

chapter review



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LearningCurve Adaptive Quizzes

Video clips that help you understand interpersonal communication

key terms

[communication](#)

[message](#)

[interaction](#)

[modalities](#)

[sensory channels](#)

[contexts](#)

[linear communication model](#)

[sender](#)

[noise](#)

[receiver](#)

[interactive communication model](#)

[feedback](#)

[fields of experience](#)

[transactional communication model](#)

[interpersonal communication](#)

[dyadic](#)

[intrapersonal communication](#)

[impersonal communication](#)

[I-Thou](#)
[I-It](#)
[meta-communication](#)
[self-presentation goals](#)
[instrumental goals](#)
[relationship goals](#)
[communication skills](#)
[appropriateness](#)
[phubbing](#)
[effectiveness](#)
[ethics](#)
[gender](#)
[sexual orientation](#)

 You can watch brief, illustrative videos of these terms and test your understanding of the concepts in LaunchPad.

key concepts

What Is Communication?

- The **message** is the basic unit of **communication**. We exchange messages during **interactions** with others, **contexts** shape how we create and interpret messages, and messages are conveyed through a variety of modalities.
- The **linear communication model** describes the components necessary for communication to occur. **Senders** communicate messages to **receivers** that may be misinterpreted due to **noise**. The **interactive communication model** adds **feedback** and **fields of experience**. The **transactional communication model** presents the notion that communication participants collaboratively create meaning.

What Is Interpersonal Communication?

- **Dyadic** communication allows us to distinguish **interpersonal communication** from **intrapersonal communication**.
- Interpersonal communication changes, and is changed by, participants' emotions, thoughts, behavior, and relationships.
- Interpersonal communication is characterized by four principles: it has content and relationship information, it can be intentional or unintentional, it's irreversible, and it's dynamic. It can be used for fulfilling a hierarchy of needs and pursuing **self-presentation**, **instrumental**, and **relationship goals**.

What Is Interpersonal Communication Competence?

- People who demonstrate **appropriateness**, **effectiveness**, and **ethics** in achieving their interpersonal goals are interpersonally competent.
- For competent technologically mediated communication, choose your modality wisely, don't assume mediated communication is always more efficient, presume your posts are public, remember that your posts are permanent, and practice the art of creating drafts.

Issues in Interpersonal Communication

- Relevant topics include culture, **gender** and **sexual orientation**, mediated communication, and challenging issues in interpersonal relationships.

CHAPTER 2

Considering Self



Photo by Scott Rosenfeld

By deepening your self-understanding, you can begin to clarify your thoughts and feelings about your self.



chapter outline

[The Components of Self](#)

[The Sources of Self](#)

[Communicating Your Self](#)

[The Social Media Self](#)

[Improving Your Self](#)



LearningCurve can help you review the material in this chapter. Go to

LaunchPad: launchpadworks.com

Artist Eric Staib describes his 2002 painting *labeled* as a self-portrait. “It depicts my feelings about how my peers saw me when I was growing up. The hands pointing, words said under people’s breath. You can tell what they’re thinking: you’re an idiot, you’re stupid, you’re a joke.”¹

By the time Eric was in third grade, he knew he was different. Whereas his classmates progressed rapidly in reading and writing, Eric couldn’t make sense of words on the written page. But it wasn’t until fifth grade that Eric was finally given a label for his difference: learning disabled, or LD. The LD label stained Eric’s sense of self, making him feel ashamed. His low self-esteem spread outward, constraining his communication and relationships. “My whole approach was *Don’t get noticed!* I’d slouch down in class, hide in my seat. And I would never open up to people. I let nobody in.”

Frustrated with the seemingly insurmountable challenges of reading and writing, Eric channeled intense energy into art. By eleventh grade, Eric had the reading and writing abilities of a fifth grader but managed to pass his classes through hard work and artistic ability. He graduated from high school with a D average.

Many of Eric’s peers with learning disabilities had turned to substance abuse and dropped out of school, but Eric pursued his education further, taking classes at a local community college. There, something happened that transformed his view of his self, his self-esteem, and the entire course of his life. While taking his first written exam of the semester, Eric knew the answers, but he couldn’t write them down. No matter how hard he focused, he

couldn't convert the knowledge in his head into written words. Rather than complete the exam, he wrote the story of his disability on the answer sheet, including his struggles with reading and writing and the pain associated with being labeled LD. He turned in his exam and left. Eric's professor took his exam to the college dean, and the two of them called Eric to the dean's office. They told him, "You need help, and we're going to help you." Their compassion changed Eric's life. Eric's professor arranged for Eric to meet with a learning specialist, who immediately diagnosed him as dyslexic. As Eric explains, "For the first time in my life, I had a label for myself other than 'learning disabled.' To me, the LD label meant I couldn't learn. But dyslexia was different. It could be overcome. The specialist taught me strategies for working with my dyslexia, and gave me my most important tool—my Franklin Spellchecker—to check spellings. But most importantly, I was taught that it was OK to be dyslexic."

Armed with an improving sense of self, Eric went from hiding to asserting himself, "from low self-esteem to being comfortable voicing my opinion, from fear to confidence." That confidence led him to transfer to a Big Ten university, where he graduated with a degree in studio arts, percussion, and horticulture. He subsequently earned a postgraduate degree in K-12 art education, graduating with a straight-A average.

Eric Staib is now an art instructor in the Midwest and was a 2006 recipient of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Power of Art Award, given to the top arts educators in the country each year. He also teaches instructors how to use art to engage students with learning disabilities. What means the most to him is the opportunity to pass down the legacy of his personal transformation. "When I think about my dyslexia, it's really incredible. What was my greatest personal punishment is now the most profound gift I have to offer to others."

Every word you've ever spoken during an encounter, every act of kindness or cruelty you've committed, has the same root source—your self. When you look inward, you are peering into the wellspring from which all your interpersonal actions flow. But even as your self influences your interpersonal communication, it is shaped by your communication as well. Through communicating with others, we learn who we are, how others perceive us, and how we should act. This means that the starting

point for improving your communication is understanding your self. In this way, you can begin to clarify your thoughts and feelings about your self; comprehend how these are linked to your interpersonal communication; and develop strategies for enhancing your sense of self, your communication skills, and your interpersonal relationships.

In this chapter, we explore the source of all interpersonal communication: the self. You'll learn:

- The components of self, as well as how critical self-reflection can be used to improve your communication skills and your self-esteem
- The ways in which gender, family, and culture shape your sense of self
- How to present and maintain a positive self
- The choices involved in communicating self, including managing self in relationships, and suggestions for successful self-disclosure
- The importance of online self-presentation

The Components of Self

Your self is the driving force of your communication

At Delphi in ancient Greece, the temple of the sun-god Apollo was adorned with the inscription *Gnothi se auton* – “Know thyself.” According to legend, when one of the seven sages of Greece, Chilon of Sparta, asked Apollo, “What is best for people?” the deity responded with that simple admonition. More than 2,500 years later, these words still ring true, especially in the realm of interpersonal communication and relationships. To understand our interactions with others and the bonds we forge, we must first comprehend ourselves. But what exactly is “thyself” that we need to know?

The **self** is an evolving composite of self-awareness, self-concept, and self-esteem. Although each of us experiences the self as singular (“*This* is who I am”), it actually is made up of three distinct yet integrated components that continually evolve over time, based on your life experiences.

SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is the ability to view yourself as a unique person distinct from your surrounding environment and to reflect on your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. That is, you are able to turn a lens on yourself and examine the resulting image that you see. According to sociologist [George Herbert Mead \(1934\)](#), self-awareness helps you develop a strong sense of your self because during interpersonal encounters, you monitor your own behaviors and form impressions of who you are from such observations. As a result, your sense of self may vary by situation, such as home versus school, and relationally, such as close friend versus classmate ([Fiske & Taylor, 2017](#)). For example, your best friend texts you that they failed an important exam. You feel bad, so you text a comforting response. Your self-

awareness of your compassion and your observation of your kindhearted message lead you to think, “I’m a caring and supportive friend.”

LaunchPad Video

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Self-Monitoring

Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



Does this video show a low self-monitor or high self-monitor? Please explain your reasoning. Have you ever changed your behavior after self-monitoring? If so, under what circumstances?

When you use your self-awareness to assess how well your communication matches situational norms, you are engaged in **self-monitoring**. Some individuals are keenly self-aware of whether or not their behaviors and communication are well-suited to the situation they are in ([Giles & Street, 1994](#)). Known as high self-monitors, these individuals prefer situations in which clear expectations exist regarding how they’re supposed to communicate, and they possess both the ability and the desire to alter their behaviors to fit any type of social situation. In contrast, low self-monitors prefer encounters in which they can just “act like themselves” and say what they think and feel, without having to scrutinize their communication to see whether it abides by norms ([Oyamot et al., 2010](#)). As a consequence, high self-

monitors are often judged as more adaptive and skilled communicators than low self-monitors ([Gangestad & Snyder, 2000](#)). However, high self-monitoring may have its drawbacks as well. For instance, people who are chronically lonely tend to suppress their expression of emotions, and research suggests that high self-monitors are more likely than low self-monitors to suppress their emotional expression in this way ([Smith et al., 2019](#)). This means that high self-monitors may “mask” feelings of loneliness—“putting on a happy face” when in actuality they are profoundly sad—which can make it difficult for others to tell that they are feeling lonely. Consequently, loved ones of high self-monitors may face a wellness challenge: because they can’t look to the person’s displayed emotions for guidance regarding their true inner states of being, they must instead try to create a context in which it’s situationally appropriate to share such feelings, and then ask direct questions about those feelings. Our recommendation is to initiate such encounters face-to-face without other people around in a quiet, private space in which the high self-monitor feels they can safely “let their guard down.”

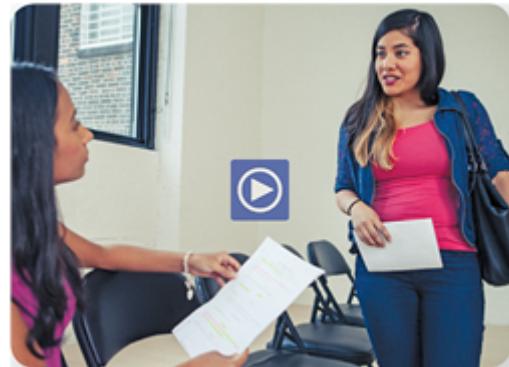
As we’re watching and evaluating our own actions, we also engage in [social comparison](#): observing and assigning meaning to others’ behavior and then comparing it with ours. Social comparison has a particularly potent effect on self when we compare ourselves to people we wish to emulate. When we compare favorably when measured against respected others, we think well of ourselves; when we don’t compare favorably, we think less of ourselves.

LaunchPad Video

launchpadworks.com

Social Comparison

Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



i

What aspects of your self are you more likely to compare with others? How does this impact your self-awareness?

Want to see more? Check out LaunchPad for a clip on **self-fulfilling prophecies**.

You can greatly enhance your interpersonal communication by practicing a targeted kind of self-awareness known as *critical self-reflection*. To engage in critical self-reflection, ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I thinking and feeling?
- Why am I thinking and feeling this way?
- How am I communicating?
- How are my thoughts and feelings influencing my communication?
- How can I improve my thoughts, feelings, and communication?

The ultimate goal of critical self-reflection is embodied in the last question: How can I *improve*? Improving your interpersonal communication is possible only when you accurately understand how your self drives your communication behavior. In the remainder of this chapter, and in the marginal *Self-Reflection* exercises you'll find throughout this book, we help you make links between your self and your communication.

SELF-CONCEPT

Self-concept is your overall perception of who you are. If self-awareness is your ability to focus a lens upon yourself, self-concept is the picture taken through that lens. Your self-concept is based on the beliefs, attitudes, and values you have about yourself. *Beliefs* are convictions that certain things are true—for example, “I’m an excellent student.” *Attitudes* are evaluative appraisals, such as “I’m happy with how I’m doing in school.” *Values* represent enduring principles that guide your interpersonal actions—for example, “I think it’s wrong to cheat on schoolwork.”



Tetra Images, LLC/Alamy

Our self-concept is influenced by our beliefs about how others view us.

Your self-concept is shaped by a host of factors, including your family, friends, gender, and culture ([Vallacher et al., 2002](#)). As we learned in the opening story about Eric Staib, one of the biggest influences on your self-concept is the labels others put on you. How do others’ impressions of you shape your self-concept? Sociologist [Charles Horton Cooley \(1902\)](#) argued that it’s like looking at yourself in the “looking glass” (mirror). When you stand in front of it, you consider your

appearance through the eyes of others. Do they see you as attractive? Confident? Approachable? Seeing yourself in this fashion—and thinking about how others must see you—has a powerful effect on how you think about your physical self. Cooley noted that the same process shapes our broader self-concept: it is based in part on your beliefs about how others see you, including their perceptions and evaluations of you (“People think I’m talented, and they like me”) and your emotional response to those beliefs (“I feel good/bad about how others see me”). According to Cooley, when we define our self-concepts by considering how others see us, we are creating a [looking-glass self](#).

self-reflection

Consider your looking-glass self. What kinds of labels do your friends use to describe you? What kinds of labels does your family use? How do you feel about others’ impressions of you? In what ways do these feelings shape your interpersonal communication and relationships?

Some people have clear and stable self-concepts; that is, they know exactly who they are, and their sense of self endures across time, situations, and relationships. Others struggle with their identity, remaining uncertain about who they really are, what they believe, and how they feel about themselves. The degree to which you have a clearly defined, consistent, and enduring sense of self is known as [self-concept clarity](#). ([Campbell et al., 1996](#)), and it has a powerful effect on your health, happiness, and outlook on life. Research suggests that people who have a stronger, clearer, sense of self (i.e., higher self-concept clarity) have higher self-esteem, are less likely to experience negative emotions (both in response to stressful situations and in general), are less likely to experience chronic depression ([Lee-Flynn et al., 2011](#)), and are more likely to self-disclose—that is, to reveal personal information about themselves ([Tajmiriyahi & Ickes, 2020](#)). In simple terms, high self-concept clarity helps you weather the unpredictability and instability of the world around you.

Keep two implications in mind when considering your self-concept and its impact on your interpersonal communication. First, because your self-concept consists of

deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and values, changing it may be challenging. For example, if you've long thought of yourself as "not a creative person," it may take a lot of time and experiences being successfully creative before your self-concept begins to shift ([Fiske & Taylor, 1991](#)).

Second, our self-concepts often lead us to create **self-fulfilling prophecies** – predictions about future interactions that lead us to behave in ways that ensure the interaction unfolds as we predicted. Some self-fulfilling prophecies ignite positive events. For instance, you may see yourself as professionally capable and highly skilled at communicating, which leads you to predict job interview success. During an interview, your prophecy of success leads you to communicate in a calm and confident fashion, which impresses the interviewers. In turn, their reaction confirms your prophecy. Other self-fulfilling prophecies elicit negative events. Steve once had a friend who felt unattractive and undesirable, leading him to predict interpersonal failure at social gatherings. When he would accompany Steve to a party, he would spend the entire time in a corner staring morosely into a drink. Needless to say, no one tried to talk to Steve's friend, leading him to complain at the end of the evening, "See, I told you no one would want to talk to me!"

skills practice

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Overcoming negative self-fulfilling prophecies

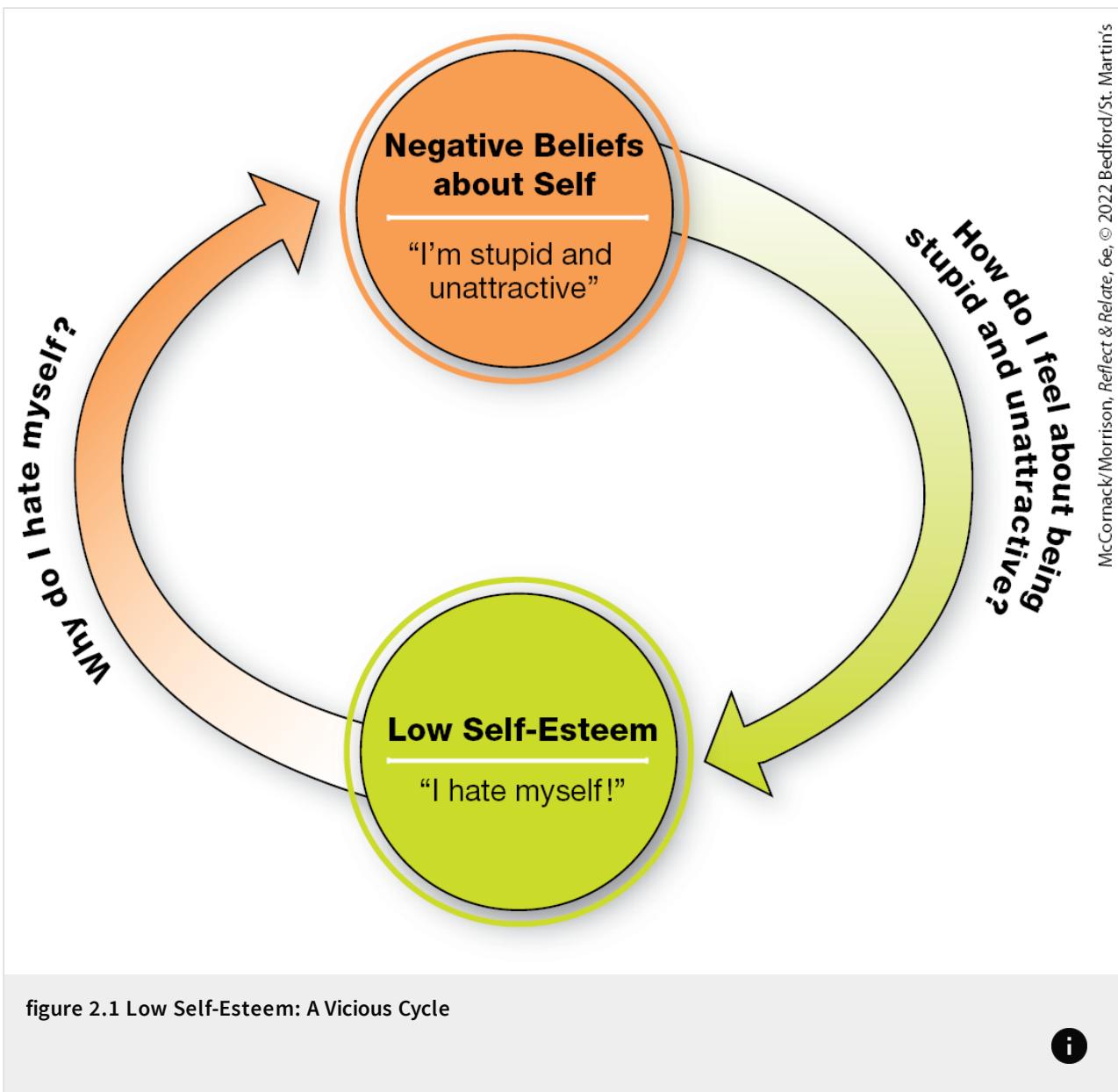
1. Identify a communication problem you experience often (e.g., social anxiety).
2. Describe situations in which it occurs, including what you think, say, and do.
3. Use critical self-reflection to identify how your thoughts and feelings shape your communication.
4. List things you could say and do that would generate positive results.
5. In similar situations, block negative thoughts and feelings that arise, and focus your attention on practicing the positive behaviors you listed.

SELF-ESTEEM

After our self-awareness allows us to turn a lens on ourselves, and we develop the picture by defining our self-concepts, **self-esteem** is the overall value, positive or negative, that we assign to what we see. Whereas self-awareness prompts us to ask, “Who am I?” and self-concept is the answer to that question, self-esteem is the answer to the follow-up question: “Given who I am, what’s my evaluation of my self?” When your overall estimation of self is negative, you’ll have a meager sense of self-worth and suffer from low self-esteem. When your evaluation of self is positive, you’ll enjoy high self-esteem.

Your self-esteem strongly shapes your interpersonal communication, relationships, and physical and mental health ([Krauss et al., 2020](#)). People with high self-esteem report greater life satisfaction; enjoy more social acceptance; communicate more positively and warmly with others; experience more happiness in their relationships; and exhibit greater leadership ability, athleticism, and academic performance than do people with low self-esteem ([Cameron & Granger, 2019](#)). High self-esteem also helps insulate people from stress, anxiety, and depression ([Lee-Flynn et al., 2011](#); [Xie et al., 2020](#)).

By contrast, people with low self-esteem are more likely to believe that friends and romantic partners think negatively of them and, as a consequence, are less likely to share their thoughts and feelings with others. This lack of expressivity ultimately undermines their close relationships ([Gaucher et al., 2012](#)). In addition, low self-esteem individuals experience negative emotions and depression more frequently ([Orth et al., 2009](#)), resulting in destructive feedback loops like the one depicted in [Figure 2.1](#).



Measuring Up to Your Own Standards

The key to bolstering your self-esteem is understanding its roots. **Self-discrepancy theory** suggests that one factor influencing your self-esteem, and associated feelings, is how your self-concept compares to two mental standards ([Higgins, 1987](#) ; [Higgins et al., 1985](#) ; [Mason et al., 2019](#)). The first is your *ideal self*, the characteristics (mental, physical, emotional, material, and spiritual) that you wish to possess—the “perfect you.” Kelly describes this as your “fairy godmother” self: that is, if your fairy godmother flew down, and waved her magic wand—instantly transforming you into whoever you dream of being—who would that be? The second

is your *ought self*, the person you feel responsible or obligated to be. You can think of this as your “should be” or “supposed to be” self. Importantly, your ideal self and ought self may clash. If you are a perfectionist, for example, you may think that you *should* be “perfect” (“ought self”), but you might *wish* (“ideal self”) that you didn’t feel this constant pressure. Alternatively, your ideal self and your ought self may match, if the person you wish you were is also the person you feel obligated to be.

Both ideal and ought self standards can be guided by two different perspectives: *your* perspective and the perspectives of *important others*, such as your family, friends, colleagues, coaches, or romantic partners. To illustrate this, think about your choice of major—or your thoughts about potential majors, if you haven’t yet selected one. How is your thinking influenced by who your parents *wish* you could be—your “ideal self” from their perspective? Or by what they say you’re *obligated* to do (“ought self”)? Keep in mind these could be different—such as when your parents *wish* you could pursue a career in art or music, but feel that you’re *obligated*, given family economic challenges, to major in something more “practical” in terms of future earning power. Now consider: is it what you *wish*, or what you feel you’re *supposed* to do? Each of these standards and perspectives can influence your self-esteem.

self-QUIZ

Test Your Ideal and Ought Self-Discrepancies

Think about your self-concept. List three aspects of your self that are central to your self-concept. For **each** of the three aspects, select the number that best describes how you feel for each question below.

For this aspect I am:

very close to 1 2 3 4 5 very far away from
who I would ideally like to be

very much like 1 2 3 4 5 not at all like
who I aspire to be

exactly like 1 2 3 4 5 completely unlike
who I hope to be

very close to 1 2 3 4 5 very far away from
who I feel I *should* be

very much like 1 2 3 4 5 not at all like
who I feel obligated to be

quite similar to 1 2 3 4 5 quite dissimilar to
who I have a responsibility to be

Add up your numbers for the top three questions. This is your ideal self-discrepancy. Then add up your numbers for the bottom three questions. This is your ought self-discrepancy. Now repeat the questions for *each* of the other two aspects of your self that you listed.

Scoring: For each aspect of your self, a score of 3–5 indicates low self-discrepancy, 6–10 indicates moderate self-discrepancy, and 11 or above indicates high self-discrepancy for that aspect. You can repeat the quiz, rating yourself from an important other person's perspective instead of your own.

According to self-discrepancy theory, you feel happy and content when your self-concept matches both ideal and ought selves ([Katz & Farrow, 2000](#)). However, when your self-concept is inferior to both ideal and ought selves, you experience a discrepancy and are likely to suffer low self-esteem ([Veale et al., 2003](#)).

Research on self-discrepancy theory documents three interesting facts about discrepancies ([Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006](#); [Phillips & Silvia, 2005](#)). First, women report larger ideal self-discrepancies than do men. This isn't surprising, given the degree to which women are deluged with advertising and other media emphasizing unattainable standards for female beauty (see *Focus on Culture* later in this chapter). Second, for both women and men, self-discrepancies impact an array of emotions and feelings linked to self-esteem. For instance, people who feel greater self-discrepancies also experience greater psychological distress, interpersonal stress, negative emotions—such as guilt, shame, and anger—and lower self-esteem, and they are more likely to engage in repeated negative thoughts about self ([Liw & Han, 2020](#); [Mason et al., 2019](#)). Finally, self-discrepancies are most apparent and impactful to us when we are consciously self-aware: looking in a mirror, watching ourselves on video, or getting direct feedback from others.

This latter finding suggests an important implication for our relationships. If we surround ourselves with people who constantly criticize, belittle, or comment on our

flaws, we are more likely to have wider self-discrepancies and lower self-esteem due to their negative perspectives influencing our standards. Alternatively, if our social networks support us and praise our unique abilities, our self-discrepancies will diminish and self-esteem will rise. Thus, a critical aspect in maintaining self-esteem and life happiness is choosing to reduce contact with people who routinely tear us down, and instead opting for fellowship with those who fortify us.

What's more, it doesn't matter whether or not we *think* we're immune to others' opinions. Research has found that the self-esteem of people who claim they couldn't "care less" about what other people think of them is just as strongly impacted by approval and criticism as the self-esteem of people who report valuing others' opinions ([Leary et al., 2003](#)). In short, regardless of your perceptions, receiving others' approval or criticism will boost or undermine your self-esteem.

Improving Your Self-Esteem

Your self-esteem can start to improve only when you reduce discrepancies between your self and ideal and ought selves. How can you do this? Begin by assessing your self-concept. Make a list of the beliefs, attitudes, and values that make up your self-concept. Be sure to include both positive and negative attributes. Then think about your self-esteem. In reviewing the list you've made, do you see yourself positively or negatively?

Next, analyze your ideal self. Who do you wish you were? Is this ideal attainable, or is it unrealistic? If it is attainable, what would you have to change to become this person? If you made these changes, would you be satisfied with yourself, or would your expectations for yourself simply escalate further? Now consider the perspectives of other important people in your life and how they influence your ideal standard, asking yourself these same questions.

Then turn to analyze your ought self, and start with the perspective of important other people. Who do others think you *should* be? Can you ever become the person others expect? What would you have to do to become this person? If you did all these things, would others be satisfied with you, or would their expectations

escalate? Then consider your own perspective in terms of who you think you should be, or who you feel that you have an obligation to be, repeating these same questions.

Fourth, revisit and redefine your standards. This step requires intense, concentrated effort over a long period of time. If you find that your ideal and ought selves are realistic and attainable, move to the final step. If you decide that your ideal and ought selves are unrealistic and unattainable, redefine these standards so that each can be attained through sustained work. If you find yourself unable to abandon unrealistic and unattainable standards, from your own or another person's perspective, don't be afraid to consult with a professional therapist or another trusted resource for assistance.

Fifth, create an action plan for resolving any self-discrepancies. Map out the specific actions necessary to eventually attain your ideal and ought selves. Frame your new standards as a list of goals, and post them in your planner, phone, bedroom, or kitchen to remind yourself of these goals. Since self-esteem can't be changed in a day, a week, or even a month, establish a realistic time line. Then implement this action plan in your daily life, checking your progress as you go.

Finally, consider how you can diversify your investments in your self by pursuing multiple interests and activities. For example, if you devoted much of your youth to honing athletic skills and developing that singular aspect of your self, who will you be when you can no longer play your sport? Rather than spending all our time and energy on one aspect of ourselves—putting all our eggs in one basket—we should consider how we can develop across multiple dimensions, building a shield for our self-esteem. Thus, as our self evolves over time, when one dimension diminishes, for whatever reason, another dimension can expand to compensate for it.



RossHelen/Shutterstock

Influencers on social media go to great lengths to present idealized, seemingly perfect versions of their selves—often using filters, airbrushing, and other visual effects. But images like these aren't realistic, and can reinforce an “appearance culture.”

i

focus on CULTURE

How Does the Media Shape Your Self-Esteem?

Korean American comedian Margaret Cho has trailblazed issues of racism and sexism in comedy. In this excerpt from her one-woman show *The Notorious C.H.O.*, she offers her thoughts on self-esteem:

You know when you look in the mirror and think, “Oh, I’m so fat, I’m so old, I’m so ugly”? That is not your authentic self speaking. That is billions upon billions of dollars of advertising—magazines, movies, billboards—all geared to make you feel bad about yourself so that you’ll take your hard-earned money and spend it at the mall. When you don’t have self-esteem, you will hesitate before you do anything. You will hesitate to go for the job you really want. You will hesitate to ask for a raise. You will hesitate to defend yourself when you’re discriminated against. You will hesitate to vote. You will hesitate to dream. For those of us plagued with low self-esteem, improving [it] is truly an act of revolution! ([Custudio, 2002](#))

Cho is right. And it’s important to emphasize that this doesn’t just apply to women. We live in an “appearance culture,” a society that values and reinforces extreme, unrealistic ideals, and glorification of attractiveness, body shape, and physical appearance ([Trekels & Eggermont, 2017](#)). In an appearance culture, standards for appearance are defined by the media through digitally enhanced images of bodily perfection ([Field et al., 1999](#)), and imposed by peers through conversations and

sometimes through bullying ([Gattario et al., 2020](#) ; [Trekels & Eggermont, 2017](#)). When we internalize messages about the perfect body and appearance, we can end up despising our own bodies and craving unattainable perfection ([Jones et al., 2004](#)). This can result in low self-esteem, depression, and, in some cases, self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders ([Harrison, 2001](#)). To combat these outcomes, we should do our best to limit consumption of harmful media messages and the destructive comparisons they elicit.

discussion questions

- How would you teach a younger sibling to maintain their self-esteem in an appearance culture? What would be specific tips to help bolster their self-esteem?
- What are some positive ways we can respond to others when their talk seems to be enforcing an appearance culture? How can we help ourselves, and others, focus on our positive qualities and strengths?

The Sources of Self

Outside forces influence your view of self

For most of us, critical self-reflection isn't a new activity. After all, we spend much of our daily lives looking inward, so we feel that we know our selves. But this doesn't mean that our sense of self is entirely self-determined. Instead, our selves are shaped by at least three powerful outside forces: gender, family, and culture.



Left to right: Ronnie Kaufman/Getty Images; Caroline Penn/Panos Pictures; age fotostock/Alamy

The sources of self include your gender, your family, and your culture.



GENDER AND SELF

One primary outside force shaping our sense of self is our *gender*—the composite of social, psychological, and behavioral attributes that a particular culture associates with an individual's biological sex ([American Psychological Association \[APA\], 2015b](#)). It may strike you as strange to see gender described as an "outside force." Gender is innate, something you're born with, right? Actually, scholars distinguish gender, which is largely learned, or constructed through our social interactions, from *biological sex*, which is a category assigned at birth. Each of us is born with biological sex organs that distinguish us anatomically as female, male, or intersex—

that is, a person who is born with or who develops characteristics in reproductive or sexual anatomy that don't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male ([InterACT, 2020](#)). By contrast, our gender is shaped over time through our interactions with others, institutional frameworks, and the culture in which we live.

Immediately after birth, we begin a lifelong process of *gender socialization*. This process may encourage binary—and sometimes stereotypical—distinctions by which we learn from others what it means personally, interpersonally, and culturally to be “male” or “female.” Girls may be taught to be aware of their physical appearance and to be more sensitive to their own and others’ emotions and needs, such as focusing on domestic chores, while boys may be taught to be tough and competitive, and may be allowed more independence ([Kågesten et al., 2016](#); [Lippa, 2002](#)). This process influences our *gender identity*—our innate sense of ourselves as boy, man, or male; girl, woman, or female; or another variation, such as gender-neutral, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming ([APA, 2015b](#)). Transgender and gender nonconforming individuals may experience or may outwardly express a gender identity that differs from their sex category assigned at birth ([Human Rights Campaign, 2020](#)).

As a result of differing socialization, men and women may end up forming comparatively different self-concepts ([Cross & Madson, 1997](#)). In the past, studies showed that women were more likely to perceive themselves as interdependent and connected to others, while men were more likely to see themselves as independent composites of their individual achievements, abilities, and beliefs—separated from others. But scholars also have found contradictory evidence ([Foels & Tomcho, 2009](#); [Peker et al., 2018](#); [Pilarska, 2014](#)), and have noted that other factors, such as power, culture, and the communicative situation are important considerations. We will discuss these factors and other topics related to gender in more detail in [Chapter 6](#). Now let's consider the first place most of us are socialized: our families.

self-reflection

What lessons about gender did you learn from your family when you were growing up? From your friends? Based on these lessons, what aspects of

your self did you bolster—or bury—given what others deemed appropriate for your gender? How did these lessons affect how you interpersonally communicate?

FAMILY AND SELF

When we're born, we have no self-awareness, self-concept, or self-esteem. As we mature, we become aware of ourselves as unique and separate from our environments and begin developing self-concepts. Research indicates that the family environments we experience in our early years impact our self-esteem in later life ([Krauss et al., 2020](#); [Orth, 2018](#)). Our caregivers play a crucial role in this process, providing us with ready-made sets of beliefs, attitudes, and values from which we construct our fledgling selves. We also forge emotional bonds with our caregiv