



A deeper approach
to
self-image

An obsession with superficial self-image is damaging people - part of what's causing the current mental health crisis. Perhaps more importantly, it's restrictive - limiting or blocking the way to a deeper, more fulfilling life.

The self-orientated psychology of "me, me, me" is normal. It's dysfunctional and problematic. But, recently, there's been the rise of a more extreme self-obsession. Circumstances have combined for this to happen: there's more disposable income, increased leisure time, the rapid expansion of materialism, cheaper products, social media, the celebrity culture and "social influencers", etc. And whereas ethical standards have always been dubious and contradictory, such considerations are nowadays generally ignored to the extent that "anything goes". In one way, this clearing out of the old ways of being is a good thing because there's potentially greater freedom for improvement and individual choice. But, in reality, sheep or zombies don't really exercise freedom of choice - so the opportunity is being lost.

The focus is often on physical appearance. You have to look a certain way, depending on which social grouping you're attempting to identify with. And you have to act a certain way. But it's all an elaborate game. You're trying to be something you're not. The expectations are often unrealistic, especially with regards to physical appearance. Most people are just okay, rather than having been born with outstanding good looks. That said, you can always slap on a few more layers of make-up, dye your hair an outrageous colour, wear the right labels, or take a few health-threatening steroids to bulk out those muscles. The tricks are seemingly endless. Technology is also coming to the rescue, with filters to make you look better in those all-important photos for social media. With a click here and there, you can magically make your waist look smaller and your hair fuller. Plus, there are all those wonderful accessories to help you look the part. And buying yet another handbag or pair of shoes during your lunch break or at the weekend can make you feel so much better for a few minutes.

A bigger pair of boobs and a more rounded bum are available at the plastic surgery shop. Sexier, fuller lips, plus Botox for smoothing out those pesky wrinkles, are less drastic. Super white teeth? Again, it's been made easy. For a price.

Looking the part has become an art form. It takes time and a degree of skill to do it all well. And this determines your focus in life. But it's shallow. And your body will seriously start to age, well before you get old, let alone die. What then? There's some truth in the words "It's too late to change." But don't worry; the "supposed-to-be" life merchants also have that covered. Exotic holidays, including those relaxing cruises, will help keep you distracted. Just pay the money and everything will continue to be fine.

When your best friend starts cutting his or her thighs with a razor to "regain control", or starts taking antidepressants, or becomes fatter than those new fuller lips because of binge eating, perhaps getting sozzled with vodka before heading out for a night on the town, or begins talking about suicide, you should hear the alarm bells ringing. Instead, you superficially respond with platitudes like "Don't worry" and "It'll be alright soon". It's not because you're a bad friend; you just don't know a better way. But the hope is baseless, as there's no effective strategy for improvement in sight. In fact, an already grim situation will likely get worse. There's safety in numbers, so shame and embarrassment are brushed off - even though they should also be warning signs that something's not working. It's hard to "come to your senses" when they've been systematically dulled, dumbed down, ignored. When you metaphorically wallpaper over the cracks, there's a danger that you won't see how big the cracks have become until the wall collapses. Avoidance doesn't work.

Many direct their attention to having a great house, making improvement after improvement, including designing that perfect kitchen. They learn to become a wonderful host, able to serve up delicious meals for those fantastic dinner parties. They laugh at the right time and keep everything relaxed. You have to have the latest technological gadgets. And car. It's all about "fitting in", playing the game, living the "supposed-to-be" life. But, no matter what, you mustn't rock the proverbial boat. You can't get real or think too clearly. You have to carefully dance around what should be obviously wrong. Don't cause "offence". If you have to be anything that approaches being honest, water it down as much as possible, always ready to retract if you step on an oversensitive toe. Remember that you long ago decided on the strategy of "fake it 'til you make it", so there's no turning back. Keep on just keeping on, avoiding those "awkward" moments. Be "happy" and don't let that fake smile drop.

An obsession with self-image has a lot to do with self-protection. You don't like feeling down, or anxious. It's all about that quick fix. Getting a make-over is much easier than having to hammer and forge your character into something more worthwhile. Those thoughts of self-doubt keep gnawing away, so - at least in the short-term - it seems sensible to avoid them by making excuses, displacing your issues onto someone or something else, minimising the scale of the problems, or employing some other trick of psychological avoidance.

It's all a mass pretence. Nobody's right when everybody's wrong. Delusion reigns supreme. And just when you're starting to question the strategy of being shallow in the cold light of dawn, "ping", your smart phone signals the arrival of the latest alert. There's a new Instagram filter to try. Or a different diet endorsed by your favourite celebrity, an enticing sale offer, or whatever. So you're immediately back in the saddle, riding around that pointless hamster wheel again. And with all of your friends, so you're not really alone - despite that horrid sense of loneliness and desperation you can't manage to shake off. The problem with habits is that you've previously invested in them. Changing repeated behaviour isn't as easy as swapping outfits for a night out. It takes a completely different approach and longer investment.

There's a lot of deceit. A huge chasm exists between the claims, hype, or promises and the actual reality. The mantra of "have fun" is as misleading as the worst of a politician's spin. The Shallow Crowd have tried to patent "fun", wrongly suggesting that "superficial" and "fun" is the only way, whereas being serious and having fun is a much healthier combination. The increasing mental health crisis is evidence that a frivolous approach to life has major negative consequences. Skin-deep is hollow and meaningless. It lacks substance and depth. The brain - our best asset - is ignored as the stupidity of being stupid is brushed aside in the glamorisation of emptiness. It's not Coronavirus (COVID-19) that we should be most worried about: that Zombie Virus is much, much worse.

You don't have to keep on trying to fit in. Not all friends are worthy friends. What you've worked hard to be a part of is a con, a sham, fake. It's worthless and a waste of life. Does it really matter what a bunch of idiots think of you? Is "normal" actually that good? There's something better and much more fulfilling.

You can change, find a different way, take another route in life - one that's more satisfying, producing better levels of psychological health. You don't actually need all of those costly distractions, sold to you at a heavy price. You don't have to go along with the endless bullshit and avoidance, which in itself can be exhausting. Nothing's predetermined or set in stone. There's freedom of choice, even if you've been following the crowd like a dopey sheep. You can wake up.

There's a deeper approach, offering far greater meaning and purpose. You can learn to be the best you can be. We've made YouTube videos explaining how to do this, plus there's a free-of-charge e-learning course, and books available (see our website below). You can think clearer, logically, rationally. You can do something worthwhile, to make life better for all through service before self. You can develop your human potential - going way beyond "normal", learning to be a pioneer. You can earn respect by daring to be different in a way that is productive and useful. This is a deeper approach to self-image. It's a great alternative to the shallowness and waste of just being superficial.

Iain Scott, December 2020

<https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org>

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