

## 5 Ways to Recognize Your Real Self

Being confused does not feel good. It makes you anxious, worried and full of self-doubt. This is especially true when you are confused about who you are, or can't answer your own questions about why you do what you do.

It can be upsetting to wonder if you are who you think you are. In these times, you feel out-of-control of your mind and your self and are riddled with anxiety and panic. You can even feel scared to death.

### Identity Confusion

I call this experience, "identity confusion". It is a universal problem that few people recognize but all will experience at some point in their life. It begins with the word, "I", one of the most confusing words in the English language. When people say "I feel" or, "I think", people don't stop to think that "I" is not singular. It actually has two parts.

"I" is a blend of "me" and "them". The "me" is how you naturally react and feel, and the "them" is the influence of our families who raised you. The identity confusion lies in the question; "Is the way I feel at a given moment because of who I am or because of what I was taught?" Where does oneself begin and the other leave off?

Everybody is a combination of who you are and how you have been trained. Without stopping to separate those two parts, you can often fail to identify your real self and easily include reactions that have been trained into you.

You must learn to recognize the difference or who you are will merge with who were told to be. You run the risk of being disciples of your parents, rather than who you really are or want to be.

Identity confusion starts at birth and continues throughout your adult life. You are born into dependency and vulnerable to influence as a child. You are trained by your parents to behave in certain ways for reasons that make sense to them. The problem is that no parent is perfect, and the rules they teach are imperfect.

Even as a small child, you realize the imperfections when something doesn't feel right. You have an internal reaction that puts you at odds with your parents or other authority figures.

### The Two Selves

In the moment when you recognize that something feels wrong, there is a clash between your natural reason and your dependency on your parents for survival. If you take the risk to stand up for yourself and are punished by your parents, you are forced to hide your natural reactions and emotions to avoid rejection or isolation.

You handle this confusion by splitting into two selves, creating one to please our parents (Self For Others), and one to represent your real reactions (Authentic Self). You maintain your relationships to your family at the expense of honoring your real self. You must hide your natural reactions to preserve your connection to your parents.

The two selves have different emotional roots. Natural emotions like joy, sadness, anger or realistic fear emerge from the use of natural reason and reflect your real self. Learned emotions, like guilt, shame and irrational fear, are created through experiences within your family and culture. Natural emotions reflect the real you. Learned emotions tell you the impact of your family.

### Reading Your Emotions

As an adult, there is a way to tell which side is the real you. This is where emotional awareness comes into play. To begin, you must first be able to recognize your emotions and what they are telling you. Identifying the sources of emotion is important to recognize your real self.

There are two problems with separating your emotions. One is the confusion about feeling an emotion and identifying its origin. Simply because they feel them, people assume that all their emotions come from within. They can easily be mistaken as your own.

This is especially true with guilt and shame. Guilt and shame are felt within, but were trained into you. They are put there and do not originate from within the person. They are the emotions reflecting your parent's beliefs rather than your own.

The second problem with separating your emotions is that learned emotions are so much stronger than natural emotions. Learned emotions are taught from years of bad experiences with rejection and punishment. They are often reinforced by religious experiences that require obedience to authority and surrender of your natural instincts. They are loud and strong in your mind.

In contrast, natural emotions are soft and gentle in your mind. They are natural reactions that don't need to be loud to be heard. They are as natural as breathing. As a result, they can be easily overrun by the learned emotions. Listening to the softer voice within you is hard when it is drowned out by the loud noise from the other emotions.

### Recognizing Identity Confusion

Identity confusion happens all the time. Here are five signs to tell when you are experiencing it:

#### Sign #1: You Repeat The Same Patterns

When you find yourself making the same mistakes over and over again, you are most likely being driven to avoid guilt and shame. You may not feel the emotions because the actions you take avoid the experiences that trigger them. You anticipate and avoid the feeling.

You also do not easily feel your natural emotions. You continue to listen to the louder emotions that keep your anxiety low at the cost of the connection to your Authentic Self.

In those moments where you ask yourself, "Why do I not learn?" ask yourself how you would feel if you did the opposite of what you did. You will begin to feel what you are trying to avoid.

#### Sign #2: You Change When Around Your Family

This is a common symptom of identity confusion that is often recognized by others but not by you. A friend or spouse will point out how you change when you are around your family, and you will deny it. It is an automatic reaction that happens so fast you may not even feel the shift.

You are so used to adjusting for the anticipated reactions of your family that you don't see your emotional programming kicking into gear. You will change to avoid the disapproval of family. Others will easily see the shift while you will experience it as an authentic reaction. You will have hidden your real self that your friends are used to seeing.

### Sign #3: Being Told You Don't Listen

The ability to listen to the emotions of others is a good test of identity confusion. Emotions are contagious, so listening for and recognizing other's emotions will resonate with your own experiences. Their emotions will trigger your natural emotions. In your Authentic Self where you are true to who you are, you will use this reaction to empathize and feel compassion toward another.

Natural emotions within the authentic self are soft. They don't take up much space in your brain. There is room to listen and absorb the emotions of others. You will not be surprised or made anxious by the natural associations and triggering of your own natural emotions.

The reactions of others may trigger internal reactions in you that you do not want to admit. Your anxiety will rise if this occurs. The emotions of others will be seen as a threat and must be silenced. This can take the form of discounting or dismissing other's reactions, or lead to a fight where you try to silence the opinions of others. Your Self For Others is protected but your relationship is harmed.

### Sign #4: Shoulds Win More Than Wants

People have a hard time recognizing shame, the core emotion of the Self For Others. They can often report feeling guilt, but not aware of how quickly guilt can turn into shame. Guilt tells us that we have done something wrong. Shame makes us feel worthless for making a mistake. It prevents us from learning through trial and error. You are expected to know something before you get a chance to learn it.

People are typically familiar with feeling a sense of obligation. They hear themselves say to themselves that they "should" do something. "Shoulds" are the voice of shame and a sign that you are suffering from identity confusion.

If you examine the obligation, you may see that it typically comes from some training from your family or culture about what you are expected to do in a given situation. In that moment, you may not be even able to define what you want. The voice of shame hides your true reactions. You do what you are supposed to do, rather than what you want to do. Most importantly, you incorrectly feel it is what you want.

#### Sign#5: High Unexplained Anxiety

People will often report that they feel anxious, but not exactly sure why they are feeling nervous in that moment. Psychologists have coined a phrase to describe this experience. They call it free floating anxiety.

I don't believe in free-floating anxiety. I believe there is always a reason that you experience anxiety. Sometimes it is hard to diagnose. If you look carefully, you will find that the anxiety was a signal of a pending emotional clash between your natural reactions and the way you were raised. This anxiety occurs in anticipation of a battle between the selves. If you have not been tracking your emotions or thoughts, you can be caught off-guard by the sudden rush of anxiety, and think it comes out of nowhere.

In summary...

Identity confusion is an experience that happens quite often to adults. The symptoms are anxiety and confusion about what to do or how to act. You can feel split in two, and not be able to tell what the right thing to do is or the right way to act. Understanding and managing this phenomena is critical to feeling that you are being true to your real self, and representing yourself clearly in all that you say or do.