

PTS PSYCHOLOGY

Empowering People Through Insightful Psychology Results

Why Being Authentic Matters: How Authenticity & Self-Esteem Can Prevent Anxiety and Depression?

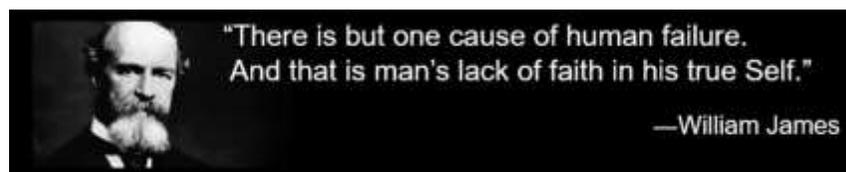
Sebastian Salicru
Registered Psychologist
Board-Approved Supervisor
PTS Psychology, Canberra, ACT, Australia



Preventing mental health is better, and far more cost-effective, than curing it because it focuses on practices and behaviours that put people at risk.

After almost 30 years of working as a psychologist, a concerning issue that I have (which also should concern everyone) is the widespread and insidious epidemic of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Given that mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders, central to these issues are the concepts of 'authenticity', 'being authentic', and 'self-esteem'.



Authenticity

Mostly popularised through 'Authentic Leadership', the concept of authenticity has been bandied around in recent years. Regrettably, the real reasons for being authentic are often unexplored and misunderstood. Many people still don't realise the exact meaning of the concept, how it applies to them, and its unique and invaluable life-long benefits.

To begin, it's important to clarify the difference between authenticity and sincerity.

Authenticity vs Sincerity

Sincerity relates to the expression of your personal experiences (thoughts, emotions, beliefs, needs, wants, or preferences) to others – it's relational, public and external. Sincerity has a 'public' face, which is manifested in the public domain, and is judged by the extent to which the self is represented accurately and honestly to others.

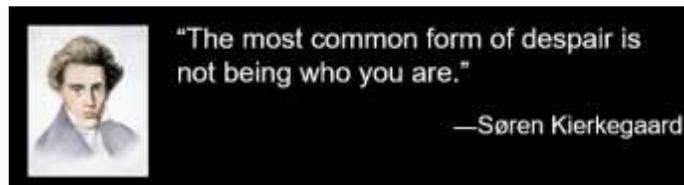
Authenticity, on the other hand, relates to the ownership of your personal experiences – it's private, internal and 'self-referential'. Authenticity doesn't have a public face, as it's not enacted in the relational domain or involves the consideration of others.

Being Authentic

Being authentic implies acting in congruence, alignment or consistency with your true self. This means being consistent with your inner experiences.

The degree to which such consistency (or lack of) exists has major implications for our mental health and wellbeing. This is because, above all, authenticity provides meaning. The opposite is also true.

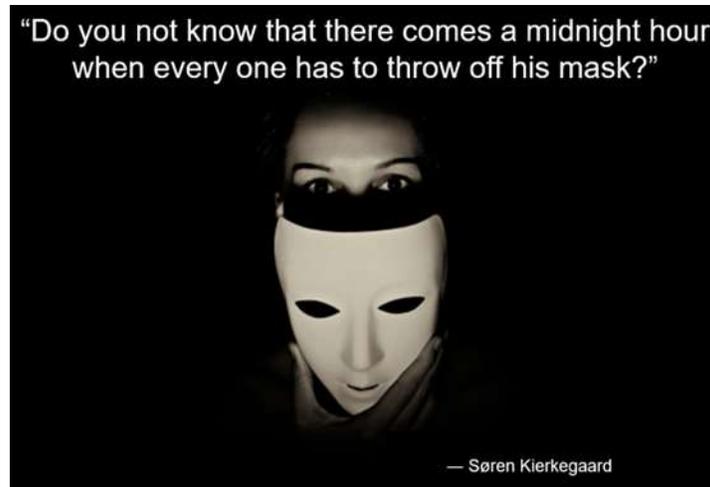
Inauthenticity, Lack of Meaning, Depression, and Anxiety



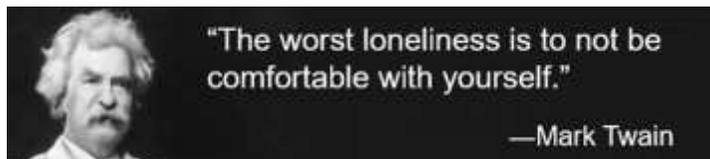
Living inconsistently with your inner experiences is like 'living a double or secret life', being a pretender or an impostor to yourself by making false claims of identity to yourself. Sooner or later, this lack of authenticity causes dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and despair.



But ...



This is because ...



Examples of Inauthentic Behaviour

In today's frantic and complex world, authenticity is a must to preserve your sanity. Yet, it's not a readily accessible commodity as being authentic is not easy. In fact, it's challenging and requires courage and sustained effort!



“The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.”

—Carl Jung

Three main sources of inauthenticity are:

1. Routinely conforming to the expectations and standards of others, rather than to your own standards.
2. Being motivated by power, prestige, money or other personal gains, rather than by your personal values and convictions.
3. Trying to emulate someone else by being like them rather than discovering yourself and acting from your own personal experience and point of view.



Empowerment, Resilience, and Mental Toughness

Doing the work that it takes of being yourself is empowering and builds the essentials for success in life:

1. Psychological empowerment

Psychological empowerment means having a sense of meaning in your life and work, and a sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and determination, and realise your impact around you. It is as a process by which you gain mastery over issues which are of concern to you.

Empowerment is the expansion of your freedom of choice and action. It involves increasing your inner authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect your life. As you exercise real choices, you will gain increased control over your life.

Once you are psychologically empowered, you will see a change in attitude, cognition and behaviour. In turn, this will lead you to a positive change in value orientation, ability to postpone instant gratification of your desires, improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-consciousness as well as better psychological well-being.

2. Resilience

Psychological resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. As much as resilience involves "bouncing back" from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth.

Resilience affords you the ability to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis or to return to pre-crisis status quickly. Resilience is built by using mental processes and behaviors that promote personal assets and protect us from the potential negative effects of stressors.

3. Mental Toughness

Mental toughness is a measure of your individual resilience and confidence that will predict success in life. It is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to cope better with the many demands (sports, competition, training, lifestyle) while remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure.

Similar to resilience, mental toughness also refers to the idea of being able to push past failures by remaining positive and competitive. It also involves knowing how to prepare to be mentally ready for whatever challenge comes your way.

Some wild animals (e.g. mountain lion) avoid being attacked, or hitting a shark on the nose to avoid being hurt.

Authenticity, Meaning, and Self-Esteem

The importance of preserving an 'authentic self' and maintaining a healthy self-esteem, and their impact in living a meaningful and fulfilling life, cannot be understated.

Research on authenticity, indicates that it is a vital source of meaning in life and optimal psychological functioning. It is positively related to critical outcomes such as self-actualisation, authentic expression, well-being, self-esteem, hope, and positive emotion. This is because being authentic or living your personal experience is purposeful and meaningful.

Benefits of Being Authentic

Authentic people:

- are more resilient
- don't need or seek the approval of others
- are more open and confident, and less defensive
- accept themselves and care less about self-criticism
- are less likely to conform to others at the drop of a hat
- know how to distance themselves from negative influences and people
- don't compare themselves to others or make less 'upward comparisons' (comparing themselves to those who they believe are better). This is a major problem for many people when using social media – particularly, for those with low self-esteem – for them "social networking is not working"! (Not to mention the link between cyberbullying and low self-esteem)

Simply put, authenticity is personal power!

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is how you value yourself (the self-evaluation evaluation of your own self-worth). It includes your judgment, attitude or beliefs about yourself. Like your physical health, is arguably your most important psychological asset to enjoy and succeed in life.

Your self-esteem determines confidence in your ability to cope with everyday life. It relates to your disposition to experience yourself as someone worthy of respect and being competent to cope with life – its challenges and adversities. By extension, your self-esteem affords you confidence in your ability to learn, make good decisions, and respond and adapt effectively to change.

Benefits of Self-Esteem

According to research, healthy or high self-esteem is correlated with:

- Persistence after failure (resilience)
- Achievement, success, and fulfilment
- Willingness to admit and correct mistakes
- Cooperativeness and the ability to manage change
- Rationality, intuitiveness, creativity, flexibility, and benevolence

Why Self-Esteem is Critical for Your Mental Health

The overlap between low self-esteem and anxiety/depression is well-known. Low self-esteem contributes to depression.

Having high self-esteem acts as a buffer against stress and anxiety. It also leads to confidence and self-assurance. People with high self-esteem are able to make commitments, keep their promises, and challenge themselves by setting and achieving demanding goals.

Conversely, the lack or low self-esteem has very pernicious consequences, including making you vulnerable to depression.

Lack of self-esteem is correlated with:

- Evasiveness and moodiness
- Irrationality, rigidity, denial or blindness of reality
- Fear, defensiveness, hostility, and over complaining
- Too much conformity, too much rebelliousness, and antisocial behaviour

Low self-esteem affects a lot of people. Regrettably, most of them are unaware of it and of the fact that it impacts their mental health. When those individuals attend psychotherapy to treat their anxiety and depression, they come to realise the underlying cause of their suffering is low self-esteem.

Low self-esteem leads to doubt and insecurity, indecision, hypersensitivity to criticism, guilt, and inability to make commitments, keep promises or deliver results.

People with low self-esteem prefer to stay with what's familiar, to remain in their comfort zones and avoid risks, thinking poorly of themselves – not feeling worthy of attention, care and respect. This is problematic because it usually leads to missed opportunities, poor performance, strained or conflicting relationships, loneliness and social isolation, poor physical health, unfulfilled potential, depression, anxiety, and general unhappiness or dissatisfaction in life.

In addition to the above, people with low self-esteem are especially vulnerable to, or present in some of the following behavioural patterns:

1. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** – feeling anxious and worried most of the time related to several aspect of everyday life.
2. **Impostor Syndrome** – doubts about your accomplishments by having persistent feelings of intellectual inadequacy and fear of being exposed as a 'fraud', despite evident success or external proof of your competence.
3. **Perfectionism** – The striving for flawlessness and setting extremely high-performance standards (often unrealistic), while being highly critical of yourself.
4. **Procrastination** – the tendency to avoid challenging, unpleasant or stressful tasks that are important, and replace them with less important or stressful tasks.
5. **Victimhood and Helplessness** – the belief of being helpless in the face of challenges, using self-pity to avoid their current situation, and often relying on others to rescuing them.

About Depression and Anxiety

Unlike other illnesses or disorders, there is [no simple explanation for what causes depression](#). It can be caused by multiple factors including: stresses (ranging from mild to severe); vulnerability; predisposition; ageing; biological, genetic, personality or psychological factors.

Based on my professional practice as a psychologist, as well as my personal experience in dealing with both depression, personal loss, and chemical dependency as a young man, I outline below some very common interrelated causes of depression.

1. Paying the price of moving on with unfinished business

How many times have you heard someone say, “I moved on from this”? Well, perhaps they have moved on, but does that equate to ‘dealing with’ the issues that needed to be dealt with? (e.g. unresolved or delayed grief). This, let’s call it ‘unfinished business’, surfaces in different areas of life (e.g. insomnia, irritability, anger, and be the catalyst to depression or relationships problems) and links directly to the next point.

2. The harmful effect of bottle up anger

The suppression of negative emotions (anger in particular) can cause psychological harm. If not dealt with, it drags you down, and eventually triggers helplessness – the sense of being unable to act or react to negative situations.

Unrecognised or unexpressed anger, over time, leads to depression and loneliness. It can also lead to passive aggression – the pattern of indirect resistance to the demands or requests of others, avoiding direct or clear communication, obstructionism, evading problems, fear of intimacy or competition, making excuses, blaming others, playing the victim, bluffing compliance with requests, being sarcastic or making negative compliments.

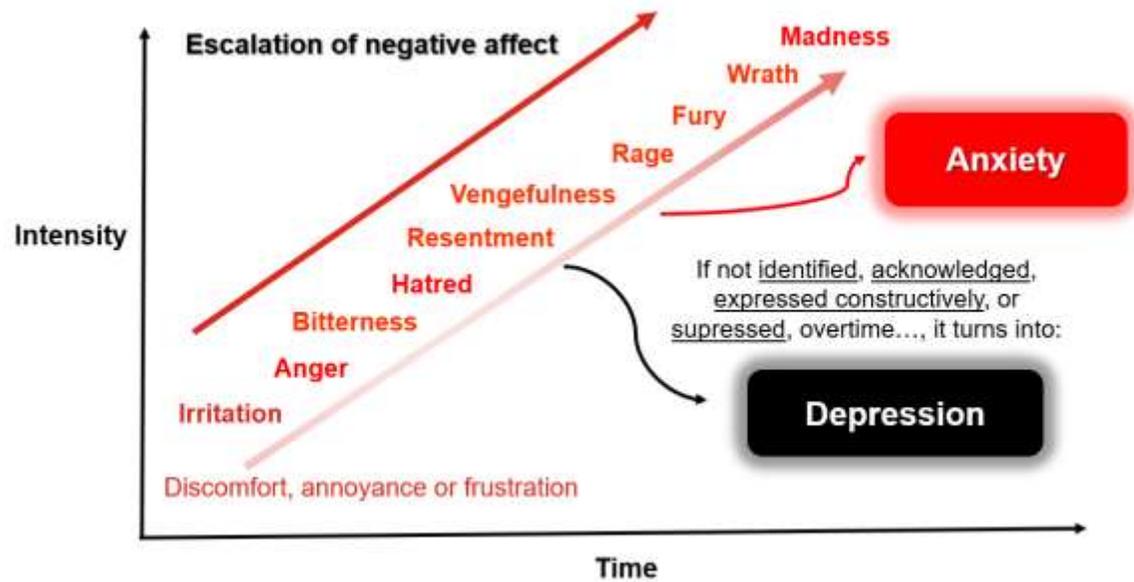
Escalation of negative emotions (e.g. anger)

Negative emotions, in themselves, are not bad – they are neutral. They are like data, or messages (produced and sent by your system) trying to tell you something important you should pay attention to. But if you don’t listen, or deal with or mask negative emotions, they escalate.

Hence the importance of being ‘emotionally intelligent’! This is your ability to recognise your emotions (and those of others), name them appropriately, own them, and facilitate, manage, regulate or adjust them effectively to your advantage.

Ignored/suppressed discomfort, annoyance or frustration, for example, progressively escalates into irritability, anger, hatred, resentment, rage, and madness. Let’s face it, these emotions are also energy, which needs to be expressed, managed or contained to maintain mental health.

The image in the next page illustrates this point.



Long-time, pent-up, unacknowledged or unexpressed, anger usually turns into depression, anxiety, despair, or even self-harm. It can also cause cardiovascular disease, heart attack, and stroke.

3. Inability to stand up for oneself

Following from the above, people who lack self-esteem find it extremely difficult to say 'NO' or to stand-up for themselves.

Whether they are aware of it or not, their 'philosophy' is that they 'always' need to be 'nice' to others, so others will like them. This is because they need excessive approval or recognition from others. They are terrified of being rejected, and are prepared to do whatever it takes to please others. Their self-esteem is very dependent on what other people think of them.

Most of these individuals ('people pleasers') are easily recognisable because they always pretend to agree with everyone and put a smile on their face! – regardless of what happens to them.

As a result, unwittingly or not, others walk all over them. In the worst-case scenario, they are bullied. As they cannot say 'no' or assert themselves, they internalised their anger, which often turns into resentment over time, and eventually depression.

True self-esteem requires avoiding self-betrayal or being disrespected. In fact, you can't be true to yourself (authentic) and betray your authenticity at the same time.

This, of course, doesn't mean one shouldn't act without kindness, generosity and compassion towards others. In fact, this is highly desirable, as long as you don't undermine or disrespect yourself in the process. People who respect themselves are assertive – that is, expressing themselves effectively and stand up for their point of view, while respecting the rights and beliefs of others.

Being assertive helps you to:

1. Control your stress and manage your anger
2. Boost your self-esteem and confidence
3. Earn respect from others

Conclusion

- Preventing mental illness by increasing mental health and psychological wellbeing is easier and far more cost-effective than treating illness
- Authenticity, self-esteem, and assertiveness are individual protective factors of psychological wellbeing
- Lack of authenticity negatively impacts your mental health and wellbeing
- Authenticity (being your 'true self') and self-esteem derive your true personal power
- Authenticity requires high levels of self-awareness and living consciously
- Low self-esteem is correlated with vulnerability to depression or anxiety
- Unrecognised or unexpressed anger, overtime, turns into passive aggression and/or depression
- Stress, depression, and anxiety can be prevented to a large degree by building and maintaining authenticity and self-esteem, and being assertive
- Being assertive preserves and builds your self-esteem



"Don't forget to love yourself."

—Søren Kierkegaard

Caveat

Having said all this, it doesn't necessarily mean that authenticity, self-esteem, and assertiveness are always the only or best means to prevent or cure certain mental health conditions (e.g. anxiety and depression).

This article has been written with absolute care, consideration, and based on current scientific or evidence-based research and practice, on the topics addressed. It does not constitute the provision of mental health or psychological advice by the author to the reader. Further, this article is not intended to be a guide to the diagnosis or treatment of any mental health issues neither should be taken as such.

Individuals experiencing depression or anxiety should always consult a healthcare professional in the first instance.

Disclaimer:

The content of this article is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not psychotherapy. Nothing found in this writing is intended to be a substitute for professional psychological, psychiatric or medical consultation, assessment, diagnosis, advice or treatment.

References

- Blomgren, L., & Strååht, J. (2019). *The role of authenticity in anxiety, depression and quality of life: An exploratory cross-sectional study*. <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/8968604>
- Branden, N. (1995). *The six pillars of self-esteem*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Incorporated
- Erler, A., & Hope, T. (2014). Mental disorder and the concept of authenticity. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 21(3), 219-232. <https://philpapers.org/rec/ERLMDA>
- Espiritu, R. T. M. (2014). *Authenticity and mindfulness: The processes involved in regulating depressive symptoms in day-to-day living*. https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/etd_masteral/4688
- Goldman, B. M., & Kernis, M. H. (2002). The role of authenticity in healthy psychological functioning and subjective well-being. *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association*, 5(6), 18-20. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2002-11420-003>
- Grijak, D. (2017). Authenticity as a predictor of mental health. *Klinička psihologija*, 10(1-2), 23-34. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-11433-002>
- Hallam, W., Olsson, C., Bowes, G., & Toumbourou, J. (2006). Being true to oneself: the role of authenticity in promoting youth mental health. *Youth Studies Australia*, 25(1), 28-32. <https://dro.deakin.edu.au/view/DU:30009212>
- Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2005). Authenticity, social motivation, and psychological adjustment. In J. P. Forgas, K. D. Williams, & S. M. Laham (Eds.), *Social motivation: Conscious and unconscious processes* (pp. 210–227). Cambridge University Press. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-19904-012>
- Lamb, A. J. (2016). The power of authenticity. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(6), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2016.706002>
- Salicru, S. (2021). A Practical and Contemporary Model of Depression for Our Times—A Timeless Existential Clinician's Perspective. *Open Journal of Depression*, 10(2), 54-89. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojd.2021.102005>
- Sheldon, K. M., Ryan, R. M., Rawsthorne, L. J., & Ilardi, B. (1997). Trait self and true self: Cross-role variation in the Big-Five personality traits and its relations with psychological authenticity and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(6), 1380–1393. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.6.1380>
- Theran, S. A. (2011). Authenticity in relationships and depressive symptoms: A gender analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(4), 423-428. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.04.001>
- YÜCEL, E., KARANFİL, D., & Emine, İ. N. A. N. (2020). Understanding the mental health implications of emotion regulation: A journey through authenticity. *Psikoloji Çalışmaları*, 40(2), 477-512. <https://doi.org/10.26650/SP2019-0042>

PTS PSYCHOLOGY

Empowering People Through Insightful Psychology Results

ptspsychology.com

© Sebastian Salicru

Author | Psychologist | Psychotherapist | Board-Approved Supervisor
PCC (Professional Certified Coach) | Leadership-Executive Coach, Facilitator & Advisor
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

