



### Discover How Your "Self-Concept" Influences Everything You Do



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The answer to the question of how to craft a happy, fulfilling life is rooted in *understanding oneself*.

Because, you see, it is only by understanding oneself that we can make the right choices that will guide us to the kind of life and happiness that we seek.

An understanding of *self-concept* can help clarify and solidify who you are as a person, what you like about yourself, what you don't like about yourself, and what you need to change.



The term self-concept is used in psychology as a means of identifying the thoughts and beliefs that a person has about themselves and how they perceive themselves.

Self-concept encompasses what a person believes their attributes are; who and what they are.

It is like a mental picture of who you think you are as a person.

### Why Is Self-Concept Important?

A person's self-concept helps them define who they think they are and how they fit into the world. That in itself makes self-concept important because every individual wants to know themselves and [feel as though they belong](#).

It applies to everyone, because everyone is going to have some kind of belief about who or what they are.

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That may be a sticky concept for some, particularly those who reject the notion of labels or think of labeling as a bad thing.

Take the attitude of a rebellious, free spirit. That person may not want to feel as though they are being confined to any particular set of attitudes or way of life. The person may not like to feel they are being put into a box that they do not belong in.

However, it is useful to understand those boxes because they can help you see the world in different ways.

The rebellious, free spirits of the world share traits like every other group of people do. In fact, their desire to not be categorized and put into a box is a trait they commonly share with one another.

The person who broadcasts to the world, whether through words or deeds, that they are a rebellious, free spirit is sending a clear message about the person they believe themselves to be. That belief is self-concept.

So, whether we like it or not, self-concept is important because it is the basis of our identity.

### How Is Self-Concept Formed?

A self is not something static, tied up in a pretty parcel and handed to the child, finished and complete. A self is always becoming.  
– Madeleine L'Engle

The field of psychology has many theories on why people are the way they are, why they feel the way they feel, and how they come to be the person that will eventually come to be.

There are a plethora of theories about numerous facets of the mind. Self-concept is no different.

The social-identity theory states that self-concept is composed of two distinct parts: personal identity and social identity.

One's personal identity includes personality traits, beliefs, emotions, and characteristics that help to define each individual person. It is purely internal.



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Social identity, on the other hand, is mostly external. It includes the groups that we belong to that we identify with or as. That may be sexual, religious, educational, racial, career oriented, or really any group of people that a person can identify with.

The formation of self-concept begins as a child, as young as three months old. The baby begins to realize that they are a unique entity by receiving feedback on their interactions with the world.

They may cry and get attention from a parent, push a toy and see that it moves, or laugh and see another person laugh back with them.

These actions begin setting the stage for the development of self-concept.

As the child grows, their self-concept is developed through internal and external means. The internal facets are that which the person thinks about themselves. The external comes from family, community, and other social influences.

A person raised in a rugged, individualistic society may see themselves or try to define themselves as a rugged, individualistic person whether they actually are or not.

This type of influence is apparent in the gendering of toys. If society believes and teaches that a boy should not play with dolls, then the boy will be more inclined to think, "I am a boy, therefore I should not play with dolls."



play video games, then she will be more inclined to think, "I am a girl, therefore I should not be playing video games."

Self-concept is fluid. Though it starts to form at a young age, it will change continuously throughout a person's life as they experience new things, gain new knowledge, and start to figure out who they truly are underneath all of the external influences that have been forced on them throughout their life.

Perhaps the boy grows up to realize that it's okay for him to like dolls and becomes a collector. Perhaps the girl decides she loves video games so much she works to become a game developer.

### **Dr. Carl Rogers' Three Parts Of Self-Concept**

The renowned Humanist psychologist Dr. Carl Rogers believed that there are three distinct parts of a person's self-concept: self-esteem, self-image, and ideal self.

#### **Self-esteem is how much a person values themselves.**

Self-esteem is influenced by internal and external factors. Internally, it is largely how we feel about ourselves, compare ourselves to others, how others respond to us, and the type of feedback we give to ourselves.

Externally, it can be influenced by feedback we receive from the world or other people.

A person who regularly tries things but is unsuccessful is likely to have their self-esteem damaged in a negative way.

The feedback they receive from other people about who they are or what they try also influences their self-esteem. Negative feedback can tear self-esteem down, while positive feedback can build it up.

#### **Self-image is how a person sees themselves.**

Self-image does not necessarily coincide with reality. A person who is struggling with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues may feel like they are much worse of a person than they actually are.

People can easily fall into negative thought loops about themselves if they don't take great care to avoid them.

On the other hand, a person can also have an incredibly exaggerated sense of self-worth and being. Their self-image may be artificially inflated by ego, arrogance, and self-

Examples corresponding to self-image may include things like physical attributes, personal traits, social roles, and abstract existential statements ("I'm a spiritual person." "I'm a Christian," "I'm a Wiccan").

#### **The ideal self is the person we want to be.**

Anyone with an interest in self-improvement is going to be looking at what they perceive to be their flaws to compare them to how they would like to be. Perhaps the person wants to be more disciplined, fearless, more creative, or a [better friend](#).

A person's perception of an ideal self may also not mesh with reality if they have an unrealistic view on the trait that they want to improve. They may find themselves reaching for a goal that does not exist.

#### **Congruence And Incongruence**

Rogers coined the terms congruence and incongruence to help clarify how well a person's grasp of reality lined up with their self-concept.

Every person experiences reality in their own specific way. Their perceptions are shaped not only by facts, but by anecdotal experiences of their lives.

Congruence happens when a person's self-concept aligns fairly close to factual reality. Incongruence is when a person's self-concept does not align with factual reality.

Rogers believed that incongruence is rooted in the way the child was loved by their parents. If the parent's love and affection was conditional and needed to be earned, the person is more likely to have a distorted perception of how they fit and relate to the world.

[Unconditional love](#), on the other hand, fosters congruence and a realistic self-image on how a person fits into the world.

Incongruence at a young age may contribute to personality disorders.

#### **Dr. Bruce A. Bracken's Multidimensional Self-Concept Scale**

Dr. Bruce A. Bracken developed his own multidimensional self-concept scale that includes six primary groups of traits that help to define self-concept. These are:

Physical: how we look, physical health, physical fitness levels ("[I am ugly](#)")

Social: how we interact with others, both giving and receiving ("I am kind")

Family: how we relate to family members, how we interact with family members ("I am a good mother")

Competence: how we manage the basic needs of our life, employment, self-care ("I am a skilled writer")

Academic: intelligence, school, ability to learn ("[I am stupid](#)")

Affect: interpretation and understanding of emotional states ("I am easily flustered")

The two perspectives can be combined to zero in on more specific traits that help a person better define their self-concept.

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- [How To Be Proud Of Yourself](#)
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### The Influence Of Self-Concept On Behavior

Self-concept heavily influences behavior because it causes a person to dictate to themselves what they may or may not be able to accomplish through self-categorization.

Every person holds beliefs and biases of different categories in their life, whether they are aware of them or not. People will make many of their decisions based on these beliefs and biases.

Let's look at a couple examples for clarification.

*Anne defines herself as a free-spirited traveler. She likes to live a light life where she can pick up and go as she so desires.*

*After years of travel and seeing the world, she starts to feel like she wants to settle down, maybe have a relationship and a family.*

*A relationship and family will mean that she'll lose some of that free-spirited traveler that is a part of her identity so that she can have a more stable and consistent lifestyle.*

*She may have a hard time reconciling that she wants to settle down and have a family with her identity as a free-spirited traveler.*

In this example, Anne may feel conflicted because her previous desires to be a free-spirit and travel is in direct opposition to her new desire to settle down and start a family. She will need to reconcile those differences and develop new behaviors that are more relevant to her emerging desires.

*Greg defines himself as an introverted, shy person. As a result, he regularly avoids social activities and socialization because that's just not who he believes himself to be.*

*Greg may actually be a sociable person if he allowed himself to step out of his box and interact with other people.*

*Even if Greg does have a difficult time with socialization, these are skills that he could learn and practice through [self-help books](#) or therapy if he could look past his self-categorization as an introverted, shy person.*

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There are a lot of people who struggle with socialization out there. Many of them call themselves introverts, when really they may be struggling with social anxiety or depression.

An introverted person is just someone who regains their energy by spending time alone. It doesn't mean they are shy, can't function in social situations, can't be charming or suave, or face overwhelming fear about socialization.

Greg's incongruent belief that he is an introverted, shy person is self-reinforcing until he chooses to break out of the boxes he has put himself in.

*Stacy comes to understand that many of her life problems are because she is a lazy person who avoids responsibility. She may identify that she is a lazy, irresponsible person, but chooses to no longer define herself as these things.*

*Instead, she wants to be a proactive, responsible person so she stops sabotaging her own success and life.*

*In her desire to change, she researches what makes a person proactive and responsible, and she starts to pattern her own behaviors and decisions on those concepts. That, in turn, leads her to change herself and her life for the better.*

Altering or changing one's self-concept is a process that takes some time. It's difficult to change entrenched habits and develop new, healthier ones.

But in this example, Stacy identified her negative qualities and developed a course of action to replace them with more positive ones.

She stopped telling herself that she was a lazy, irresponsible person and replaced her habits with those of a person who is proactive and responsible, shifting herself into a healthier mentality.

*John lives a sedentary, unhealthy lifestyle. He understands that a lack of physical activity and junk food is detrimental to his long-term health. John does not possess the traits that one would expect an active, healthy person to have.*

*But, he can develop those habits by deciding to be an active, healthy person. John researches healthy eating, starts buying better food, and finds an exercise routine that empowers him to change into a*

Incongruences in a person's self-concept can be painful and difficult as the person tries to figure who they are and how they fit into the world.

A stay at home dad who prides himself on being a family man will have his whole reality jolted if his wife decides to leave him, because it will cause him to question if he's been a good family man and partner.

A career driven woman may find herself questioning her life if she becomes disabled and loses her job. She may be unsure if the sacrifices she made were worth it or not once she can no longer define herself as a career woman. She will have to find a new way to identify herself.

On the other side of the coin, a person can use their incongruences to guide their self-improvement and empowerment, much like Stacy and John did.

A person who understands who they are can more easily figure out how to improve in the areas of their life that they feel are lacking. Anyone can replace the negative perceptions with positive ones, introduce new behaviors and processes, and [change for the better](#).

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### Self-Concept And Stereotyping

The categorization of people and oneself can be a sticky subject for some. No one likes to feel that they are being scrutinized and analyzed.

Self-concept is a helpful tool for not only clinicians, but for the average individual who wants to better understand and find happiness with themselves.

Yet it can also be problematic. Being aware of the categories that exist can influence one's perception of who they think other people are or should be.

The career woman may not have much tolerance for other people who do not take their careers as seriously as she does. The artist may snub other artists for not practicing their art or being as productive. Other people may look down on the stay at home dad for not maintaining traditional employment like a man was once expected to.

Awareness of how we define ourselves can help us grow closer to other people, particularly by avoiding falling into these stereotypical thinking traps.

Every single person is different, with their own unique trajectory in this existence. What makes sense for the career woman, artist, or stay at home dad may not be relevant to other career types, artists, or stay at home parents.

No one fits neatly into one generic box. One should be careful to avoid projecting their own biases and views onto other people.

### How Our Own Self-Concept Can Influence The Behavior Of Others

People generally treat other people as they are permitted. Self-concept plays a significant role in how other people will view and treat us.



A person who defines themselves as incompetent or unreliable is likely to be viewed that way by others.

Regardless of how true this may be, if a person's self-concept includes these views, they will likely talk about themselves in this way. They may also fall into patterns of behavior that confirm this view because they have accepted that this behavior is who they really are.

Given the evidence they are presented with, other people will often share this person's view of themselves. That is, unless they are a close friend or family member who sees this person in an entirely different way to how they see themselves.

That can also work to the positive. A person who [believes in themselves](#) and puts forward a strong sense of self-worth is more likely to be treated positively.

The person who emanates confidence in themselves is more likely to inspire confidence in other people, particularly if they can back up their claims with actions and results.

Congruence puts the individual in a place where they understand exactly what they have to offer the world. It can positively and negatively affect not only the way a person treats themselves, but how the rest of the world will treat them.

### Developing Clarity Of Self-Concept

"If you really have your own identity, you'll keep on doing what you think is really right for you, and you'll also understand the next step you want to take.  
– *Helmut Lang*

The development of an understanding of one's self-concept can help them better understand why they see the world in the way that they do, why they feel the way that they feel, and why they make the decisions that they do.

Forging congruence between reality and self-concept can help a person better relate to the world and journey toward happiness. It allows a person to more easily identify what areas of their life need work and improvement.

[Journaling](#) is an effective way to develop and understand one's self-concept. A person who journals out who they believe they are and tests that against their choices in life will be able to more clearly see where the differences are.

To really make this work, one needs to look at their choices and get to the bottom of why they make the decisions that they do. Is it more logical or emotional? What was the basis of those decisions? What were the alternatives? How did those decisions work out?

Therapy may be an important tool. A good therapist can provide a valuable third-party perspective that may not be available elsewhere. A therapist can also help their client navigate the emotion surrounding decision making processes, because emotional decisions may not align with rationality or reason.

Examining one's past and previous decisions will also grant clarity on one's emotional state and future emotional decisions.

A person can learn a lot about themselves by dissecting and exploring the choices they've made in their life, whether mundane or life-altering. The more one understands about their choices in life, the clearer they can see themselves, and the better equipped they are to [make good decisions](#) that reflect their true desires.

The ideal self is how one envisions themselves to be at the end of their journey. It takes time, dedication, and discipline to make significant changes to be the person they want to be.

That journey is absolutely worthwhile because it is a means to find peace of mind and happiness in this life.

A person who lives against who they actually are will be fighting an unending battle against their own mind, trying to square away who they are versus who they believe they need to be.

The person who is able to live in accordance with their ideal self will have far less internal conflict about their place in the world.

Never mind searching for who you are. Search for the person you aspire to be.

– Robert Brault

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