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IDENTITY & MENTAL HEALTH

Identity

Identity is a mental concept which provides a sense of continuity within oneself, a perception of your place around others and in the world. This sense of identity enables an individual to function independently and consistent with their own beliefs and values.

What is identity distress?

Given the fragile nature of adolescent emotional development, many young individuals often struggle with identity issues and have difficulty identifying themselves or knowing their place in the world. This is known as 'identity distress' or is sometimes referred to as an identity crisis or confusion. Identity issues represent a negative emotional state and is not a mental disorder. Older adults can also suffer from identity issues, although this appears to be more prevalent among young individuals. It is also common for young people to struggle fitting in with peers, especially for those who do not have any profound interests or for individuals who lack strong social and communication skills.

Young people may adopt labels depending on their self-perception and understanding, which can affect their mental health. Suffering from other mental health issues can also affect an individual's self-perception and can impact identity. Inversely, experiencing identity issues can make an individual more likely to suffer from other mental health conditions, such as depression.

Although this guide places an emphasis on young people's identities, anyone can be affected by the issues discussed in this content and it is important to talk to someone and seek support if you are suffering from a mental health condition.

Note: For the sake of this guide, the terms 'identity issues', 'identity crisis', 'identity confusion' and 'identity distress' will be used interchangeably.

Identity distress: is it a mental disorder?

Although 'identity issues/identity distress' is not a diagnosable disorder on its own, in the DSM-5, 'identity' is used as a crucial diagnostic characteristic for personality disorders (Jung et al., 2013). Therefore, the onset of identity issues can be indicative of further mental health problems. Identity issues may be used by a clinician to help identify other mental disorders that an individual maybe experiencing. Identity issues are a known struggle among those suffering or recovering from mental health conditions, such as borderline personality disorder (Ng et al., 2019), among numerous other conditions which will be discussed later in this guide.

Personal identity vs social identity

Personal/narrative identity – This is dependent upon the self-categories and abilities which allow an individual to define and label themselves (such as an occupation, hobby/interest or talent).

Social/group identity – These are the characteristics which place an individual into a broad group category (such as gender, race, occupation, etc.).

1 in 10 young people will experience an identity problem at any given time...

Psychology of identity distress

The formation of a positive identity is one of the most important psychological conflicts that an individual will face in their lifetime. Identity issues, particularly among young people, produce schemas (a pattern of thinking or behaviour used to organise information) which can lead to a variety of other mental health symptoms. For those with identity issues, these schemas are known as 'self-emotions' and include thoughts and behaviour such as self-blaming, beliefs about failure, self-criticism, shame, guilt, and self-judgement (Ashra et al., 2021).

Symptoms of identity distress

Identity distress can manifest in a variety of ways:

- Questioning one's sense of being
- Experiencing a lack of purpose and/or belonging
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Self-criticism and self-loathing
- Self-deprecation
- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of inferiority
- Thinking that one is undesirable or unliked by others
- Self-harm
- Having low mood
- Feelings of not fitting-in with their peers, family, community or society



Optimising a positive identity and reducing emotional distress is a key strategy for improving mental health. For a greater improvement to mental health, identity issues should be tackled at an early stage in emotional development (adolescence to the early twenties), as to prevent the onset of further mental health problems later in life. It may also be easier to treat other mental health conditions in the future if mental distress is managed at the early intervention stage.

Emotional development and identity

When an individual reaches a later stage of emotional development, such as older adulthood, they develop a stronger sense of personal identity and greater self-confidence and thus are able to better manage difficult emotions. Some individuals develop coping strategies which they can use to maintain a positive identity. These coping strategies are discussed at the end of this guide.



Mental health issues related to having a negative identity

Experiencing negative self-belief, shame and guilt can place an individual at a greater risk for other common mental health conditions.

Alongside having another mental illness, identity distress can make someone feel worse about themselves, due to the guilt and shame associated with having identity issues.

The most common mental conditions related to identity distress include:

- **Depression** – A key symptom of depression is a low mood.
- **Anxiety** – worry that one does not fit in with peers may increase the onset of identity issues.
- **Substance misuse** – Individuals with identity issues may use substances to cope with difficult emotions.
- **Psychosis** – Delusions regarding one's identity could be indicative of the early onset of psychosis.
- **Eating disorders** – Those who have feelings of inferiority regarding their appearance, or low self-worth may develop eating disorders to manage these negative feelings.

(Ashra et al., 2021)

Social media & online identity

Social media can help shape one's identity, which can have both a positive or negative impact on self-perception. Through the use of anonymity on the web, individuals are able to express themselves freely and more genuinely; particularly because people can seek out other like-minded individuals through their access to online forums and discussion boards. The process of building an online identity that is different from a person's life offline is known as 'online identity reconstruction' (Huang et al., 2021).

Although much like in real life, they may be pressures to conform to particular societal standards on social media, such as having a certain appearance, lifestyle, achievements, interests and relationships. The identities which people portray on social media may often be false or embellished. This may lead to identity issues if an individual is unable to adhere to these standards which are perpetuated through social media. Stimuli on social media can also serve as a reminder that an individual does not adhere to particular societal standards, which can induce shame, guilt and beliefs about one's own inferiority and worthlessness.

As many as 11.2% of identities on social media are fake...



How common are identity issues?

Key facts & statistics

Unfortunately, identity issues are common in society, especially among young people (adolescents and university students) and for those who identify as LGBTQ+.

- Approximately 1 in 10 (8% to 12%) of young people in high school and university experience an identity problem at any given time (Côté, 2018).
- Identity confusion in adolescents increases their risk and vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and certain eating disorder symptoms; namely bulimia nervosa (Verschuere et al., 2018).
- Almost 6 in 10 (59%) university students reported potentially problematic (excessive) alcohol consumption as a means of attaining an online social identity (Ridout, Campbell, & Ellis, 2012). This includes behaviours such as conforming to peer pressure through excessive alcohol consumption or discussing one's alcohol consumption using a social media platform.
- An estimated 5.5% to 11.2% identities of worldwide monthly active Facebook users are false (Romanov et al., 2017); where information portrayed is embellished or untruthful. This is the equivalent of approximately 83 million profiles (Kaskazi, 2014).

LGBTQ+/sexual identity - statistics

- Young people 14 to 19 years old who identified as LGBTQ+ are more likely to have a mental disorder (34.9%) than those who identified as heterosexual (13.2%) (Mental Health Foundation, 2018).
- For those accessing children and adolescent gender identity services in the UK, approximately 7 in 10 (69%; 2016 total) were female and 3 in 10 (31%; 1400 total) were male (GOV UK, 2018).
- Among those accessing GIDS (Gender Identity Development Services), the most common psychosocial difficulties include bullying (47%), low mood or depression (42%) and self-harming behaviour (39%) (Holt et al., 2014).
- For all individuals with a LGBTQ+ identity, 70% avoided being open about their identity, out of fear of a negative reaction (GOV UK, 2018).
- Most suicide attempts among LGBTQ+ men occur within 5 years of discovering one's sexual identity (Meyer et al., 2021).

Labelling & identity

Once you label yourself, you may take on the behaviours that you believe are associated or part of that label. This is known as self-fulfilling prophecy.

Living with a mental condition can lead an individual to act differently to how they would ordinarily behave, because of the impact that a label can have on their mental state. This creates a shift in one's thinking and behaviour, often leading to an individual losing sight of their true self. This applies to mental health outcomes such as loneliness, where it has been found that the expectations and the anticipation of loneliness are associated with loneliness later in life (Pikhartova, Bowling, & Victor, 2016).

Effect of mental illness on identity

Identity changes are not always caused by the onset of mental illness, however mental issues can have a big impact on one's perception and construction of their identity.

Loss of identity/loss of self - The onset for other mental illness has shown to sometimes impair or remove one's sense of identity. Mental focus will often be placed on trying to manage a specific mental health problem, which may lead to an individual self-identifying as a sufferer of that condition.

Duality of selves - An individual may have a conflict between two or more perceptions of themselves, due to the impact of a mental illness. This will often manifest as a disparity between who they once were and the person that they have become since suffering from a condition, developing emotionally or by experiencing other changes in their life.

Striving for normalcy - A noted primary goal among many sufferers of mental illness is the desire for normalcy, as some individuals with a mental illness describe feelings of abnormality and strive to fit in with others.

Hope - Those who experience identity changes from mental illness often maintain a sense of hope that they can be 'normal' again and be able to reclaim their old selves or develop a new positive identity (Wisdom et al., 2008).



What causes identity issues?

A likely explanation for the onset of identity issues is due to changes in brain functioning; for which these changes are a normal part of mental development and growing up. In particular, the symptoms of identity distress (discussed earlier in this guide) have been associated with changes in brain activity in key areas relating to emotional functioning, memory, self-perception, social cognition and decision-making (Liu et al., 2020).

These changes in cognition (brain functioning) will affect how social and emotional information is processed. Negative stimuli, such as social criticism from friends and family, has a stronger effect on the brain's ability to process information than its positive counterpart (such as compliments), which can affect one's sense of identity and mental health if this negative information is not processed properly. This will impact the way in which an individual processes stressors in life, such as interpersonal problems, romantic relationships societal expectations, work life, school, trauma and maltreatment, or any other type of stress and will lead to one's self-perception being undermined. Therefore, the development of a positive identity is intrinsic to maintaining good mental health.

Fortunately, there is a lot of support available for those who are suffering from mental health issues and there are also several ways in which to help an individual manage a positive identity.



How to maintain a positive identity

As discussed earlier, it is important to identify and manage mental health issues early during their onset, as to reduce the possibility of developing other conditions and identity issues later in life. Having an identity, especially a one that is centred on positive labels, can provide you with a sense of belonging, which is crucial for maintaining positive well-being and confidence. There are several things which can be done to help optimise a positive identity and increase positive self-emotions:

Focus on positive labels – By focussing on achievements and positive labels, individuals can build higher levels of self-esteem and self-worth, which will improve overall wellbeing. Try to focus on what you have achieved and succeeded at, rather than the things that you do not have.

Don't compare yourself to others – Everyone is different and will have their own set of skills and talents which make them unique. If someone on social media or in the real world appears to have a 'perfect' life, this may not always be the case. Social comparison with others can induce greater levels of stress if you are unable to adhere to a similar lifestyle. Your set of skills and achievements will be often vastly different from those of your peers, family members, favourite celebrities and idols. It is also likely that people in your social circle will be comparing themselves to you, as this is a common social behaviour.



Discuss your feelings – It is never beneficial for one’s mental health to bottle-up your emotions. Talking with someone that you trust, such as a family member, close friend or teacher can help with managing mental health issues and identity distress. The people closest to you may be going through or have experienced similar issues in the past. They may also be able to offer a solution or provide useful advice and guidance.

Maintain healthy relationships – Having a good social support network is important for maintaining good mental health, as the people in your social circle may be able to support you in seeking mental health advice and guidance. Good friends and close family members will also be likely to support you and help raise your self-esteem, which is important in forming a positive identity. The Children’s Society recommends making friends with others who have similar interests to you, as this can make you more optimistic in addition to being more open to people from different backgrounds (Children’s Society, 2021).

Join a club – You may find enjoyment and a positive sense of identity through joining a local club, such as a social club, fitness centre/ sports club or reading group, as this may help to reinforce both your social and personal identity and also to socialise with like-minded people.

Focus on a hobby or favourite activity – You can also maintain a positive identity through focusing on an enjoyable activity, such as playing sports, art, music, etc.

Focus on self-improvement– Self-improvement helps to boost confidence and self-esteem and can support the formation of a positive personal identity. There are a variety of ways in which you can attain self-improvement, such as through academic or occupational achievement, improvement of health and fitness/ exercise, and/or through achieving personal goals.

If you are experiencing mental distress, it is important to speak to someone about it. Please contact your GP for referral to a qualified mental health professional, who will be able to provide you with support.

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