind may revolt and tell you this is useless or nonsensical.

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Begin by preparing a pen and paper, setting aside some time, and finding a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. It's possible to use a computer or a phone for this exercise, but cutting yourself off from electronic stimuli and writing your responses is likely to yield deeper self-reflection and more profound insights. Ask yourself, "Who am I?" and wait for answers to form in your mind. What words, titles, or descriptions appear in your consciousness?

As possible answers make themselves known to you, write them down, even—perhaps especially—if they seem weird or surprising. As you write each one, take a moment and allow yourself to feel the emotional content of the words. What feelings do you associate with each one?

When you feel that you've emptied yourself of all the descriptors, review the list and select a few that stand out as most fundamental to your core sense of identity. Take a good look at each one and examine your relationship with them. For example, if you consider yourself smart, how do you relate to your intelligence? Do you have a need to prove your cleverness or see yourself as superior to others because of it? And if so, can you loosen your grip on this characteristic? What emotions does the thought I am smart arouse in you? Who would you be without this title? What if you were stupid? What would that mean about you? Give yourself time to explore these questions.

Next, you can select a few that you'd like to experience more deeply. For these traits, ask yourself how you can best do this. Look for concrete actions you can take. If you'd like to deepen your relationship with fatherhood, for example, how can you spend more meaningful time with your children? Should you take a parenting course? Discuss options with your spouse? Or simply take your children to the park this afternoon?

This process can give you a different perspective on the core components of your identity. You may discover that your identity is not just a bunch of self-prescribed titles but that you can embody a range of roles and characteristics without any of them ultimately defining who you are. This can be deeply freeing and a stepping stone on the road to generating change.

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1. "Therapy Toolkit: Move From Fear To Fearless, Lesson 9":
https://insighttimer.com/meditation-courses/course_charles-frelighs-course-form
 2. "Exploring Some of the Most Common Personality Traits":
<https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/personality/what-are-the-most-common-personality-traits/>
 3. Take personality quizzes, like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, to help you explore some of your characteristics.
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