

# Authenticity: The hidden quest

**T**hey always say that you write the book that you are meant to read, and I feel as though I have been humbled in that process as my first book prepares for release next month (Molyneux, 2026).

While the importance of authenticity has been at the heart of my practice, teaching, writing and values for many decades, I feel as though I am beginning to see more and more just how hard this process and commitment actually is. It is one thing knowing the importance of being true to yourself, as well accepting and being aware of our many processes and responses in life, but it is a whole other thing to be able to live this courageously, with the constant awareness that is required for this endeavour.

I have often presented the subject of authenticity and congruence through theory, or an attitude of encouragement, but I have most recently been in touch with the many ways in which we continually deny ourselves and our experience (i.e. inauthenticity) – and with very good reason.

Ultimately, we are all doing the best that we can with life and the many situations it presents to us. Each of us is made up of a unique collection of life lessons and experiences that provide the algorithm to our continued responses and behaviours.

While this is perfectly understandable and natural, the pressure point can be where we start to discover symptoms of not living more authentically – often without even realising that inauthenticity is the cause.

Whether this shows up as anxiety, depression, poor sleep, faltering relationships or burnout (to name just a few), these can often be the ways in which our body and mind show us that something is out of alignment. I believe a common source of this is a lack of authenticity or continued denial of our organic responses.

## Denial of self

When I was reflecting on my own process around this, I began to realise how easy it is to deny, or be completely disconnected from, some of the deeper processes and preferences that may represent the parts of ourselves that feel less acceptable.

Whether it be through bad experiences in the past or lessons that have been passed onto us (particularly while growing up), we learn ways of being that we think are more acceptable to others or give us a greater chance of being accepted or valued.

In reality, many of these shunned ways of being are likely to be more acceptable than we first think. We can often be our own worst critic and overemphasise the unacceptable nature of some of our most natural desires and responses.

We may have been taught that stating our preference is inconvenient, that we should be seen and not heard, always work hard or do not cause a fuss. Not abiding by these external rules will have probably come with consequences or judgements, as we were finding our way in the world. Rather than being explicitly taught to us, many of these things will have been implicitly communicated to us as a result of other people's preferences and, as time goes on, we then begin to absorb them as our own rules for life.

The denial of 'self' begins and we start to compound these earlier lessons, while simultaneously moving further away from our authentic selves.

## Where we look for answers

Maybe the greatest risk in all of this is that it is likely to happen to us without even noticing. We go about our lives, doing the best we can and then wonder why things do not feel like they used to or are faltering all around us. This can often be a process of reverse engineering: starting with the symptoms and working backwards to begin to discover where some of the roots may lie.

However, with the pressures of daily life, professional practice and the cost of living, this inquiry of reverse engineering may feel a luxury, often reserved for specific settings like counselling or other methods of self-inquiry. Given the pressures we face and limited capacity, a more common treatment plan for attempted symptom reduction can be just powering through and hoping it passes, a range of coping mechanisms that may attempt to paper over the cracks, but make things worse, or a medication that may diminish the feeling, but not ultimately treat the cause. Again, all very understandable ways of trying to deal with things as best we can.

We are also more likely to look externally rather than internally for solutions, continuing our prioritising of other people's preferences above our own. This can often result in a continuation of the unresolved psychological tension and add even more fuel to the fire of our well-intentioned seeking.

In person-centred theory, there is a belief that a common path to improved well-being is that we begin to listen to and trust our internal

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compass more. That is, that we move away from the familiar place of looking outside ourselves for approval and answers, and instead begin to give ourselves this same respect and authority.

This is not to say that we become self-righteous or superior, but just that we can begin to have trust and awareness of our own processes and preferences (as well as take into account our context and surroundings). The belief is that the more self-aware we are, the more authentic we can be.

In a sense, these are two sides of the same coin. Distress is increased the more we deny of ourselves and experience, and well-being is increased the more that we are aware of and accepting of our varying internal responses and ways of being.

Of course, this can be a very difficult tide to turn, especially in a world that often promotes the opposite. If answers and alignment lay within us, what does it mean to live in a world where we are increasingly encouraged to focus on image, performance, 'likes' and distraction? Systems that increase our disconnection and further erode the lack of trust and awareness of our own experience and needs.

There is no denying that this return to self may have entered a new level of challenge in the modern world. While rising mental health difficulties seem to validate Carl Rogers' person-centred theory that suppressing our authentic selves is harmful, it also makes the fight to reclaim ourselves all the more important (Rogers, 1951).

### A conscious effort

I know, for myself, there has needed to be a conscious effort to both tune out of much of the external chatter, as well as purposefully tune in to the internal data and processes. This could look like not reaching for my phone automatically as I am used to, deleting apps that are all too easy to casually check without even thinking about, turning off many of the notifications on my phone, or being purposeful in my intention and needs when I do think to move towards more external stimulus. Equally, we can use this newfound space to see how we are actually feeling at any given moment:

- What is my body telling me – is it tense and charged, or relaxed and purposeful?
- What are my thoughts and feelings telling me about what is most present – does my head feel full and overwhelmed, or clear and spacious?

I believe that much of this journey is a lot like gathering data. We are moving away from all the things that might get in the way of the endless amounts of data that are available to us

internally, but also being intentional in prioritising these internal stimuli and what this might inform us about what we most need or are experiencing in any given moment.

This is not to shun or abandon the many useful resources that we have at our disposal, but just that we are making our own, personal data centre the first and most important port of call. This can often give us a clearer picture, but also help us in being more aligned and complimentary to things we then choose to engage in and why.

### Towards an authentic life

I am under no illusion about the courage and commitment it takes to live a more authentic life. It is a lifelong process that continues to surprise me with the areas I was out of touch with or completely unaware of. Pair this with a world that is increasingly giving us reasons to disconnect, deny and distort ourselves and our experience, and we are faced with an increasingly challenging obstacle course on which to navigate our wellbeing and sense of self.

It can also be hard to know what we do not know! How do we assess our level of self-awareness and actually evaluate how much we might be out of touch with or are denying to ourselves?

If you are anything like me, it can begin to feel overwhelming if we look at the endless and unknown terrain of self-awareness that may lie ahead of us. I think we can only start where we are and commit to being willing and curious. We cannot know exactly what we might discover or the twists and turns that await us, but I do feel confident that it is a journey worth taking.

If we do choose to commit to a more authentic way of being, we will not only increase our wellbeing, but we will also begin to value and embrace the wonderfully unique and valuable parts of ourselves (and others). We find that many of the rules, judgements and conditions that we have lived by were never actually ours to begin with, and we can begin to reclaim our perfectly valid and idiosyncratic ways from those who have hijacked them.

I will continue to explore this topic in the next issue of *Wounds UK*, looking more at some of the barriers that stand in the way of our authenticity, as well as how we might begin to commit to this very precious process. And, of course, if you would like to go more in depth (or cannot wait that long!), then you may also find my new book useful. ●

### References

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