

Understanding and Assessing Yourself

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Your self-concept consists of a core set of beliefs and traits about who you are as a distinct person in terms of your own personal characteristics, unique qualities, and typical behaviors (Huffman, Dowdell, & Sanderson, 2018). Self-understanding involves the extent to which you have a conscious awareness and working knowledge of your own particular attributes, capabilities, and limitations.

Your self-understanding provides a key template through which you establish and maintain relationships with others while retaining a differentiated sense of self (Williamson, 1991). There are a myriad of ways to delineate the various attributes of the self. One of the most applied and ubiquitous forms of portraying the self is by identifying an individual's various personality traits (Myer, 2013).

Understanding Your Personality

Forged out of a synthesis of heredity and experience, personality traits comprise your basic patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving (Myers, 2013). Once fully formed in early adulthood, these traits constitute the enduring ways in which you manage your life and navigate relationships.

Your personality is composed of two fundamental types of traits: those of character and those of temperament. While both types are influenced by heredity, character traits are considered to be far more influenced by experience (Fisher, 2009). How you were parented, your growing up experiences, your multi-generational influences, your intimate relationships, your work, your religion and education, and a multitude of other life influences all contribute to shaping your character traits. The balance of your personality is your temperament. While temperament is influenced by experience, it is considered to be determined far more by heredity. These traits emerge in early childhood and form the foundation of your disposition—often persisting throughout the course of your life (Fisher, 2009).

Psychologists have identified five basic character traits that appear across cultures (Schmitt, Allik, McCray, & Benet-Martinez, 2007). These basic traits, known as the Big Five, are as follows: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and secureness. In addition, there are a myriad of different temperaments that have been identified in cross-cultural research as key traits of human personality (Rothbart, 2007). There is not as much agreement about these traits as there is about what constitutes the character traits, but some of the most commonly identified temperaments have to do with the degree to which individuals vary in their levels of activity, excitability, regularity, distractibility, and flexibility.

Although these traits—particularly temperament traits—do not appreciably change after they are solidified in early adulthood, they are not entirely fixed. For example, some character traits (secureness, extraversion, and openness) slightly decrease during early and middle adulthood and others (agreeableness and conscientiousness) slightly increase during these same parts of the life cycle (McCrae, 2011; Vaidya, Gray, Haig, & Watson, 2002). While mutable, personality traits

typically change only when individuals see the need to modify them and make a conscious choice to do so.

Following a pattern of solidification and periodic alteration, the previously identified ten traits constitute the particular personality of an individual adult. More specifically, each of these traits involve a range of characteristics that form a continuum of related qualities. Every person falls somewhere on each continuum of these traits and the particular mix of these traits constitute his or her personality. To indicate where you fall on each trait, complete the personality assessment located in the Appendix.

Adaptive & Principled Selves

In addition to personality traits, the self also consists of a synthesis of limbic and cortex driven traits referred to by Reel (2022) as the adaptive and principled selves. The adaptive self is shaped in the early part of your growing up experience as you react and adjust to the conditions in your surrounding environment. This is the phase of development when your neurobiology is molded by the learning, experiences, and events you were exposed to as you grew up. Much of this early exposure, particularly the part that is unconsciously absorbed, takes place in the limbic part of your brain that later generates autonomic visceral and behavioral responses when it comes to meeting your adult needs for safety, attention, sex, and flight-fight survival.

The adaptive self is designed and formed to make sure you take care of yourself and preserve your identity in relationships. Some of the most functional traits for this part of the self are self-awareness, intuitiveness, authenticity, self-regulation, and assertiveness. However, adverse factors like ill health, developmental disabilities, insecure attachment, impoverished economic circumstances, drug abuse, troubled family life, and particularly exposure to childhood trauma can compromise the healthy formation of these capabilities in adulthood (Kearns & Lee, 2015).

When these adverse conditions persist, problematic traits like perfectionism, all-or-nothing thinking, relentlessness, rigidity, and needing to be right can become dominant traits for the adapted self. In mild forms these traits can protect the individual's ego and are often associated with persistence in the face of adversity. However, when close relationships are involved, particularly in intimate relationships, these traits interfere with the mutuality and cooperation needed for their successful functioning (Reel, 2022).

The principled self develops later in life with the evolution of the prefrontal cortex. This executive part of your brain is primarily responsible for such functions as goal-setting, impulse control, decision-making, problem-solving, and moderation of social behavior. This part of yourself evolves as your identity forms through various stages of cognitive development and provides the normative and ethical basis for regulating your core reactions and behavior (Cherry, 2010). Some of the principled self's most functional character traits are truthfulness and dependableness. When interacting with others, some of the principled self's most important functional traits are considerateness, kindness, and fairness.

The principled and adaptive parts of the self are connected in a complex network of reactions and counteractions in which both of these parts are continually trying to influence each other. From

this perspective, the self is like a complex ecosystem in which each part competes for influence (Edelman, 1992). The central role of the principle self is to ensure conscious deliberation and the main role of the adaptive self is to provide a reactive template for your motivations, decision-making, and behavior. A secure and healthy sense of self depends on the complementary and integrated functioning of these two vital parts of the self (Damasio, 2005).

Like with your personality, the traits that comprise your adaptive and principled selves fall on a continuum. These traits, combined with those of your personality, constitute the major psychological components that comprise your identity as a unique person. To indicate where you fall on each trait, complete the designated assessments listed in the Appendix.

Diminished Functioning

We require the active influence of both the adaptive and principled selves to function as fully differentiated and secure adults, and when either part becomes consistently dominant, we can become compromised in our capability and adaptability (LeDoux, 1996). As previously indicated, extensive exposure to major stressors like childhood trauma are some of the critical factors that contribute to inhibiting the complementary functioning between these two key parts of the self (Kears & Lee, 2015).

In response to major stressors, the principled self can become overly analytical, critical, and single-minded in attempting to moderate the adaptive self. Conversely, when major life stress plays a less pervasive role over the course of your development, the principled self can evolve to serve as a useful source of moderation, temperance, and perspective.

Under protracted stress, the adaptive self is more likely to override the principled self because it is more survival-based with much of its visceral circuitry already wired by early childhood. Under these conditions, defenses like rationalization and denial tend to form into an unconscious bulwark to protect the self, and other character traits like perfectionism, defensiveness, rigidity, and relentlessness can become default forms of fortification when interacting with others--particularly with attachment figures (Real, 2022).

Real (2007) points out that these defenses and traits represent a compromised sense of self-esteem in which those affected are compelled to either aggrandize or diminish themselves. Aggrandizement is exemplified by persistent self-centeredness characterized by overinflated self-worth; conversely, diminishment is exemplified by persistent self-deprecation characterized by underinflated self-worth.

These esteem problems reflect an insecure sense of self in which people are too thick- or thin-skinned and become overly sensitive or insensitive in their interactions with others. Real (2007) points out that a key manifestation of this insecurity is when people consistently take dysfunctional one-down and one-up positions in their lives in general, but particularly in their attached relationships. For example, when people consistently assume these roles in intimate relationships, they become prone to feeling either: (1) overly controlled by their partners' needs and wants, or (2) overly presumptuous about what their partners should need and want. To assess the extent to which

these self-esteem issues and related traits are concerns, answer the designated questions in the Appendix.

Improved Functioning

Standard clinical remedies for addressing the traits that become problematic are psychotherapeutic interventions geared toward helping those affected stabilize any disruptive symptoms, like anxiety and depression, they might be experiencing. Once these symptoms are stabilized, the most successful interventions are geared in one way or another toward establishing more balanced and complimentary functioning between the adapted and principled selves.

The most common therapeutic interventions geared to achieving a more functional balance between the adapted and principled selves involve addressing the dominant emotional and cognitive reactions that interfere with their integration. Key elements of this therapeutic strategy entail identifying major insecurities, modifying ego defenses, and re-establishing a secure sense of self grounded in authentic self-knowledge, realistic self-acceptance, and enhanced support from key personal and family relationships (Chui, Palma, Jackson, & Hill, 2020).

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APPENDIX TRAIT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name _____

Date _____

Instructions: Rate yourself on the extent to which you possess the different traits listed in the inventories below. Each of one of these traits is rated on a continuum of High, Medium, and Low. Place a check mark (✓) under the rating that best reflects the extent to which you typically manifest that trait. Your ratings should be based on your honest judgment about how you typically feel, think, and behave in regard to each one of these traits. Keep in mind that the self is typically comprised of a synthesis of the prevalent influence of some of these traits and the subordinate influence of others. While there may be a temptation to rate yourself in the middle as a Medium when you not entirely sure, pause and reflect on how your partner and/or those who know you well would rate you.

Character & Temperament Traits

CHARACTER TRAITS:

High Medium Low

Openness—embracing new ideas & experiences.

Conscientiousness—being goal oriented, responsible, & organized.

Extraversion—becoming energized by social activity.

Agreeableness—putting others' interests & needs ahead of your own.

Secureness—remaining sure of yourself in the face of stress & adversity.

TEMPERAMENT TRAITS:

High Medium Low

Activity—being energetically engaged in work & life activities.

Excitability—responding readily to something new or stimulating.

Regularity—implementing organized routine in your endeavors.

Distractibility—getting sidetracked from obligations and responsibilities.

Flexibility—accommodating to needed life and work changes.

Adaptive & Principled Traits

ADAPTIVE TRAITS:

High Medium Low

Self-awareness—knowing yourself and your impact on others.

Intuitiveness—obtaining understanding without conscious reasoning.

Authenticity—expressing your thoughts & feelings in a genuine manner.

Self-regulation—tempering internal reactivity without external influence.

Assertiveness—being direct in expressing your thoughts & feelings.

PRINCIPLED TRAITS:

High Medium Low

Truthfulness—engaging in honest representation & discourse.

Dependableness—behaving in a consistent & reliable manner.

Considerateness—exhibiting concern for the wants & needs of others.

Kindness—expressing compassion & acting generously toward others.

Fairness—being just & even-handed without regard to favor.

Other Questions about Your Traits

1. When either your principled or adapted self takes over at the expense of the other, designate what adverse traits you tend to exhibit. Check (✓) all that apply:

- Becoming Overly Analytical
- Being Too Critical
- Getting Single-Minded
- Becoming Perfectionistic
- Being Relentless
- Getting Too Rigid
- Being Defensive
- Engaging in Rationalization & Denial
- Others:

2. When either the adapted or principled self takes over at the other's expense, do you typically tend to take a one-up or one-down position in your relationships with those you care the most about? Briefly identify some of the key ways you typically take one-up or one-down positions in these relationships?

3. What parts of the yourself are the most problematic and what concerns about yourself would you like to address in therapy?