



Who Am I ? : Defining Your Identity --A Must Read for the Young Person in Your Life

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Eve*, a young woman, thinks fondly of her days growing up in a small town in upstate New York. She is the oldest of 2 sisters and 1 brother from a close religious family by her description. Her father is a lawyer and lay minister, and her mother a domestic engineer (home maker). Both parents worked hard to raise their children. They had set high standards for their children. They wanted them to attend college as well as graduate school and become either doctors or lawyers. In high school, Eve had been a straight A student, captain of her lacrosse team, member of the church choir, and a dutiful daughter. It was clear to her, since age 7, that she would be a doctor. Her Freshman year at a college in N.Y.C. was an exciting and confusing time. She met students who were from cultures other than her own. She was kissed by a boy for the first time, but did not enjoy it, and wondered what it meant that she did not enjoy it. She began hanging with a group of students considered to be “Goths” and her style of dress changed frequently. Her grades slipped, and she was not sure she wanted to be a doctor anymore. On a visit home, during a break from school, many of her family members and friends commented to her: “We don’t know who you are anymore.” Eve herself often felt she didn’t know who she was either. But such thoughts made her sad and sometimes anxious, so she ignored them. However, a chapter in her Psychology class’ textbook discussed the process of identity development and the feelings, thoughts, anxieties, triumphs, and insights she had been experiencing began to make sense.

Eve is going through a process of identity development. She is exploring and experimenting with different interests and behaviors. Over time she will crystallize what she likes, dislikes, and what her values and beliefs are. Our lives are shaped by multiple identities. Among them religious, sexual, gender, racial, cultural, peer group, and career identity. Each day we awake and go about our normal routines, giving no thought to why we are the way we are. We give little or no thought as to why we think, feel or act a certain way. But who we are is shaped by the various identities that form our core. During one's life span there are certain tasks which must be accomplished in order to attain a healthy sense of self and level of functioning. One of these tasks, which begins in adolescence and continues into adulthood, is identity development. Identity development is a process of establishing an identity. It is a process of exploration, observation and reflection. It is a process everyone must go through to determine who he/she is as an individual.

I believe every young person can benefit from examining the various influences on his/her identity development. Adolescence and young adulthood is a time of exploration of various ideas, and beliefs that will later solidify and crystallize and form one's core. During this process the individual explores, selects, tries out, discards, reselects, and ultimately commits to values and beliefs that are integrated into an individualized sense of self. During this time an adolescent may feel like they are in an identity crisis and may experience a range of emotions. **These feelings are normal as long as a the young person is able to perform day-to-day tasks such as going to classes and studying. If the feelings interfere with school, work, or relationships, however, it may be time to seek counseling.**

Research has shown that achieving a healthy sense of one's identity is associated with positive psychological outcomes such as self-assurance, self-certainty and a sense of mastery. People with a positive identity are better able to cope with stress, report higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, and are less likely to use drugs and alcohol. The absence of a clear, stable sense of identity may contribute to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. A clear, coherent organization of the different domains of identity across various contexts (home, school, work, peers, et cetera) enables one to make decisions, manage responsibilities, manage emotions, and maintain relationships with others.

A young person's growing sense of independence/ autonomy, combined with exploration of his/her values and beliefs comes naturally. Thus, adolescence can be a time of identity confusion as well as development. Again, this process is normal as long as the young person is able to perform day-to-day tasks such as going to classes and studying. If the feelings associated with this process interfere with school, work, or relationships, it may be time to seek counseling.

The table below summarizes some of the major identities that shape our lives. These various domains of identity interface and overlap. The intent of this table is to encourage one's exploration of the complex factors and variables that contribute to identity formation. As one reads the table think about which of the choices one identifies with and what values and beliefs one holds as a result. In addition, consider how these values and beliefs affect your thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Table of Major Domains of Identity

Religious	Ethnic	Gender	Peer Group	Racial	Sexual	Career
Christian	African American	Masculine	Jocks	Black	Heterosexual	Doctor
Jewish	Latin American	Feminine	Nerds	White	Homosexual	Lawyer
Muslim	Italian	Transgender	Druggies	Latin	Bisexual	Teacher
Catholic	Chinese		Thugs	Asian	Asexual	Engineer
Hindu	Indian	-----	Gang	Biracial	-----	Home-maker
Et cetera	Et cetera		Et cetera	Multi-racial		Et cetera

This information is for educational purposes and is not intended to replace the advice of your mental health provider.

****Note Eve is a fictitious character***

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