

Different Aspects of the ‘Sense of Self’

(adapted and enlarged from Daniel N. Stern, 1985)¹

- **The Core Self**²
 - A sense of ‘self’ as opposed to ‘other’; being a person (having been treated as a person); having essential self-respect; having a unique identity which is appreciated; “*consisting of self-agency; self-coherence; self-history (continuity), and self-affectivity*” (Stern, 1985, xix); etc.
 - Loss, or non-development, of this sense can lead to feelings of: indifference, apathy, disinterest, lack of assertion, over-compliance, out-of-contact, etc.
- **The Embodied Self**
 - This sense of Self has a bodily coherence; a sense of being complete; a physical whole with good boundaries; the centre of any integrated action, both moving and still.
 - Loss or injury of this sense of self leads to feelings of: fragmentation of bodily experience, depersonalization, out-of-body experiences, feeling ethereal or unreal, possible somatoform disorders.
- **The Spatial Self**
 - A sense of having space; being on firm ground; having the ability to move; the ability to manipulate objects; physical potency.
 - Loss of this sense leads to feelings of: passivity; helplessness with respect to objects; powerlessness; not feeling one has a ‘proper’ place or home.
- **The Self in Time (Historical Self)**
 - A coherent sense of time; has a personal history and a sense of living and enduring throughout; a sense of continuity with one’s own past or with history; a feeling that one ‘goes on being’; that changes can happen, whilst remaining basically the same.
 - Loss of this sense leads to feelings of: temporal dissociation, fugue states, amnesia, a sense of ‘not being’, fear of change, etc.
- **The Self as Agent**
 - A sense of responsibility for one’s own actions; having volition; feeling in control over self-generated actions; initiating actions; self-regulation.
 - Loss of this sense leads to feelings of: powerlessness, paralysis, no responsibility for own actions, loss of control to external agents, paranoia, etc.
- **The Emotional Self**
 - A sense of an effective self; experiencing inner qualities of patterned feelings (affects) that ‘belong’ with other experiences of self; being aware of different levels of feelings.
 - Loss of this sense leads to feelings of: the inability to experience ordinary pleasurable emotions; dissociated states; being unemotional, withdrawn or unavailable; etc.
- **The Relational Self**
 - A sense of belonging or a feeling of participation with others; wanting to be social, relating to others; being reasonably empathic.
 - Loss of this sense leads to feelings of: loneliness, alienation, reclusiveness, etc.
- **The (En)gendered Self**
 - A sense of self as male or female; pleasure and security in that; the ability to relate to others as men and women.

¹ Thanks for this basic structure is given to Malvern Lumsden, “The Moving Self in Life, Art and Community Mental Health: Twelve Propositions.” *Journal of Body, Movement & Dance in Psychotherapy: Vol. 5: No. 3. 2010.*

² Damasio also speaks of a Core Self, a primitive feeling of identity, distinguishable from an “Autobiographical Self”, however, this view is critiqued by others: viz. Gonzalo Munévar (2014). Damasio, Self & Consciousness. *Philosophia Scientiae, 18-3, 191-201.*

- Loss or injury of this sense of self leads to feelings: of fear of sexual relationships; gender identity disorders; homophobia or misogyny; psychosexual dysfunction.
- **The Cultural Self**
 - A sense of self within a particular culture, or nationality, or location, or tribe; feelings of being a part of that culture – its mores, its celebrations, its dysfunctions; one’s racial heritage;
 - Loss or absence of this can lead to feelings: of being estranged; of displacement and alienation; of having lost touch with one’s roots; etc.
- **The Intellectual Self**
 - A sense of rationality; the ability (and pleasure) to study, reason and think; an awareness of and interest in different ideas that do not threaten us.
 - Loss, or lack of this sense of self leads to feelings of: irrationality to think straight; feeling threatened by new or different ideas; etc.
- **The Moral Self**
 - A sense of one’s actions are (or should be) influenced by social rules, collective agreements, consensual rationality or philosophical principles, rather than immediate and personal gains and losses.
 - Loss of this sense leads to (feelings of): selfishness, narcissism, immorality or amorality, being evil.
- **The Verbal Self**
 - A sense of ‘ownership’ of language and of relationship is associated with membership in a particular language (and cultural) community; separates the ‘lived’ experience from the verbal representation; sees ‘self’ and ‘other’ more clearly and can identify differences.
 - Loss of this sense leads to feelings of: alienation, culture shock, dislocation, rootlessness, etc.
- **The Narrative Self**
 - The self is sensed as a set of symbolic narratives; this is your ‘story’ – your sense of your life; there is a ‘red thread’ running through your life that helps explain choices and actions.
 - Loss of, or injury to, this leads to feelings of: being neurotic; seeming like a butterfly (never content with something for long); being eccentric; being ‘wacky’ or disjointed; or having other problems in work (especially with continuance) and having disruptive family relations.
- **The Creative Self**
 - A sense of freedom and efficacy in transforming given forms, of dealing with chaos, and of expressing the wider aspects of yourself; having a definite ‘form’ of expression (music, art, cooking, etc.); seeing the world through this medium of expression.
 - Loss of this sense of self can lead to: staleness, frustration, etc.
- **The Aware (or Intuitive) Self**
 - As one becomes more self-aware (through age, meditation or mindfulness practice), one develops not only a sense of observing oneself going through life, feeling and doing, etc., but also a sense of what one ‘should’ / could be doing; having a sense of one’s potential; directions for self-development, etc.
 - Loss or absence of this sense can lead to: meaninglessness; being existentially lost; a blindness about possibilities or consequences; stumbling through life; etc.
- **The Spiritual Self**
 - A sense of the transpersonal, of transcendence beyond the confines of the individual self; a sense of the ‘Other’; a regularly-practiced belief system that really works for you; the ability to ‘transcend’ on occasion and connect with other things dimensions, beings, or insights.
 - Loss of this leads to feelings of: despair, dullness, being mundane, being out-of-touch, etc.

Each of these aspects is complex within itself and can be explored further in therapy, journaling, meditation, etc., so this schema is only a rough “working model”. However, several things can be noted:

- A. These various aspects of the sense of self develop at different times in one's life and it is likely that later ones (e.g. verbal and narrative selves) build upon the development of earlier aspects (the core self, the embodied self, etc.)
- B. Most of these aspects are non-verbal and develop as a result of early bodily interactions and emotional experiences. We may struggle with the language of description, but these can usually be more clearly and easily 'felt'.
- C. The task (or process) of development involves not only the development of each aspect, but also their integration into a harmonious whole. This developmental, integrational process is the essential inner 'work' of our life and gives a template for any therapy to help to heal any early disruptive or dysfunctional experiences that have 'damaged' or prevented one of these aspects from developing properly.
- D. The process of becoming aware of these different aspects and integrating them was described by Maslow (and others) as **self-actualisation**: Self-actualization can mean a lot of things depending who you ask, but Maslow described self-actualization as the process of becoming "everything you are capable of becoming".
Self-actualization does not involve achieving perfection, or things always going smoothly. You can become self-actualized and still have problems and face difficulties. In fact, a huge part of self-actualization is recognizing your limitations, in addition to focusing on your unique strengths — whether those involve practical skills, parenting, artistic talents, or emotional insights. It's a process of finding your way to "Being You" as fully as possible. ^[3]
- E. Generally speaking, self-actualized people are: quite independent; can discriminate as to what works for them or doesn't; are usually sincere and truthful; focus on the wider perspectives (rather than on just their own) and don't mind not knowing; are basically kind, accepting and compassionate; are ethical and have a sense of justice; have a good sense of humour and are quite spontaneous; enjoy meaningful relationships and have an interest and concern about other people's well-being; are quite creative; and enjoy life to the full (peak experiences). However, this self-actualization not a fixed state, but an ongoing process.

Further Reading

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D.N. Stern (1985). *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. Basic Books.

D.N. Stern (2004). *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*. W.W. Norton.

³ www.healthline.com/health/self-actualization#how-to-achieve-it