

ers, and our communication and interactions with them powerfully shape our beliefs regarding the functions, rewards, and dependability of interpersonal relationships ([Bowlby, 1969](#); [Domingue & Mollen, 2009](#)).

These beliefs, in turn, help shape two dimensions of our thoughts, feelings, and behavior: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance ([Collins & Feeney, 2004](#)). *Attachment anxiety* is the degree to which a person fears rejection by relationship partners. If you experience high attachment anxiety, you perceive yourself as unlovable and unworthy—thoughts that may result from being ignored or even abused during childhood. Consequently, you experience chronic fear of abandonment in your close relationships. If you have low attachment anxiety, you feel lovable and worthy of attention—reflections of a supportive and affectionate upbringing. As a result, you feel comfortable and confident in your intimate involvements.

Attachment avoidance is the degree to which someone desires close interpersonal ties. If you have high attachment avoidance, you'll likely experience little interest in intimacy, preferring solitude instead. Such feelings may stem from childhood neglect or an upbringing that encouraged autonomy. If you experience low attachment avoidance, you seek intimacy and interdependence with others, having learned in childhood that such connections are essential for happiness and well-being.

Four attachment styles derive from these two dimensions ([Collins & Feeney, 2004](#); [Domingue & Mollen, 2009](#)), which you can see in [Figure 2.2. Secure attachment](#). Individuals who are secure are low on both anxiety and avoidance: they're comfortable with intimacy and seek close ties with others. Secure individuals report warm and supportive relationships, high self-esteem, confidence in their ability to communicate, and more resilient attitudes and behaviors ([Bender & Ingram, 2018](#)). When relationship problems arise, they move to resolve them and are willing to solicit support from

others. In addition, they are comfortable with sexual involvement and are unlikely to engage in risky sexual behavior.

	High Avoidance	Low Avoidance
High Anxiety	Fearful Attachment <i>A tendency to fear rejection and shun close relationships</i>	Preoccupied Attachment <i>A tendency to fear rejection but still desire close relationships</i>
Low Anxiety	Dismissive Attachment <i>A tendency to view close relationships as unimportant, prioritizing self-reliance instead</i>	Secure Attachment <i>A tendency to seek close relationships and feel comfortable and confident with intimacy</i>

McCornack/Morrison, Reflect & Relate, 6e, © 2022
Bedford/St. Martin's

figure 2.2 Avoidance and Anxiety in Attachment Styles



Preoccupied attachment adults are high in anxiety and low in avoidance: they desire closeness but are plagued with fear of rejection. They may use sexual contact to satisfy their compulsive need to feel loved. When faced with relationship challenges, preoccupied individuals react with extreme negative emotion and a lack of trust ("I know you don't love me!"). These individuals often have difficulty maintaining long-term involvements.

People with low anxiety but high avoidance have a **Dismissive attachment** style. They view close relationships as comparatively unimportant, instead prizes and prioritizing self-reliance. Relationship crises evoke hasty exits ("I don't need this kind of hassle!"), and they are more likely than other attachment styles to engage in casual sexual relationships and to endorse the view that sex without love is positive.

Finally, **fearful attachment** adults are high in both attachment anxiety and avoidance. They fear rejection and tend to shun relationships. Fearful individuals can develop close ties if the relationship seems to guarantee a lack of rejection, such as when a partner is financially or emotionally dependent on them. But even then, they suffer

from a chronic lack of faith in themselves, their partners, and the relationship's viability.

CULTURE AND SELF

At the 1968 Summer Olympics, U.S. sprinter Tommie Smith won the men's 200-meter gold medal, and teammate John Carlos won the bronze. During the medal ceremony, as the U.S. flag was raised and "The Star-Spangled Banner" played, both runners closed their eyes, lowered their heads, and raised black-gloved fists. Smith's right fist represented Black power, and Carlos's left fist represented Black unity ([Gettings, 2005](#)). The two fists, raised next to each other, created an arch of Black unity and power. Smith wore a black scarf around his neck for Black pride, and both men wore black socks with no shoes, representing Black poverty. These symbols and gestures, taken together, clearly spoke of the runners' allegiance to Black culture and their protest of the poor treatment of Black people in the United States. Nearly 50 years later, in 2016, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick mirrored the protests of Smith and Carlos by kneeling during the national anthem at games in order to protest police brutality and racial injustice. His symbolic gesture of "taking a knee" subsequently was embraced by many of his teammates—both Black and white—and became a protest emblem used by Black Lives Matter activists and their allies. Kaepernick's protest, like the gesture of Smith and Carlos in 1968, illustrates the powerful connection between culture and self: Kaepernick, Smith, and Carlos each used symbolic gestures to express solidarity with the Black American culture of their respective eras.



Photos: AP Images/Anonymous, Michael Zagaris/San Francisco 49ers/Getty Images

Tommie Smith and John Carlos's protest at the 1968 Summer Olympics, and Colin Kaepernick's protest at NFL games during the 2016 season, showed how they each identified with the Black American culture of their respective eras.



As these examples show, in addition to gender and family, our culture is a powerful source of self. *Culture* is an established, coherent set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices shared by a large group of people ([Keesing, 1974](#)). If this strikes you as similar to our definition of *self-concept*, you're right; culture is like a collective sense of self shared by a large group of people.

Thinking of culture in this way has three important implications. First, culture includes many types of large-group influences, including your nationality as well as your ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and even age. We learn our cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values from parents, teachers, religious leaders, peers, and the mass media ([Gudykunst & Kim, 2003](#)). Second, most of us belong to more than one culture simultaneously and possess the beliefs, attitudes, and values of each. For instance, we may be "American," but also "Latino American" or "Asian American." Third, the various cultures to which we belong sometimes clash. When they do, we sometimes have to choose the culture to which we pledge our primary allegiance.

self-reflection

When you consider your own cultural background, to which culture do you “pledge allegiance”? How do you communicate this allegiance to others? Have you ever suffered consequences for openly communicating your allegiance to your culture? If so, how?

We'll be discussing culture in greater depth in [Chapter 5](#), where we'll consider some of the unique variables of culture that help to define us and communicate our selves to others, along with the commonalities that connect us across cultures. For example, regarding self-esteem, research has demonstrated that our self-esteem increases from the time we are late adolescents to our middle adult years, and that this finding is consistent across 48 different countries ([Bleidorn et al., 2016](#)).

Now that we have defined three of the components comprising self and discussed some external forces shaping self, let's turn our attention to how we communicate self.

Communicating Your Self

Presenting your public self

Rick Welts is one of the most influential people in professional basketball.² He created the NBA All-Star Weekend, and he is a cofounder of the women's professional league (the WNBA) and a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame's Class of 2018. For years, he served as the NBA's executive vice president and chief marketing officer, and he is now president of the Golden State Warriors. But throughout his entire sports career—40 years of ascension from ball boy to executive—he lived a self-described “shadow life,” publicly playing the role of a straight male while privately being gay. The lowest point came when his longtime partner died and Welts couldn't publicly acknowledge his loss. Instead, he took only two days off from work—telling colleagues that a friend had died—and for months compartmentalized his grief. In early 2011, following his mother's death, he came out publicly. As Welts described, “I want to pierce the silence that envelops the subject of being gay in men's team sports. I want to mentor gays who harbor doubts about a sports career, whether on the court or in the front office. But most of all, I want to feel whole, authentic.”



Foto AP/The Arizona Republic, Michael Chow

Rick Welts was ultimately able to reconcile his private self with his public self. What parts of your private self do you keep hidden from public view?



In addition to our private selves, the composite of our self-awareness, self-concept, and self-esteem, each of us also has a public self—the self we present to others ([Fenigstein et al., 1975](#)). We actively create our public selves through our interpersonal communication and behavior.

In many encounters, our private and public selves mirror each other. At other times, they seem disconnected. In extreme instances, like that of Rick Welts, we may intentionally craft an inauthentic public self to hide something about our private self we don't want others to know. But regardless of your private self, it is your public self that your friends, family members, and romantic partners hold dear. Most (if not all) of others' impressions of you are based on their appraisals of your public self. People know and judge the “you” who communicates with them, not the “you” you keep inside. Thus, managing your public self is a crucial part of competent interpersonal communication.

LaunchPad Video

launchpadworks.com

Mask

Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



When, if ever, have you chosen to use a mask to veil your private self or emotions? What motivates you to use a mask? Do you think others use masks for similar reasons?

Want to see more? Check out LaunchPad for a clip on **face**.

MAINTAINING YOUR PUBLIC SELF

Renowned sociologist [Erving Goffman \(1955\)](#) noted that whenever you communicate with others, you present a public self—your **face**—that you want others to see and know. You actively create and present your face through your communication. Your face can be anything you want it to be—“perky and upbeat,” “cool and level-headed,” or “tough as nails.” We create different faces for different moments and relationships in our lives, such as our face as a parent, college student, coworker, or homeless-shelter volunteer.

Sometimes your face is a **mask**, a public self designed to strategically veil your private self ([Goffman, 1959](#)). Masks can be dramatic, such as when Rick Welts hid his grief for weeks over the loss of his longtime partner. Or masks can be subtle—

the parent who acts calmly in front of an injured child so the youngster doesn't become frightened. Some masks are designed to inflate one's estimation in the eyes of others. One study found that 90 percent of college students surveyed admitted telling at least one lie to impress a person in whom they were romantically interested ([Rowatt et al., 1998](#)). Other masks are crafted so that people underestimate us and our abilities ([Gibson & Sachau, 2000](#)), like acting disorganized or unprepared before a debate in the hope that your opponent will let their guard down.

Regardless of the form our face takes—a genuine representation of our private self, or a mask designed to hide this self from others—Goffman argued that we often form a strong emotional attachment to our face because it represents the person we most want others to see when they communicate with and relate to us.

Sometimes after we've created a certain face, information is revealed that contradicts it, causing us to lose face ([Goffman, 1955](#)). Losing face provokes feelings of shame, humiliation, and sadness—in a word, **embarrassment**. For example, when we were attending one of our sons' high school symphony performances, the piece they were playing had a brief period of quiet between movements. Mistaking the pause for the end of the song, we both burst into loud applause—only to realize that we were the sole people clapping, as a tide of laughter rippled through the audience and the orchestra.

While losing face can cause intense embarrassment, this is not the only cost. When others see us lose face, they may begin to question whether the public self with which they're familiar is a genuine reflection of our private self. For example, suppose your workplace face is "dedicated, hardworking employee." You ask your boss if there's extra work to be done, help fellow coworkers, show up early, stay late, and so forth. But if you tell your manager that you need your afternoon schedule cleared to work on an urgent report and then they see you bingeing Netflix on your computer, they'll undoubtedly view your actions as inconsistent with your communication. Your face as the "hardworking employee" will be called into question, as will your credibility.

self-reflection

Recall an embarrassing interpersonal encounter. How did you try to restore your lost face? Were you successful? If you could relive the encounter, what would you say and do differently?

Because losing face can damage others' impressions of you, maintaining face during interpersonal interactions is extremely important. How can you effectively maintain face?³ Use words and actions consistent with the face you're trying to craft. From one moment to the next and from one behavior to the next, your interpersonal communication and behaviors must complement your face. Make sure your communication and behaviors mesh with the knowledge that others already have about you. If you say or do things that contradict what others know is true about you, they'll see your face as false. For example, if your neighbor already knows you don't like them, they are likely to be skeptical the next time you warmly greet them and adopt the face of "friendly, caring neighbor."

Finally, for your face to be maintained, realize that your communication and behavior are influenced by factors over which you have only limited control, such as objects and events in the surrounding environment. For example, imagine that your romantic partner—who serves in the military—has recently been deployed overseas. The two of you agree to video chat when you can, and your first scheduled chat is Friday at 5 p.m. But when you're driving home Friday afternoon, your car breaks down. Making things worse, your phone goes dead because you forgot to charge it, so there is no way to contact your partner. By the time you get home and online, your partner has already signed off, leaving a perplexed message regarding your "neglect." To restore face, you'll need to explain what happened.

Of course, all of us fall from grace on occasion. What can you do to regain face following an embarrassing incident? Promptly acknowledge that the event happened, admit responsibility for any of your actions that contributed to the event, apologize for your actions and for disappointing others, and move to maintain your face again. Apologies are fairly successful at reducing people's negative

impressions and the anger that may have been triggered, especially when such apologies avoid excuses that contradict what people know really happened ([Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994](#)). People who deny their inconsistencies or who blame others for their lapses are judged much more harshly.

skills practice

Apologizing

Creating a skillful apology

1. Watch for instances in which you offend or disappoint someone.
2. Acknowledge the incident and admit your responsibility, face-to-face (if possible) or by phone.
3. Apologize for any harm you have caused.
4. Avoid pseudo-apologies that minimize the event or shift accountability, like “I’m sorry you overreacted” or “I’m sorry you think I’m to blame.”
5. Express gratitude for the person’s understanding if they accept your apology.

DISCLOSING YOUR PRIVATE SELF

In Greta Gerwig’s award-winning 2017 film *Lady Bird*, the title character is a teen struggling with who she is and what she wants out of life. Although Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson shares many points of connection with her mother—including their shared love of their hometown, Sacramento—her mother’s relentless criticism causes even casual interactions to escalate into conflict. Their relationship is further fractured when Lady Bird accepts admission to an East Coast university without having told her mom that she applied out-of-state. Heartbroken that her daughter will soon be leaving, her mother struggles to share her feelings with Lady Bird by writing a letter—but ends up throwing multiple failed attempts into the trash. In the closing scenes, Lady Bird’s father shares with Lady Bird her mother’s discarded letter drafts—which he retrieved from the garbage—and Lady Bird calls her mother, leaving a voice mail. “Hey Mom, did you feel emotional, the first time you drove in Sacramento? I did, and I wanted to tell you, but we weren’t really talking when it

happened. All those bends I've known my whole life, and stores, and ... the whole thing. But I wanted to tell you ... *I love you. Thank you.*"



Lifestyle pictures/Alamy

Lady Bird and her mother continually struggle to communicate their true feelings to each other. Have you ever been in a relationship where you had difficulty expressing your self?



Self-Disclosure

We all can think of situations in which we've struggled with sharing deeply personal feelings, thoughts, or experiences with others, like Lady Bird and her mother. Revealing private information about ourselves is known as [**self-disclosure**](#) ([Wheless, 1978](#)), and it plays a critical role in interpersonal communication and relationship development. According to the [**interpersonal process model of intimacy**](#), the closeness we feel toward others in our relationships is created through two things: self-disclosure and the responsiveness of listeners to our disclosure ([Reis & Patrick, 1996](#)). Relationships are intimate when *both* partners share private information with each other and each partner responds to the other's disclosures with understanding, caring, and support ([Reis & Shaver, 1988](#)).



LaunchPad Video

Self-Disclosure

Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



Do you ever find it easier to self-disclose to a stranger? Why or why not? How much self-disclosure do you expect from a close friend, and when, if ever, is it too much?

Four practical implications flow from this model. First, like Lady Bird and her mother, you can't have intimacy in a relationship without disclosure and supportiveness. If you, like Lady Bird, view a friend, family member, or lover as being nonreceptive or nonsupportive, your relationship with that person will be less intimate as a result. Second, if listeners are nonsupportive *after* a disclosure, the impact on intimacy can be devastating. Think about an instance in which you shared something personal with a friend, but they responded by ridiculing or judging you. How did this reaction make you feel? Chances are it substantially widened the emotional distance between the two of you. Third, just because you share your thoughts and feelings with someone doesn't mean that you have an intimate relationship. For example, if you regularly chat with a classmate and tell them all your secrets, but they never do the same in return, your relationship isn't intimate, it's one-sided. In a similar fashion, tweeting or posting personal thoughts and feelings and having people read them don't create intimate relationships. Intimacy only exists when *both* people share with and support each other.

And finally, not all disclosures boost intimacy. Research suggests that one of the most damaging events that can happen in interpersonal relationships is a partner's sharing information that the other person finds inappropriate and perplexing ([Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985](#)). This is especially true in relationships where partners are already struggling with a challenging problem or experiencing a painful transition. For example, during divorce proceedings, parents commonly disclose negative and demeaning information about each other to their children. The parents may see this sharing as stress-relieving or "cathartic" ([Afifi et al., 2007](#)), but these disclosures only intensify the children's mental and physical distress and make them feel caught between their two parents ([Koerner et al., 2002](#)).

Differences in Disclosure

Researchers have conducted thousands of self-disclosure studies over the past 40 years ([Tardy & Dindia, 1997](#)). These studies suggest four important facts regarding how people self-disclose.

First, in any culture, people vary widely in the degree to which they self-disclose. Some people are naturally transparent, whereas others are more opaque ([Jourard, 1964](#)). Trying to force someone who has a different idea of self-disclosure than yours to open up or be more discreet not only is presumptuous but can damage the relationship ([Luft, 1970](#)).

Second, people disclose differently online than they do face-to-face, and such differences depend on the intimacy of the relationship. When people are first getting to know each other, they typically disclose more quickly, broadly, and deeply when interacting online than face-to-face. One reason for this is that online encounters lack nonverbal cues (like tone of voice and facial expressions), so the consequences of such disclosure seem less noticeable, and words take on more importance and intensity than those exchanged during face-to-face interactions ([Joinson, 2001](#)). The result is that we often overestimate the intimacy of online interactions and relationships with acquaintances or strangers. However, as relationships mature and intimacy increases, the relationship between the modality of communication and disclosure reverses. Individuals in close relationships typically use online

communication for more trivial exchanges (such as coordinating schedules, updating each other on mundane daily events), and reserve their deeper, more meaningful discussions for when they are face-to-face ([Ruppel, 2014](#)).

To help ensure competent online disclosure, scholar Malcolm Parks offers the following advice: Be wary of the emotionally seductive qualities of online interaction. Disclose information slowly and with caution. Remember that online communication is both public and permanent; hence, secrets that you tweet, post, text, or email are *no longer secrets*. Few experiences in the interpersonal realm are more uncomfortable than “post-cyber-disclosure panic”—that awful moment when you wonder who else might be reading the innermost thoughts you just revealed in an email or a text message to a friend ([Barnes, 2001](#)).

Third, self-disclosure appears to promote mental health and relieve stress ([Tardy, 2000](#)). When the information is troubling, keeping it inside can escalate your stress levels substantially, resulting in problematic mental and physical symptoms and ailments ([Kelly & McKillop, 1996](#); [Pennebaker, 1997](#)). Of course, the flip side of disclosing troubling secrets to others is that people might react negatively and you might become more vulnerable.

Finally, and importantly, little evidence exists that supports the stereotype that men can't disclose their feelings in relationships. In close same-sex friendships, for example, both men and women disclose deeply and broadly ([Shelton et al., 2010](#)). And in cross-sex romantic involvements, men often disclose at levels equal to or greater than their female partners ([Canary et al., 1997](#)). At the same time, however, both men and women feel more comfortable disclosing to female than to male recipients ([Dindia & Allen, 1992](#)). Teenagers are more likely to disclose to mothers and best female friends than to fathers and best male friends—suggesting that adolescents may perceive females as more empathetic and understanding than males ([Garcia & Geisler, 1988](#)).



diego_cervo/Getty Images

Contrary to stereotypes, men are fully capable of self-disclosure and forming close emotional bonds with other men.

THE RELATIONAL SELF

One of the reasons we carefully craft the presentation of our self is to create interpersonal relationships. We present our self to acquaintances, coworkers, friends, family members, and romantic partners, and through our interpersonal communication, relationships are fostered, maintained, and sometimes ended. Within each of these relationships, how close we feel to one another is defined largely by how much of our self we reveal to others, and vice versa.

Managing the self in interpersonal relationships isn't easy. Exposing our self to others can make us feel vulnerable, provoking tension between how much to reveal versus how much to veil. Even in the closest of relationships, certain aspects of the self remain hidden—from our partners as well as ourselves.

Opening Your Self to Others

In the movie *Shrek*, the ogre Shrek forges a friendship with a likable but occasionally irksome donkey ([Adamson & Jenson, 2001](#)). As their acquaintanceship deepens to friendship, Shrek tries to explain the nature of his inner self to his companion:

SHREK: For your information, there's a lot more to ogres than people think!

DONKEY: Example ... ?

SHREK: Example ... OK ... Um ... Ogres ... are like onions.

DONKEY: They stink?

SHREK: Yes ... NO!

DONKEY: Or they make you cry?

SHREK: No!

DONKEY: Oh ... You leave 'em out in the sun and they get all brown and start sprouting little white hairs!

SHREK: No! Layers! Onions have layers—OGRES have layers! Onions have layers! You get it!? We both have layers!

DONKEY: Ooohhhh ... you both have layers ... oh. You know, not everybody likes onions ... CAKE! Everybody loves cakes! Cakes have layers!



Dreamworks LLC/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock

Shrek at first appears to be a grumpy, unsociable loner—but over the course of his adventure with Donkey, more layers of his personality are revealed. Can you think of a time in your life when someone was not who they initially

seemed to be?

Shrek was not the first to use the onion as a metaphor for self. In fact, the idea that revealing the self to others involves peeling back or penetrating layers was first suggested by psychologists [Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor \(1973\)](#) in their [social penetration theory](#). Like Shrek, Altman and Taylor envisioned the self as an “onion-skin structure,” consisting of sets of layers.

At the *outermost, peripheral layers* of your self are demographic characteristics such as birthplace, age, gender, and ethnicity (see [Figure 2.3](#)). Discussion of these characteristics dominates first conversations with new acquaintances: What’s your name? What’s your major? Where are you from? In the *intermediate layers* reside your attitudes and opinions about music, politics, food, entertainment, and other such matters. Deep within the “onion” are the *central layers* of your self—core characteristics such as self-awareness, self-concept, self-esteem, personal values, fears, and distinctive personality traits. We’ll discuss these in more detail in [Chapter 3](#).

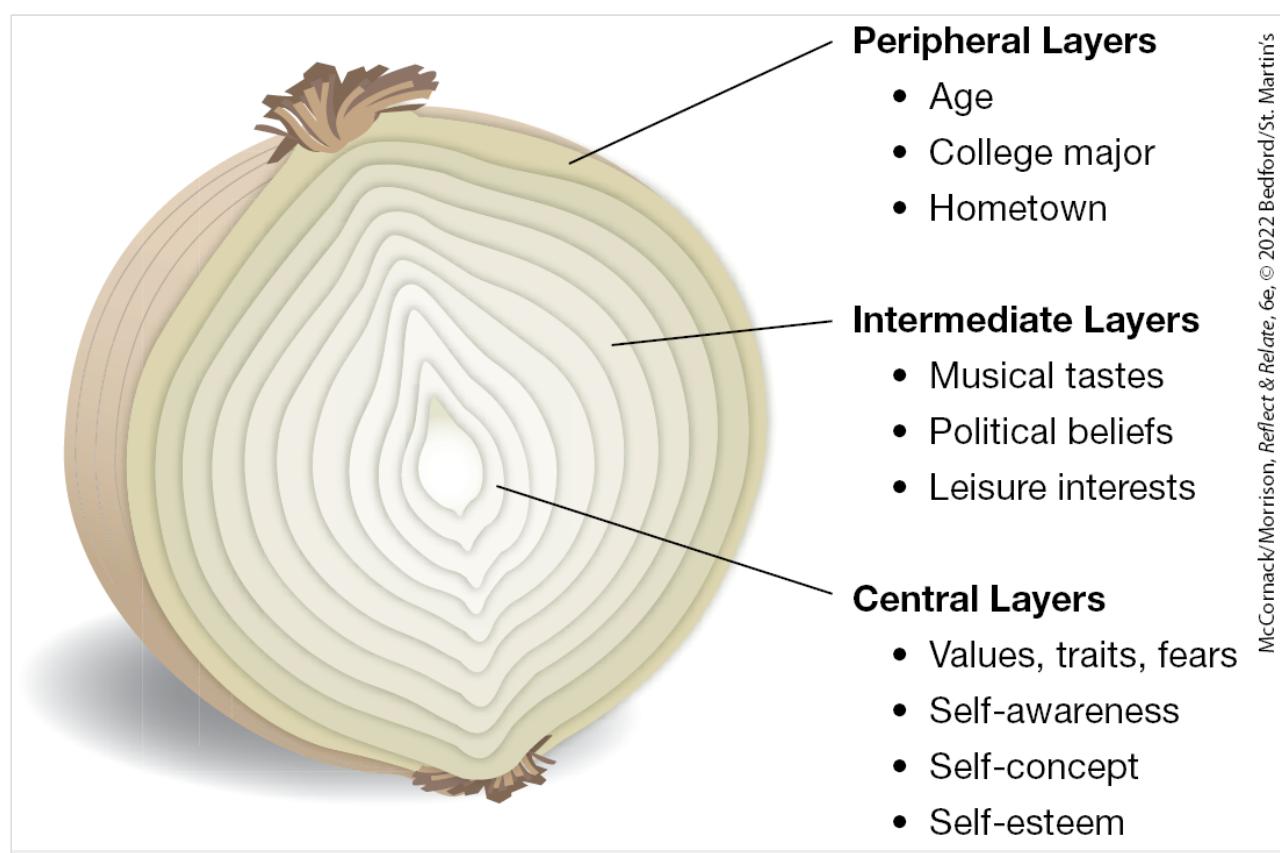


figure 2.3 The Layers of Self



The notion of layers of self helps explain the development of interpersonal relationships, as well as how we distinguish between casual and close involvements. As relationships progress, partners communicate increasingly personal information to each other. This allows them to mutually penetrate each other's peripheral, then intermediate, and finally central selves. Relationship development is like slowly pushing a pin into an onion: it proceeds layer by layer, without skipping layers.

The revealing of selves that occurs during relationship development involves both breadth and depth. *Breadth* is the number of different aspects of self each partner reveals at each layer—the insertion of more and more pins into the onion, so to speak. *Depth* involves how deeply into each other's self the partners have penetrated: Have you revealed only your peripheral self, or have you given the other person access into your intermediate or central selves as well?

Although social penetration occurs in all relationships, the rate at which it occurs isn't consistent. For example, some people let others in quickly, while others never grant access to certain elements of their selves no matter how long they know a person. The speed with which people grant each other access to the broader and deeper aspects of their selves depends on a variety of factors, including the attachment styles discussed earlier in the chapter. But in all relationships, depth and breadth of social penetration are intertwined with intimacy: the feeling of closeness and union that exists between us and our partners ([Mashek & Aron, 2004](#)). The more deeply and more broadly we penetrate into each other's selves, the more intimacy we feel; the more intimacy we feel, the more we allow each other access to broad and deep aspects of our selves ([Shelton et al., 2010](#)).



LaunchPad

Online Self-Quiz: Discover Your Attachment Style. To take this self-quiz, visit
LaunchPad: launchpadworks.com

Your Hidden and Revealed Self

The image of self and relationship development offered by social penetration theory suggests a relatively straightforward, linear evolution of intimacy, with partners gradually penetrating broadly and deeply into each other's selves over time. But in thinking about our selves and our relationships with others, two important questions arise: First, are we really aware of all aspects of our selves? Second, are we willing to grant others access to all aspects of our selves?

We can explore possible answers to these questions by looking at the model of the relational self called the Johari window (see [Figure 2.4](#)), which suggests that some "quadrants" of our selves are open to self-reflection and sharing with other people, while others remain hidden—to both ourselves and others.

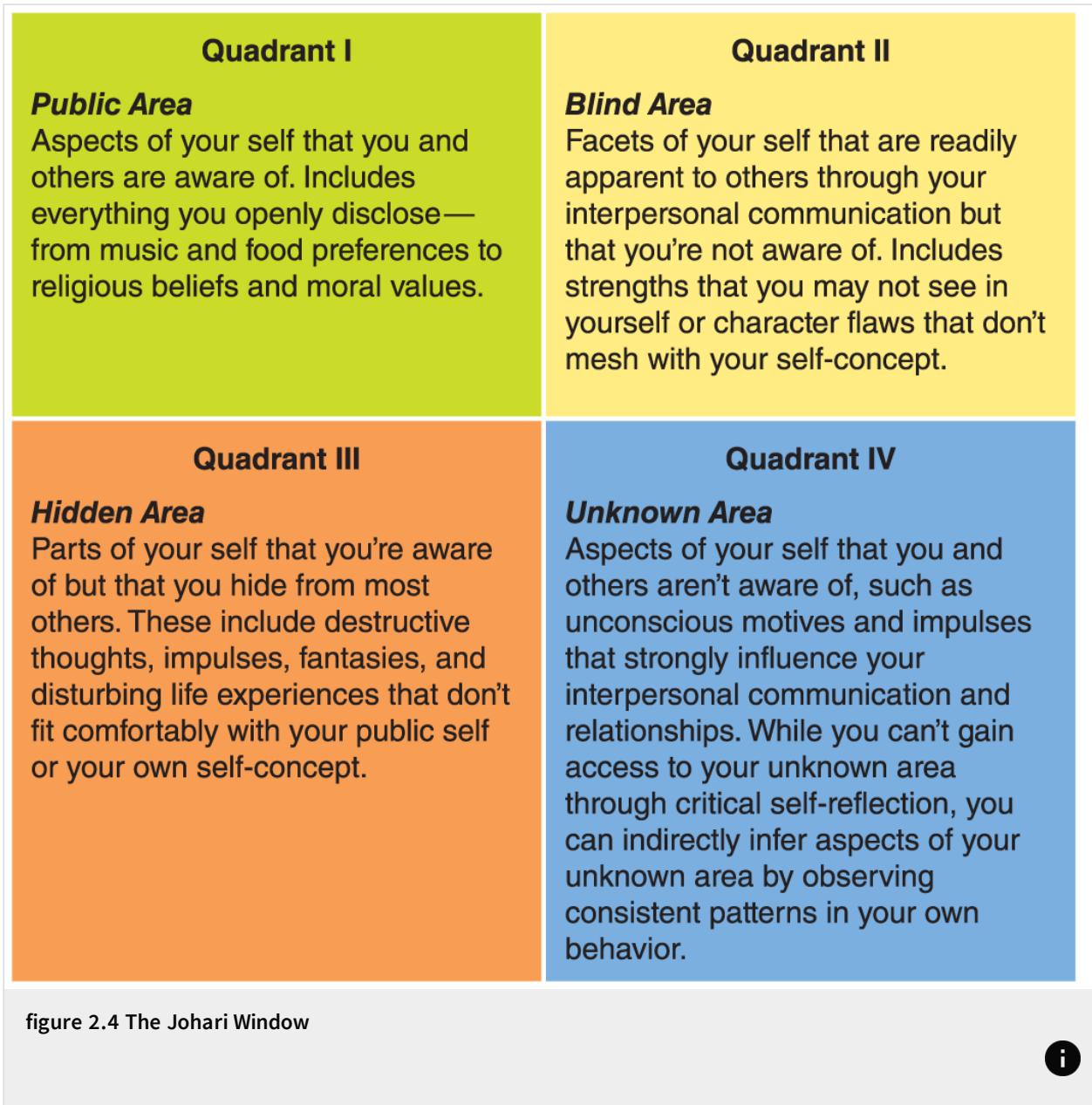


figure 2.4 The Johari Window



self-reflection

Consider your “blind area” of self. What strengths might you possess that you don’t recognize? What character flaws might exist that don’t mesh with your self-concept? How can you capitalize on these strengths and mend your flaws so that your interpersonal communication and relationships improve?

During the early stages of an interpersonal relationship and especially during first encounters, our *public area* of self is much smaller than our hidden area. As relationships progress, partners gain access to broader and deeper information about their selves; consequently, the public area expands, and the *hidden area* diminishes. The Johari window provides us with a useful alternative metaphor to social penetration. As relationships develop, we don't just let people "penetrate inward" to our central selves; we let them "peer into" more panes of the window, or parts of our selves, by revealing information that we previously hid from them.

As our interpersonal relationships develop and we increasingly share previously hidden information with our partners, our unknown and blind quadrants remain fairly stable. By their very nature, our unknown areas remain unknown throughout much of our lives. And for most of us, the blind area remains imperceptible. That's because our blind areas are defined by our deepest-rooted beliefs about ourselves—those beliefs that make up our self-concepts. Consequently, when others challenge us to open our eyes to our blind areas, we resist.

To improve our interpersonal communication, we must be able to see into our blind areas and then address the aspects within them that lead to incompetent communication and relationship challenges. But this isn't easy. After all, how can you correct misperceptions about yourself that you don't even know exist or flaws that you consider your greatest strengths? Delving into your blind area means challenging fundamental beliefs about yourself—subjecting your self-concept to hard scrutiny. The goal of this is to overturn your most treasured personal misconceptions. Most people accomplish this only over a long period of time and with the assistance of trustworthy and willing relationship partners.

COMPETENTLY DISCLOSING YOUR SELF

Based on all we know about self-disclosure, how can you improve your disclosure skills? Consider these recommendations for competent self-disclosure:

- **Follow the advice of Apollo: know your self.** Before disclosing, make sure that the aspects of your self you reveal to others are aspects that you want to

reveal and that you feel certain about. This is especially important when disclosing intimate feelings, such as romantic interest. When you disclose feelings about others directly to them, you affect their lives and relationship decisions. Consequently, you're ethically obligated to be certain about the truth of your own feelings before sharing them with others.

- **Know your audience.** Whether it's an Instagram post or an intimate face-to-face conversation with a friend, think carefully about how others will perceive your disclosure and how it will impact their thoughts and feelings about you. If you're unsure of the appropriateness of a disclosure, don't disclose. Instead of disclosing, talk more generally about the issue or topic first, gauging the person's level of comfort with the conversation before revealing deeper information.
- **Don't force others to self-disclose.** We often presume it's good for people to open up and share their secrets, particularly those that are troubling them. Although it's perfectly appropriate to let someone know you're available to listen, it's unethical and destructive to force or cajole others into sharing information against their will. People have reasons for not wanting to tell you things—just as you have reasons for protecting your own privacy.
- **Avoid gender stereotypes.** Don't fall into the trap of thinking that because someone is a woman she will disclose freely, or that because he's a man he's incapable of discussing his feelings. Men and women are more similar than different when it comes to disclosure. At the same time, be mindful of the tendency to feel more comfortable disclosing to women. Don't presume that because you're talking with a woman, it's appropriate for you to freely disclose.
- **Be sensitive to cultural differences.** When interacting with people from different backgrounds, disclose gradually. As with gender, avoid stereotypes. Don't presume disclosure patterns based on someone's culture.
- **Go slowly.** Share intermediate and central aspects of your self gradually and only after thorough discussion of peripheral information. Moving too quickly to discussion of your deepest fears, self-esteem concerns, and personal values not only increases your sense of vulnerability but also may make others uncomfortable enough to avoid you.

Now that we have explored how we present our public selves and disclose our private selves, let's consider another facet of how we communicate self, namely, how we present ourselves through social media.

The Social Media Self

Communicating competently on social media



Courtesy of Steve McCormack.

Even seemingly innocent profile photos can cause controversy and drama, depending on how people perceive them.



In July 2017, we finally—after several years—tackled the long-delayed project of cleaning out our garage. On the second day of this ordeal, Steve unearthed his long-lost compound bow, which he hadn't shot in years. Steve had never hunted, but for many years had enjoyed the meditative calm of archery. In the days that followed, he

snuck away to the backyard, for brief breaks from our garage work, and worked on reclaiming his target-shooting chops. After one particularly successful round, he took a selfie, which he then posted on social media. That's when the fun began. Many people "liked" the post; commenting on how it broadened their view of him ("I didn't know you shot bow!"). Others who saw the photo couldn't figure out what Steve was holding, prompting a lengthy, humorous thread regarding the nature of the "mystery object." Still others expressed criticism: "I didn't know you *hunted*!?" When Steve posted a response indicating that he *didn't* hunt, but that he just liked to target-shoot, his hunter friends pounced, posting, "What have you got against hunting?" Soon a social media scuffle arose on his pages regarding the morality of hunting. Disheartened that a simple selfie had caused such social media drama, Steve deleted the posts and hung his bow back up in the garage.

One of the most common ways we stay connected with each other is through social media, when we produce and share personal content online. Social media includes everything from social networking sites to virtual game worlds and blogs, and it's incredibly widespread: three and a half *billion* people engage in some form of social media ([We Are Social, 2019](#)). Thus, social media can be considered an integral part of most people's interpersonal lives, a "way of being" ([Kuss & Griffiths, 2017](#)).

SELF-PRESENTATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Given the universality of social media, it's no surprise that social networking sites have become *the* principal vehicles people use to express their identities to others. For people under the age of thirty, Instagram is the go-to site for self-presentation; more than 70 percent of young adults ages 18 to 24 years in the United States use Instagram on a regular basis ([Smith & Anderson, 2018](#)), and they do so because it's extremely flexible in allowing people to express their identities in multiple ways ([Lee & Borah, 2020](#)).

Social media provides us with unique benefits and challenges for self-presentation. When you talk with others face-to-face, people judge your public self based on your words as well as your appearance—your age, gender, clothing, facial expressions,

and so forth. Similarly, during a phone call, vocal cues—or how your voice sounds—help you and your conversation partner draw conclusions about each other. But on social media, these visual and vocal cues are radically restricted and more easily controlled. We carefully craft our photos and edit our tweets, texts, emails, and profile descriptions. We selectively self-present in ways that make us look good, without having to worry about verbal slipups or uncontrollable nervous habits ([Parks, 2007](#)).

People routinely present themselves on social media, through photos and written descriptions, in ways that amplify positive personality characteristics such as warmth, friendliness, and extraversion ([Vazire & Gosling, 2004](#)). Photos posted on social media typically show groups of friends, fostering the impression that the person in the photo is likable, fun, and popular ([Ellison et al., 2007](#)). These positive and highly selective depictions of self generally work as intended. Viewers of online profiles tend to form impressions of a profile's subject that match the subject's intended self-presentation ([Gosling et al., 2007](#)). So, for example, if you post profile photos and descriptions in an attempt to portray yourself as “entertaining” and “the life of the party,” this is the self that others will likely perceive.

Arguably the most impactful and popular means of self-presentation on social medi