

“Who Am I?” – Identity Formation in Adolescence

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What is identity?

People can identify with lots of different groups, like their gender, race, nationality, or political party (just to name a few). A **personal identity is a cohesive sense of self**, and it includes ideas about all of these group identities, in addition to values and goals. If asked about their identity, someone might say something like “I’m an American woman, I want to make the world a better place, and I take care of my family.”

Identity in Adolescence

Many adolescents begin developing a sense of identity. They’re trying to answer the question “Who am I?” Lots of the things that teens do, like trying new activities or wearing different kinds of clothes, are part of their search for an identity. Even though identity development often begins during the teen years, it can be a life-long process; people can change the way they think about themselves when they experience changes in life, like starting a new job or becoming a parent.

“Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.”

- Oscar Wilde

How do teens develop an identity?

Psychologists who study identity have described two processes that are involved in identity development: **exploration**, which involves trying out different roles or options, and **commitment**, which involves committing to some aspect(s) of identity.¹

Identity Exploration

In order to try out different roles and options for themselves, teens might try things like:

- Hanging out with a new group of friends
- Trying new activities
- Learning more about something that interests them

Identity Commitment

There are lots of benefits associated with identity commitment. People who have committed to some aspect(s) of identity tend to experience **more self-esteem and life satisfaction, and fewer symptoms of depression or anxiety.**^{2,3}

Consequences of Engaging in Identity Exploration

Benefits:

- People who report high levels of exploration *and* high levels of commitment usually have the best outcomes
- Researchers have found that having engaged in identity exploration in the past is associated with facets of adaptive psychological functioning, like self-esteem and purpose in life⁴

Pitfalls:

- Exploring one's options for identity is associated with identity confusion, or feeling a lack of certainty about one's identity.
- People who are currently engaging in identity exploration and experiencing identity confusion might experience increased symptoms of depression or anxiety⁴

There are benefits associated with having explored one's identity, but the process of exploration can be unsettling and uncomfortable. Adolescents should be encouraged to explore their identity, but they might require some additional social and emotional support while doing so.

Tips for Supporting Identity Formation

- Role models can help adolescents imagine different roles or options for their future selves. Look for role models in your family, schools, or community.
- Talk about values, goals, and identities with teens. They may be interested to know how you made decisions about the kind of person you want to be.
- Try to support commitments that have been made. Identity commitments can help someone feel grounded and less confused while they engage in identity exploration.

References

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