

How did I lose myself?

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There are times in life that we stop and assess our lives, and wonder, "how did I get here? How did I lose myself?" This sense of the lost self can be losing focus in career goals, losing passion and purpose, or even losing touch with the real you. There are many reasons this can happen, some of which are our life situations and the lifestyle of busyness.

The Hats We Wear:

During our lifetime we take on many different hats or roles: child, growing teen or young adult, student, worker/employee, spouse, boss, parent, caregiver, friend, mentor, volunteer, and trainer to name a few. Sometimes our roles change because we make a conscious decision (to become married, to take a particular job), and other times the decision feels as if it were made for us (unexpected pregnancy, job loss, forced retirement, widowhood or divorce). One pitfall of changing roles, is that we can come to identify ourselves so strongly with the role that it becomes our basic identity. For example, "I am a mother/father." When the role is no longer there in the same capacity (children grow and move away), we can feel lost as our role is no longer needed or useful in the way that it was. If we are not that role, then who are we?

Changing Roles:

Sometimes we can lose ourselves when the roles change faster than we expect. Perhaps an aging parent suddenly needs a full-time caretaker. The adjustment from the roles of career person, spouse, parent, friend to full-time caretaker can be shocking. We may feel unprepared for the other roles to take a subservient position. We may feel equally unprepared for the role in which we now are thrust.

Positive changes and roles such as promotions, marriage, and parenthood can also create this disconnect. We can feel just as unprepared for our new positive role as a more challenging one. Sometimes the way we think about and of ourselves is still based on the old role. It can be difficult to smoothly transition between roles and keep a strong sense of continuity in our identity.

Physical Changes:

Another area that can challenge how we think of ourselves is changes to our physical bodies. Through accidents or sudden illness, our physical selves can be changed in a moment. Abilities, strength, and confidence we had are suddenly shaken. Questions arise: "Who am now that I can't work? Now that I can't walk/move like I use to? Now that I'm tired all of the time? Now that I look different?" These questions are valid and need to be answered. They also may reveal that we unknowingly put much of our identity in our physical self and abilities. Sometimes our bodies begin to break down precisely because we have been burying our true selves and working hard at things we feel no longer matter.

The Business of Busyness:

A subtle area that can hide our true selves and passions is busyness. It is easy to become busy. Technology and modern conveniences should give us more time, but it seems they only give us more time that we quickly fill. We schedule in more tasks, more jobs, and more events into our calendars. There are times we need to be focused, such as building a career, raising a family, completing a degree, or building a business. However, we can become so preoccupied with the tasks at hand, that we become single-focused and put ourselves on autopilot, forgetting our passions and dreams.

We forget to stop and ask ourselves, "What is necessary?" "What is meaningful?" "Is this still what I really want to be doing?" It is easy to become out of balance and have no relaxation or recreation time. Without "down-time", we continue on autopilot and have no space in which to reflect.

Painful Pasts:

Yet another area that can rob us of our true selves is painful experiences in our pasts. Experiencing and/or witness abuse/trauma as children and teens can create a system of limiting beliefs (I'm not good enough. That good life is not for me. This is the best I can hope for. I'm bad and do not deserve good things.). These types of beliefs limit the potential of who we really are. Is a child really born "bad?" Of course not. Children are all worthwhile and acceptable whether people in their lives are acting appropriately or not. But those trauma beliefs erode our sense of self as good, deserving, and having potential.

In some abuse situations, the physical and emotional danger is so great, that the victim spends most of his/her thoughts and actions trying to please the abuser. This can happen in child abuse or domestic violence between adults. This preoccupation with the abuser's needs and emotions consumes our thoughts and puts all sense of self far in the background. Suddenly, we find we no longer know ourselves, what we like, or what we want.

Another form of abuse is being told to "stop dreaming" and that our ideas are "stupid", "worthless", or "a waste of time." This type of abuse cuts to the core of ourselves and our passion. How can we express our deep longing to dance, draw, sing, help people less fortunate, or do something fulfilling when it is under constant attack and ridicule? We quickly learn (even as small children) to hide this part of ourselves. The soul is squelched and the dying process begins.

Seeing the other:

Sometimes we wake from our autopilot simply because we see something about another person. This can be shocking, such as a death or severe illness in someone we know or of a similar age. Those events immediately bring our own mortality to mind, and we begin to think about how much time we have left. Are we really doing what we want with our precious time?

Another trigger to wake up from autopilot is seeing someone who is living his/her life with freedom, relaxation, and doing the soul's work. We sense his/her peace

and contentment and joy in life and work. We compare this to our situation. "Do I really love my job/work? Is there something else my soul rather be doing? Do I feel content, or am I feeling stressed out, burnt out, or restless?" We suddenly see the contrast and realize that we lost ourselves somewhere along the way of creating our lives.

Other events can include a growing restlessness or dissatisfaction in a primary relationship. Our adult children getting married and starting families can wake us to the passing of time. Having a birthday reminds us of time. Our parents getting older and eventually passing brings forth the question, "What is next for me?"

Good News:

There *is* good news in all of this. The good news is that we have the opportunity to search, struggle, and rediscover ourselves. It is not too late. We can reconnect with our passions, our dreams, our likes and wants. We can create ourselves anew. Reflection, retreats, and engaging with others can all help the process. Counseling can provide a guide to help you navigate the path to reclaim and transform yourself.

We *can* free ourselves from the past, from limiting beliefs, and live our dreams. This is an exciting time!

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