

SENSE OF SELF ISSUES

If life is composed of sensory input, then who experiences all these sensations? Who is the “I, me, my” we are referring to when we say “I feel pain” or “That belongs to **me**” or “You hurt **my** feelings?” or “I want (don’t want) that”? We call that “I” our “self,” and it is actually made up of sensory experiences. (Sounds weird, maybe, but it’s true.) Certain thoughts, emotions, and body sensations combine to create the feeling that you have a continuous and separate “self” that “feels” things in the bodymind and “initiates” action in the world.

If you try to look and find a self in the body or mind, you can’t. It’s simply body activity (emotional and physical sensations) plus mind activity (mental images and mental talk) combining into the illusion of a “self” and interacting with world sensations (sights and sounds) that seem to be external to that self. Moment to moment there is a Body|Mind|World interaction that feels continuous enough to be a fixed entity we call “self” (similar to how a motion picture appears as a continuous picture but is actually a series of discrete shots rapidly flashed on a screen). This constructed self is not really a fixed and separate thing (even though it feels that way); rather, it is a series of sensations that must combine fluidly to make the sense there is a reliable ‘self’ doing the experiencing. We call this the sense of self (or sometimes self-sense) and might compare it to sense of touch or sense of hearing. (**Note:** the terms “sense of self” and “self-sense” are used synonymously here.)

The sense of self is not present at birth but develops with experiential contact and maturation. There are several functions that the sense of self performs:

- **Contain and regulate primary sensory experiences passing through the bodymind system**– The self-sense acts as a psychological container, i.e. a holder, for physical and emotional sensations passing through it. As infants, we don’t feel ourselves to be separate from our caregivers and world; we rely on those caregivers to modulate our emotions and satisfy physical demands. As we mature the sense of “I am” as separate from the caregiver develops and begins to take over these self-care and self-soothing functions. As we mature even more, the complexities of our social environment (education, relationships, work) require a more complex and skillful bodymind regulation system. The self-sense grows and evolves to adapt to these growing demands.
- **Interact with the world and other “selves” in it**– We humans cannot survive in the world alone. We separate from caregivers and develop self-care skills, but we are social animals and require safe connections (attachment) with others for our entire lives. To do this, self must learn to balance group needs with individual needs. This balancing requires social skills (reading verbal and non-verbal cues), communication skills (language and conflict resolution), and a certain amount of flexibility.
- **Maintain conventional (shared) reality**– The self must be realistic in its appraisal of itself and others, such that a shared understanding among the various selves is possible. Specifically, the subjective self is made of mental images, mental talk, and the physical and emotional body. This subjective (inner) self experiences the objective (outer) world

as sights and sounds, including the sights and sounds that make up objects and other people in the world.

In order to have shared reality we have to agree with others about what is there. If I see a tree and want to talk about it, but no one else sees the tree, I'm not sharing that part of external reality with another. Similarly, if I hold the view of myself (inner images and talk) that I am a kind person but cannot find someone else who agrees with that based on my external behavior, being kind is not a shared view. Conventional reality is also consensual, i.e. it consists of those things we can agree on.

- **Maintain flexible boundaries**— The constructed self needs to permit new contents to flow in and old to flow out. Again, the self is made of mental images, mental talk, and the emotional and physical body. With this constructed self we play many roles in life—child, parent, employee, student, lover, teacher—and each of these requires a different self with different bodymind components. So we must be able to allow old self-parts to flow out and new ones to flow in. But, we have to do this without boundaries becoming so loose that the self cannot do its container function anymore and know itself as separate from others. Overly loose boundaries create problems of holding and managing emotions or distinguishing our own feelings and desires from those of other people.

The self-sense experiences sensations that seem external to it (the world), but it can also experience itself: what we typically call being “self-aware.” Sometimes being self-aware is negative, as when we feel self-conscious. Other times being self-aware is positive, like when we feel proud or competent in some way. The sense of self is *not fixed but feels as if it is* to the user, and this illusion can create problems in the formation and use of the sense of self. There is a certain “feel” to the changing nature of the self that is sometimes exciting and sometimes scary. I remember noticing this in elementary school at the end of each school year. Usually I was happy in my classroom with work and friends, liked my teacher, and felt liked by him/her. Basically I “knew how to do” that grade and felt competent. At the close of the year I was sad to have that all come to an end, and occasionally worried about the future. Maybe the next year wouldn't be as good as this one; what if I wouldn't be able to “learn how to do” that next year because it was too hard for me? At the same time, if you had asked if I just wanted to stay in third grade, I would have been horrified, because I so much wanted to experience what I saw “upper graders” doing.

I recognize now that what I was feeling was the sense of self losing the set of thoughts and feelings that formed my third grade self in order for another set of thoughts and feelings to flow in and form my fourth grade self. If I resist this natural flow, or the conditions in my world are not supportive of the flow process, the formation of the self does not happen smoothly. In some cases the sense of self may not function as well for the next role required or future changes imposed by the flow of events.

The many ways for the sense of self to form itself create challenges. Even when our sense of self is stable and functions well, we still feel these challenges to some extent over the course of a lifetime; it is all a matter of degree. Here are a few obvious ones:

Too Solid

The sense of self is experienced too solidly and prevents new bodymind experiences from replacing one another. Overly rigid boundaries keep the self-sense fixed in one role or one set of ideas about life. This lack of flexibility, release, and renewal renders the self vulnerable to

problems of rigidity. The result could be compulsive or ritualistic behavior, obsessive or rigid thinking, inability to adapt to change, futile efforts to control the future, etc. Another feature of the rigid sense of self is that it produces too strong a notion of "I, me, and mine." We become over-identified with thoughts and feelings and problems of possessiveness, jealousy, or feeling threatened by others.

Too Loose

The sense of self combines too loosely and bodymind components flow too quickly or chaotically to make the sense of self arise in a stable fashion. Overly loose boundaries can result in problems of holding and managing emotions or distinguishing our own feelings and desires from those of other people. Such a self is vulnerable to emotional volatility because it isn't a strong enough container to hold emotions as they flow through. The diffuseness of this sense of self also makes it difficult to know "self" from "other," i.e. we can't tell if what we're feeling belongs to us or the other person(s). Finally, indecisiveness and confusion can occur when there is not a stable self-sense. We can't locate what "I" like, what "I" want, how "I" feel.

Distortions

The sense of self is based on distortions in the mind or body. The distortions can be mental beliefs born out of mistaken understandings of childhood (e.g. believing one is unworthy and/or lacking something because parents were neglectful or absent). The distortion can be something that is mostly body, like being fearful of all dogs because you were scared by a dog at some point. The sense of self becomes "someone who is afraid of dogs." The distortions can be body or mind sensations that are not consistent with external reality, like somatic, visual, and auditory hallucinations.

Lack of Integration

The mind and body aspects of the sense of self are not integrated in some way. In this situation the mind may think one way and the body feel another. In trauma situations, the lack of integration is often both in the mind and body. The body "knows" something that is not known conceptually to the mind and "speaks" using body symptoms such as anxiety and depression, chronic headaches or stomachaches, tension, soreness, or frequent injury of back, legs, neck.

Being human, we all have some of the too tight, too loose, distortion, lack of integration qualities in our sense of self. When they are pronounced, they affect everyday functioning.

