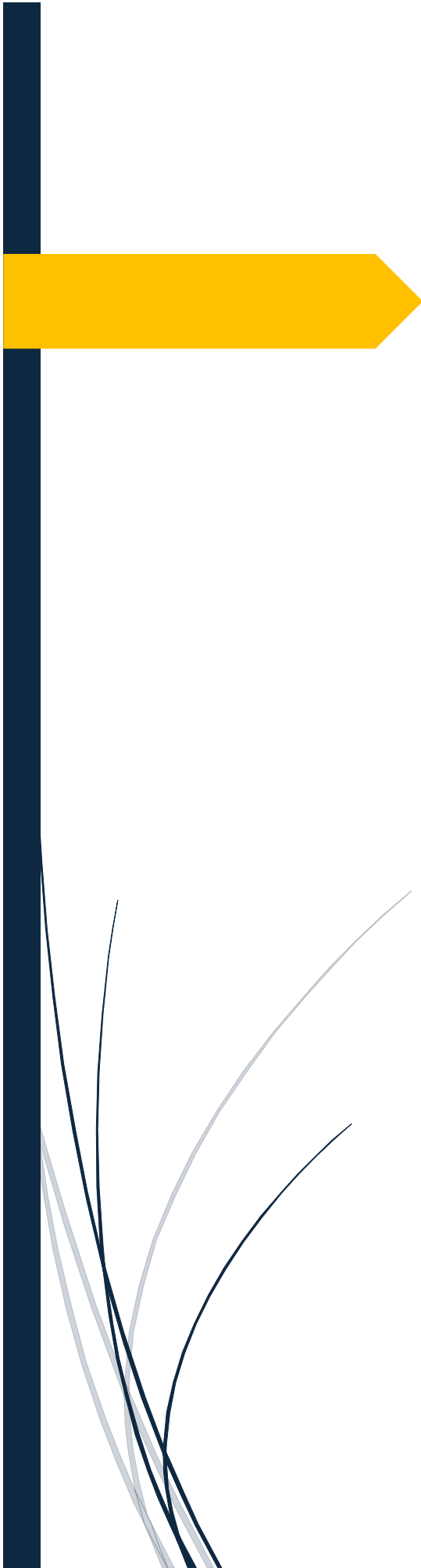




Understand the SELFs

How We See Ourselves, Value
Ourselves, and Navigate the
World

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Understanding Yourself

Understanding ourselves is an ongoing process of discovery, reflection, experience, and change.

We develop beliefs about who we are, what we're worth, what we're capable of, and how we fit into the world. Some of these beliefs are shaped by our experiences. Others are influenced by family, culture, relationships, social expectations, and the messages we've received throughout our lives.

We might describe ourselves as confident, capable, independent, compassionate, intelligent, or resilient. At other times, we may question those same qualities depending on what we're experiencing.

For example:

- Someone can feel confident professionally but uncertain in relationships.
- Someone can recognize their strengths yet struggle with their sense of worth.
- Someone can be highly capable but become self-critical when they make mistakes.
- Someone can know who they are but find it difficult to express their preferences or needs.
- Someone can feel unsuccessful in one area of life while doing well in several others.

These experiences reflect different, but interconnected, aspects of how we understand and relate to ourselves.

The objective isn't to create a perfect sense of self. It's to better understand how we see ourselves, how those perceptions influence our experiences, and how we can develop greater awareness, flexibility, and choice.

Three Lenses for Understanding the SELFs

There are many psychological concepts that begin with the word *self*. Although they overlap, each provides a different way to understand our identity, perceptions, capabilities, and responses.

For this resource, we'll organize ten concepts into three lenses.

These are practical categories for understanding ourselves not separate psychological systems. Each influences and interacts with the others.

CORE SELF | Who Am I?

Our Core Self focuses on identity, personal meaning, and our sense of worth.

Self-Concept — How I Understand Myself

Our overall perception of who we are, including our characteristics, beliefs, qualities, strengths, limitations, and experiences.

- "I'm someone who values independence."

- "I'm curious and enjoy learning."
- "I tend to be reserved in unfamiliar situations."

Self-concept is our broader understanding of ourselves. It can evolve as we gain new experiences and perspectives.

Self-Identity — Who I Understand Myself to Be

The roles, values, commitments, experiences, and affiliations that contribute to our sense of identity.

- "I'm a parent."
- "I'm a partner and friend."
- "Being dependable is important to me."
- "My cultural background is part of who I am."

Identity can include both inherited and intentionally chosen elements. It may change as we move through different ages, stages, and circumstances of life.

Self-Worth — Do I Believe I Have Value?

Our underlying sense that we have value as a person, independent of any single achievement, mistake, relationship, or outcome.

- "I can make a mistake and still have value."
- "Someone disagreeing with me doesn't make me less worthy."
- "My worth isn't determined entirely by what I accomplish."

Self-worth can be influenced by experiences and relationships. Developing a more stable sense of worth involves learning not to make our value dependent on every external outcome.

EVALUATIVE SELF | How Do I See Myself?

Our Evaluative Self focuses on how we perceive, assess, and judge ourselves.

Self-Esteem — How Do I Feel About Myself?

Our overall evaluation of ourselves, including the degree to which we feel positively or negatively about who we are.

- "I feel good about the person I'm becoming."
- "I've been questioning myself lately."
- "I feel less confident about myself after that experience."

Self-esteem can fluctuate with mood, relationships, accomplishments, comparisons, and feedback.

Self-Image — How Do I Picture Myself?

The mental picture we hold of ourselves, including physical appearance, social qualities, emotional characteristics, and how we believe we present to others.

- "I see myself as someone who's approachable."
- "I think others perceive me as serious."
- "I don't always like how I look or come across."

Our self-image may or may not match how others experience us. It can also differ from how we'd ideally like to see ourselves.

Self-Confidence — How Capable Do I Generally Feel?

Our broader belief in our ability to handle situations, use our skills, and navigate challenges.

- "I generally trust myself to figure things out."
- "I'm comfortable speaking in front of groups."
- "I feel uncertain when I'm in unfamiliar social settings."

Confidence can vary across situations and domains. Being confident in one area doesn't mean feeling confident everywhere.

FUNCTIONAL SELF | How Do I Work With Myself?

Our Functional Self focuses on awareness, action, learning, and how we respond to our experiences.

Self-Awareness — What Do I Notice About Myself?

Our ability to recognize our thoughts, emotions, beliefs, behaviors, patterns, and their effects.

- "I'm noticing that I become defensive when criticized."
- "I tend to withdraw when I'm overwhelmed."
- "I'm more comfortable expressing frustration than sadness."

Self-awareness creates opportunities for understanding and choice. Recognizing a pattern doesn't automatically change it, but it gives us something to work with.

Self-Regulation — How Do I Manage My Responses?

Our ability to influence how we respond to emotions, thoughts, impulses, and situations.

- "I can pause before reacting."
- "I can recognize when I need a break."
- "I can experience frustration without automatically acting on it."

Self-regulation isn't about eliminating emotions or controlling every internal experience. It's about developing flexibility in how we respond.

Self-Efficacy — Do I Believe I Can Do This?

Our belief in our ability to perform a particular task, develop a skill, or achieve a specific outcome.

- "I believe I can learn to communicate more effectively."
- "I can complete this project if I break it into steps."
- "I'm not confident I can manage that situation yet."

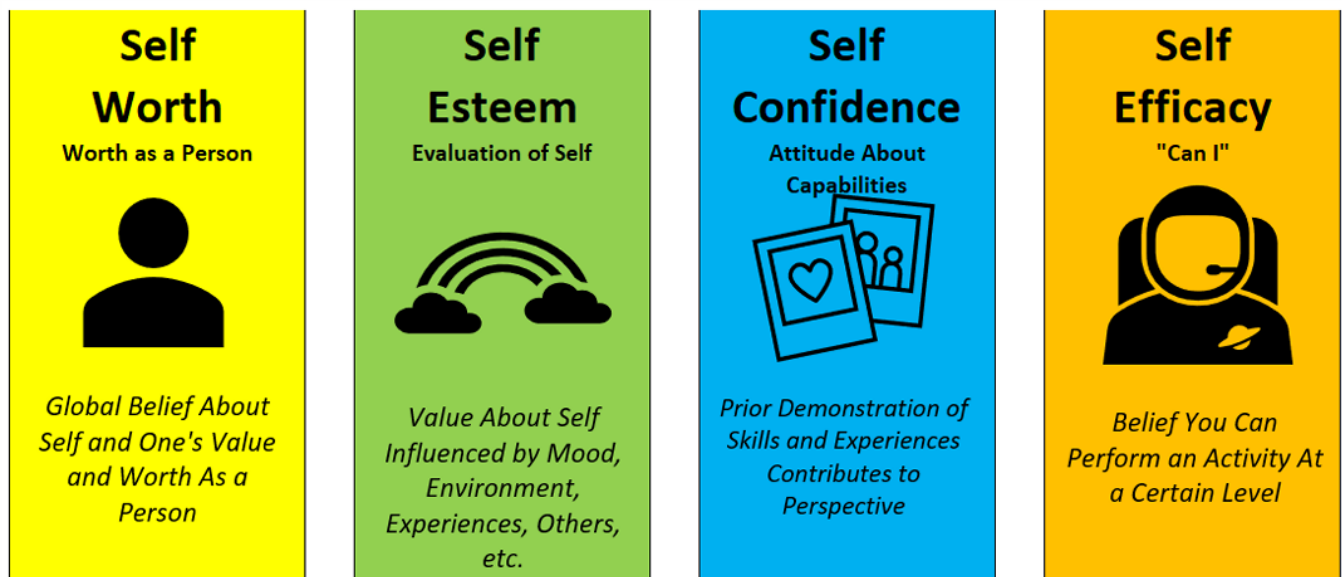
Self-efficacy is more task-specific than general self-confidence. It often develops through learning, practice, feedback, and successful experiences.

Self-Compassion — How Do I Treat Myself?

Our ability to respond to ourselves with understanding, care, and perspective, particularly during difficult experiences.

- "That was difficult, and I can learn from it."
- "Making a mistake doesn't mean I'm a failure."
- "I can hold myself accountable without attacking myself."

Self-compassion doesn't mean avoiding responsibility or dismissing problems. It allows us to acknowledge challenges while maintaining a constructive relationship with ourselves.



How Our Sense of Self Develops

Our understanding of ourselves doesn't emerge in isolation.

It develops through the interaction of our temperament, experiences, relationships, social environments, personal interpretations, and choices.

Family and Early Experiences

Our early environments can influence how we understand our worth, capabilities, identity, and emotions.

For example:

- Being recognized primarily for achievements may encourage us to connect personal value with performance.
- Receiving encouragement while learning something difficult may support confidence and self-efficacy.
- Having our preferences respected may help us develop a clearer sense of identity.
- Experiencing frequent criticism may influence how we evaluate ourselves.
- Having opportunities to make mistakes and try again may support resilience and self-compassion.

These influences matter, but they don't permanently determine who we become.

Culture, Community, and Social Expectations

We also develop our sense of self through cultural, social, religious, educational, and professional environments.

These systems communicate expectations about:

- What makes someone successful or valuable.
- Which roles and responsibilities matter.
- How independence and connection should be balanced.
- What strengths or characteristics are admired.
- How emotions, vulnerability, and mistakes should be handled.

Some expectations fit our values and aspirations. Others may be worth reconsidering as we gain experience and develop our own perspectives.

Relationships and Feedback

Other people influence how we understand ourselves. Encouragement, criticism, acceptance, rejection, comparison, and recognition can all shape our self-perceptions.

However, feedback isn't always accurate, complete, or objective.

Someone else's interpretation of us is information to consider—not necessarily a definition of who we are.

Experience, Learning, and Change

Our sense of self can expand when we develop new skills, take on unfamiliar roles, navigate challenges, and discover capabilities we didn't know we had.

Someone who once believed, "I'm not good at difficult conversations," may gradually develop confidence through learning and practice.

Over time, the belief may shift from: "I can't do that."

To: "I haven't learned how to do that yet."

And eventually: "I can handle that more effectively than I used to."

Our history influences our sense of self, but our future experiences can continue to shape it.

How the SELFs Work Together

The different aspects of self don't operate independently.

An experience that challenges one area can influence several others. Likewise, strengthening one capability can support changes across the system.

Example 1 | Receiving Critical Feedback

Imagine receiving criticism about your performance at work.

Your initial response might be embarrassment, frustration, defensiveness, or self-doubt.

Different aspects of self may become involved:

- **Self-Concept:** "I usually see myself as someone who does good work."
- **Self-Esteem:** "This feedback makes me question myself."
- **Self-Worth:** "A mistake doesn't determine my value as a person."
- **Self-Awareness:** "I'm noticing that I feel embarrassed and defensive."
- **Self-Regulation:** "I can pause and listen before responding."
- **Self-Efficacy:** "I can learn the skill needed to improve."
- **Self-Compassion:** "I can acknowledge the feedback without attacking myself."

Notice that the criticism may be relevant to a particular performance or capability without needing to become a judgment about the entire person.

Example 2 | Navigating a Relationship

Imagine someone who values connection but finds it difficult to express emotions or personal needs.

- **Self-Identity:** "Being a dependable friend or partner matters to me."
- **Self-Concept:** "I've always thought of myself as someone who handles things independently."
- **Self-Image:** "I worry that others will see me as needy if I ask for support."
- **Self-Awareness:** "I'm noticing that I keep my concerns to myself."
- **Self-Confidence:** "I'm uncertain how to begin a personal conversation."
- **Self-Efficacy:** "I can practice sharing something small with someone I trust."
- **Self-Compassion:** "It's understandable that something unfamiliar takes practice."

The opportunity may not be to change the person's identity or values.

It may be to expand their capabilities so they can express those values in additional ways.

Example 3 | Learning Something New

Imagine someone attempting a new activity and struggling at first.

They might conclude: "I'm terrible at this."

But that statement combines a temporary performance with a much broader judgment.

Consider a different interpretation:

- **Self-Awareness:** "I'm frustrated because this is harder than I expected."
- **Self-Efficacy:** "I haven't developed this particular skill yet."
- **Self-Regulation:** "I can manage the frustration and try a different approach."
- **Self-Compassion:** "Learning involves mistakes and repetition."
- **Self-Confidence:** "I've learned difficult things before. I can approach this one gradually."

A difficult experience can become evidence of personal inadequacy—or information about what needs more learning, practice, or support.

The experience may be the same. How we interpret and respond to it can be different.

When One Part of Self Gets Challenged

One of the more useful distinctions we can develop is recognizing when a specific experience becomes a broader judgment about ourselves.

Consider the difference between:

A specific experience

A broader self-judgment

I made a mistake.

= I'm a failure.

I struggled with that conversation.

= I'm bad at relationships.

Someone disagreed with me.

= My opinions don't matter.

I didn't accomplish my goal.

= I'm not capable.

I received criticism.

= I'm not good enough.

I don't know how to do something.

= I'm not smart enough.

The first column describes an event, behavior, or capability. The second turns that experience into a broader conclusion about identity, worth, or ability. Sometimes those conclusions become familiar stories we repeat about ourselves.

Performance Versus Worth

Our performance can vary considerably. We can succeed, struggle, improve, regress, learn, and make mistakes across different areas of life.

Those experiences provide information about our skills, choices, circumstances, and opportunities.

They don't have to determine our value as people. **Doing something poorly isn't the same as being a poor person.**

Confidence Versus Capability

Feeling confident doesn't necessarily mean we're capable of performing a particular task. Likewise, feeling uncertain doesn't automatically mean we're incapable. Someone may have considerable experience and skill but still feel anxious or uncertain in a new environment.

Another person may feel confident while overestimating their actual capabilities.

This is why it's useful to distinguish:

- **What I know how to do.**
- **What I believe I can do.**
- **How confident I feel about doing it.**
- **What I may need to learn or practice.**

These aren't always the same.

Self-Awareness Versus Self-Criticism

Becoming more aware of ourselves doesn't mean becoming more critical. Self-awareness helps us recognize patterns, strengths, vulnerabilities, and opportunities. Self-criticism may turn those observations into harsh judgments.

For example:

- Self-awareness: "I notice that I become defensive when I feel criticized."
- Self-criticism: "I'm terrible at receiving feedback."

The first creates an opportunity to understand and practice. The second may reinforce shame or avoidance.

The objective is to understand yourself well enough to work with yourself—not to become your own harshest critic.

Building a More Flexible Sense of Self

A flexible sense of self allows us to maintain continuity in who we are while remaining open to new experiences, information, and development.

It doesn't require constant reinvention or abandoning the qualities that matter to us.

Instead, it involves recognizing that we can have strengths and limitations, confidence and uncertainty, independence and connection, success and difficulty.

We can also develop capabilities that weren't previously available to us.

Cultivate Self-Awareness

Become curious about the beliefs and descriptions you use about yourself.

- What do I believe about who I am?
- Which beliefs are based on experience?
- Which may have been inherited or reinforced by others?
- Which beliefs are useful?
- Which might deserve reconsideration?

Try This: When you notice a familiar statement beginning with "I'm just the kind of person who..." ask whether it describes a fixed quality, a preference, a learned pattern, or a capability that could develop.

Separate Worth From Performance

Notice when outcomes, approval, comparisons, or mistakes influence your overall evaluation of yourself.

Try This: Replace "What does this say about me?" with "What can I learn about this experience, behavior, or capability?"

You can acknowledge a disappointing outcome without turning it into a verdict about your worth.

Build Self-Efficacy Through Experience

Confidence and self-efficacy often develop through action rather than waiting until we feel ready.

Try This:

- Identify one capability you'd like to develop.
- Break it into a small, observable behavior.
- Practice in manageable situations.
- Notice what works and what needs adjustment.
- Repeat until you have enough experience to evaluate your progress.

The objective isn't to convince yourself that you can do everything. It's to develop evidence about what you can do and what you're learning to do.

Practice Self-Regulation and Self-Compassion

Difficult experiences can activate strong emotions, negative self-evaluations, and familiar responses. Developing the ability to notice those experiences and respond constructively supports greater flexibility.

Try This: When something doesn't go as planned, ask:

- What am I experiencing?
- What happened?
- What is within my influence?
- What might help me respond effectively?
- How can I hold myself accountable without attacking myself?

Self-compassion and accountability can coexist.

Allow Your Identity to Evolve

We often carry descriptions of ourselves from earlier stages of life.

Some continue to fit. Others may no longer reflect who we are or who we want to become.

For example:

- "I've always been the quiet one."
- "I'm not someone who asks for help."
- "I'm not very emotional."
- "I'm not good at making friends."
- "I'm not a leader."

These descriptions may reflect previous experiences, but they don't necessarily establish permanent limits.

Try This: Consider which descriptions you want to keep, update, expand, or retire.

You don't need to abandon your identity to develop additional ways of showing up.

Where Do I Begin?

You don't need to work on all ten aspects of self. Start by identifying which area seems most relevant to your current experiences.

If you're noticing...

Uncertainty about who you are or what matters

Feeling valuable only when achieving or pleasing others

Concern about how others perceive you

Doubting your general abilities

Believing you can't perform a particular task

Repeating patterns without understanding why

Reacting in ways you later regret

Harsh self-criticism after mistakes

Consider exploring...

Self-Concept and Self-Identity

Self-Worth and Self-Esteem

Self-Image

Self-Confidence

Self-Efficacy

Self-Awareness

Self-Regulation

Self-Compassion

A Brief Self-Review

Consider the following questions:

1. **What aspects of myself do I understand well?** Think about your values, strengths, characteristics, patterns, and capabilities.
2. **Where do I experience the most uncertainty or self-doubt?** Is it related to identity, worth, confidence, a particular skill, or how others perceive you?
3. **What influences how I see myself?** Consider family, culture, relationships, achievements, criticism, comparison, and personal experiences.
4. **Am I evaluating a specific experience or making a broader judgment about myself?**
5. **What is one aspect of self I'd like to understand, strengthen, or develop?**

You don't need perfect answers.

The purpose is to identify an opportunity worth exploring.

Final Thoughts | Understanding the Whole Person

Our sense of self is not one fixed characteristic.

It's a collection of perceptions, beliefs, experiences, capabilities, values, and responses that interact and evolve throughout our lives.

We can feel confident in one area and uncertain in another. We can recognize our strengths while acknowledging limitations. We can make mistakes without losing our worth. We can value independence while developing greater connection with others.

And we can discover that some of the things we've believed about ourselves are descriptions of what we've experienced not permanent definitions of who we are.

Understanding the different SELFs helps us distinguish what we believe, what we feel, what we're capable of, and what we may want to develop.

The goal isn't to become a different person. It's to develop a clearer, more flexible understanding of yourself and expand the ways you can show up in your life.

Notice → Understand → Choose → Practice → Build Reps

You are more than any single role, experience, accomplishment, mistake, or belief about yourself.