

To Thine Own Self Be True

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“To thine own self be true,” a famous quote by William Shakespeare, often spills from the lips with ease but to live by these words is vastly more difficult. In psychology we have coined the term congruence, which essentially means one should act in accordance to their thoughts and feelings. Hence, “to thine own self be true.” Now what happens to the self structure when a person cannot be congruent or act in accordance to what they are thinking or feeling? Well, very simply put, the self first utilizes its defense mechanisms (discussed in previous blogs) to preserve the ego but when the defense mechanisms fail to protect the ego, a multitude of mental health disorders can develop e.g. anxiety and depression are the most common.

So, if an individual isn't true to themselves, one could develop mental illness. Then, why would anyone choose to not live a congruent life? Well, the answer is simple, most people live their lives on autopilot and thus without much thought one lives according to social norms, familial norms and gender constraints. In order to live a congruent life, one must be an active participant in their own life, on a daily basis. Unfortunately, life in western culture does not lend it self to easily living a congruent life.

Clients come into my office all the time suffering from anxiety and depression. More often than not, it is related to living an incongruent life. “I can't date that person, my family would kill me.” “I need to go to graduate school because my mother is expecting me to.” “I cannot live with my boyfriend before marriage because women in my culture don't do things like that.” These are just a few things I've heard in my practice that cause great stress in my client's lives. When a person is presented with an expectation that they don't/can't fulfill there is only two options. One, is to be congruent which creates short term anxiety/depression. Two, is to be incongruent which creates long term anxiety/depression. For, no matter where you go, there you are, the choice is always ultimately yours.