Self and Self-Concept

The picture you hold of who you are — and how it shapes how you feel

Self-concept is the collection of beliefs, labels and stories you have come to believe about yourself: what you are worth, what you are like, and what you can expect from life and other people. It usually forms before you have the words to question it, which is why it tends to feel less like an opinion and more like a fact. It is built from the earliest relationships you had, the role you were given, how you were comforted, and what happened to you.

Self-image

The picture of who you believe you are: the labels and roles you carry — capable, too sensitive, the sensible one, the peace-maker, difficult, needy.

Self-esteem

How much you value, approve of and feel worthy of that person. It can sit high in one area of life and very low in another.

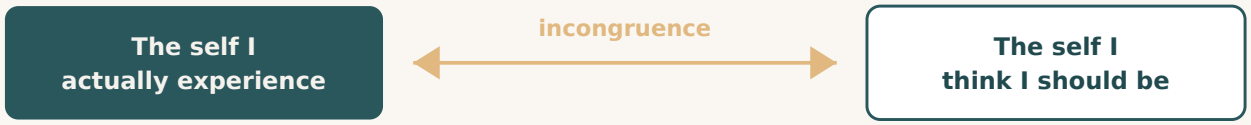
Ideal self

The person you think you should be — how you ought to look, achieve, feel and behave. We absorb this from others long before we choose it.

Where does it come from?

- The earliest relationships you had, and how reliably your needs were met.
- The place you found in your family — the responsible one, the quiet one, the one who coped.
- School, peers, teachers and coaches: the feedback you were given, and what you overheard.
- Culture, faith, money, gender expectations and, later, social media and comparison.
- What happened to you — loss, bullying, illness, discrimination, trauma, or a slow accumulation of small moments.

The gap where the strain lives



The wider the gap, the more effort an ordinary day takes.

None of this is a diagnosis, and none of it is a fault. A self-concept is learned — usually in relationship — and what is learned can be re-learned, at a pace that suits you.

How a self-concept can cause distress

Carl Rogers, one of the founders of person-centred therapy, noticed that we do not need other people's approval — but as children we need their love. So when love came with strings attached, we quietly traded parts of ourselves for it. The result is a gap between who you really are and who you believe you need to be. Rogers called that gap incongruence, and most of the unease people bring to therapy lives somewhere inside it.

Conditions of worth — “I’m only okay if…”

The rules you had to live by to be accepted. They sound small, but they run your life from underneath:

- “I’m only okay if I’m useful.”
- “I’m only okay if nobody is annoyed with me.”
- “I’m only okay if I’m not a burden.”
- “I’m only okay if I’m achieving.”

The inner critic

The harsh voice that comments on everything you do is rarely your own. It is usually an absorbed tone, phrase or look from years ago — repeated so often it now feels like your own judgement. That is why it lands as truth rather than opinion, and why arguing with it alone rarely works: you are reasoning with someone else’s verdict.

How it shows up day to day

What you notice	What may be underneath
Perfectionism, or never finishing things	A mistake feels like proof that you are not enough, so starting again feels dangerous.
Saying yes when you mean no	Your own needs feel less legitimate than everyone else’s.
Anxiety before ordinary situations	You are bracing to be seen, and then judged against the ideal self.
Shame after normal mistakes	One behaviour is read as your whole identity: “I was selfish” becomes “I am selfish”.
“I don’t know what I want”	Years of tracking other people’s moods has quietly buried your own preferences.
Staying where you are diminished	It matches the level of love you learned to expect, so it feels familiar rather than wrong.

A self-concept is a habit, not a personality test. It was learned in relationship, and it can change in relationship — including in the space of therapy, where you are met without conditions for a while.

Notice this week: one moment when you said “I’m fine” and meant the opposite. Don’t change it yet — just record what you were afraid would happen if you had told the truth.

Exercise: mapping and updating my self-concept

Give yourself about 20 quiet minutes, and write by hand if you can — it slows you down enough to notice what comes up. You do not have to finish in one sitting, and if anything here brings up something painful, that is a normal response: bring it to a session rather than pushing through it alone.

1 The labels I carry

Write the words you would use to describe yourself — the ones that come first, kind or unkind.

2 Whose voice are they?

For each label: who first said it, or showed it? When? What was happening in their life then?

3 The rules I live by

Finish these twice: "I'm only okay if..." and "I must never..." — the two you try hardest to keep.

4 Does the story fit all the evidence?

Choose the unkindest label. Write the evidence for it, then the evidence against — including every time you acted differently.

5 A kinder, truer description

Rewrite that label as you would to someone you love: same honesty, far less cruelty. What was missing from the old version?

6 One small step that fits

What is one action this week that fits the new description — small enough to feel believable?

Bring this sheet with you, or request a free 15-minute enquiry call at wellnesscp.co.uk/contact