

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.” – Oscar Wilde

Chapter 1

How to Be Yourself

By Jesse Yoder, PhD

What does it mean to Be Yourself? It might seem as if we could not help but be ourselves; after all, we can't be somebody else! Yet growing up in today's society, it seems like there are a lot of obstacles to being yourself. For starters, let's say that being yourself is doing something that genuinely represents what you want to do, or makes you happy. We'll look at some things that might stand in the way and then come back and see if we've learned anything.

Barriers to Being Yourself

You've probably encountered multiple barriers to being yourself:

Peer Pressure

Anyone who grows up in grade school and high school is going to experience peer pressure.

What is peer pressure? Peer pressure is the pressure from your classmates to act a certain way,



do certain things, look a certain way, or join certain groups.

People naturally want to “belong” to a group, so they try to do what they have to do to be in the group or be a part of the “popular” crowd. This might include smoking, drinking, doing drugs, being very thin, wearing popular clothes, or eating specific foods. Doing something you feel pressured to do isn't always bad, but it can be if it's unhealthy, or if it isn't what you really want to do.

What about the “pressure” part of peer pressure? Most people understand that intuitively, but it's worth trying to define it.

The idea of pressure is to exert force on someone or something to make them move in a certain direction or to do something.

Usually this pressure doesn't take the form of going up to someone and physically shoving them. Instead, the pressure is

experienced in the form of undesirable consequences that might happen if you fail to conform. If you don't conform to the school dress code, you might be kicked out of school. If you don't smoke, you think you can't be part of the popular crowd. College fraternities have their own set of guidelines that members have to conform to.

Often peer pressure takes the form of written or unwritten rules that define what group members have to do. Schools and other authorities typically write down and enforce dress codes and other rules. Social groups may not write down rules, but the members make it clear what happens if you don't follow them. Someone who is not in the "popular" crowd at school may not get invited to certain parties or other group activities.

This also applies to churches and religious groups. The Amish have a tradition called "shunning" that involves shutting people out of the community people who do not conform to required dress and other behavior patterns. Until recently, the dress code at most churches was either formal or what some people call business casual. This is changing as casual clothes become more widely accepted, including in business environments. Dress codes, whether written or unwritten, still prevail at most businesses.

Of course, there might be many different groups in school or other organization. In high school, I was never part of the "popular" crowd, but I started my own group of people who read Russian history once a week.

Parental Pressure

In many ways parental pressure is more difficult to deal with than peer pressure because during a certain period of a child's life, parents have an almost "life and death" control. They also have a range of "undesirable consequences" at their disposal, depending on the child's age. These range from spanking, withholding allowances, not allowing use of the family car, requiring children to maintain certain hours, etc.

As someone who grew up in the 1960s in a conservative, religious family, I experienced the repression that characterized the mindset of the 1950s. I remember not being allowed to listen to rock 'n roll or watch television. Expressing negative feelings like anger was frowned upon, and we were taught to repress them. Authority was to be respected, whether at home, at school, or at church. It wasn't until I started college that I was able to break free from these pressures. In college, I found enough like-minded people to become part of a group I could belong to and be myself.

Societal Pressure

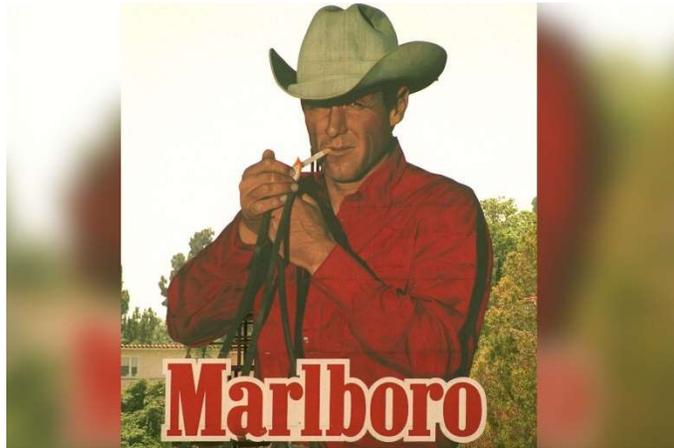
Besides peer pressure and parental pressure, societal pressure through media of all types attempts to force conformity from early childhood until old age. Growing up, young children, especially girls, are encouraged to conform to a certain – and changing -- look, body type, hair style, dress, makeup, and other aspects of appearance. This conformity is enforced by the promulgation of types of looks in models, advertising, television commercials, and in the adulation of those conforming to those looks in schools, cheerleading squads, and other school organizations.

Certain bodies are held up as "ideal" – women who are neither too tall nor too short, who have long or brunette hair, and who are either slender or bordering on anorexic, as in the case of some models. Young girls who attempt to conform to these "ideals" may find this difficult if they are

born short with the “wrong” body type or even a non-ideal hair color, although makeup and hair can be more easily changed. They may also develop eating disorders, low self-esteem, and other issues.

The same idea applies to men, sometimes with dangerous consequences. For many years, the “Marlboro Man,” lighting up from under a cowboy hat, sometimes on a horse, was held up as an ideal of masculinity that symbolized the ruggedness of men who smoked

Marlboros. The “Marlboro Man” commercials began in 1955 when executives decided to change their marketing focus from a woman’s cigarette to one appealing more to men. Wayne McLaren, a stuntman, actor, and rodeo rider, posed as the Marlboro Man in 1976. He died of lung cancer in 1992 at the age of 51. Another actor who played this role, David McLean, died of lung cancer in 1995 at the age of 72.



Eric Lawson, an actor who played this role in print ads from 1978 to 1981, died at 72 of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in 2014. The “Marlboro Man” of the television commercials was Robert Norris, a rancher and close friend of the actor John Wayne. He was unique among Marlboro Men in that he did not smoke. He gave up the role after 14 years, saying it was a bad example for his children. He lived until the age of 90, dying in November 2019.

It wasn’t only in commercials that cigarettes were promoted in the 20th century. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, cigarettes played a prominent role on television shows such as *Perry Mason*, *The Saint*, the James Bond movie series, and many other popular shows. At that time, smoking was allowed on airplanes, so many movies featured airline passengers smoking. Most of these were not overtly promoting a particular brand, although the tobacco industry supported of cigarettes in positive situations to encourage smoking in general, perhaps with a glimpse of a particular brand. In shows, smoking served as a kind of prop for generating interaction among the characters. Asking someone for a light or a cigarette was often a conversation starter. In the James Bond movie *From Russia with Love*, “Do you have a match?” served as a kind of code for the interaction of the SMERSH agent and James Bond.

It wasn’t only smoking that was popularized by commercials, TV shows, and movies. James Dean is widely credited with popularizing jeans in the 1955 movie *Rebel Without a Cause* by wearing Lee Rider’s 101. Prior to that, Marlon Brando wore Levi’s 501 jeans in the 1953 film *The Wild One*. After that, Elvis Presley further popularized jeans in the 1957 movie *Jailhouse Rock*. Jeans suddenly became popular, and denim sales quadrupled between 1957 and 1960. In

1959, a movie called *Blue Jeans* depicted denim-induced teen pregnancy. At the same time, jeans became a symbol of rebellion and anti-establishment feelings. Many schools banned the wearing of jeans.

In the 1950s, teens wore jeans to sock hops. In the 1960s and 1970s, jeans became a symbol of a social movement. In the 1960s, for instance, students wore jeans to music festivals. And in the late 1960s and 1970s, young people wore them to mass protest gatherings. In the 1980s and 1990s, jeans became more mainstream, and were worn by the characters on *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, and many other shows. They began penetrating the workplace, where the phrase “business casual” suddenly appeared. However, many businesses made it clear that they did not consider jeans to be “business casual,” and some relegated jeans to “casual Fridays.”

People Want to Belong

Almost everyone wants to be accepted and to feel that they belong. The problem comes when the price of belonging conflicts with someone’s core self, or when it makes them unhappy. In the movie *Whip It*, the main character Bliss (Ellen Page) was pressured by her mother, a former beauty queen, to participate in beauty pageants. What she really wanted to do was be a part of the “Hurl Scouts” roller derby team. Eventually her success as a “Hurl Scout” forced her to make a choice between staying on the team and pleasing her mother.

It is not unusual for parents to want their children to either do what they did or to do what they never could accomplish. My father built and rehabilitated houses all his life. While I never felt pushed in a certain career direction, I always got the feeling that he equated “work” with “manual labor.” I couldn’t stand manual labor and ended up pursuing a career of writing and philosophy. This is something I chose for myself.

It is not uncommon for parents to disown or otherwise shut out children who choose the “wrong” career, or who refuse to marry someone the parents want them to marry. The tragic story of Romeo and Juliet, while fictional, is a story of two people who want to be together but are forbidden by their feuding families from marrying. More recently, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle left the British royal family and moved to America so that they could live their lives on their own terms.

“Allure” magazine did a series of interviews with girls from age 5 to 18. In these interviews, young girls reveal that they feel pressured to look or dress a certain way, or to have a certain body type, or type of hair. Many of them cite pressure from looking at popular magazines or from television commercials, and also from seeing how famous people look. There is a lot of emphasis for girls on being thin, sometimes unrealistically so. Another issue is whether their hair is straight or curly, short or long. One dynamic at work here too is that people often wish they were what they are not, whether it’s tall or short, blonde or brunette, thin or average. This is just human nature. Yet the pressure to look a certain way is very real and created a great deal of unhappiness and insecurity in those girls interviewed.

Being Yourself

With such a multitude of influences and pressures, how is anyone to be themselves, or maintain their authenticity? How are we to distinguish desires or goals that are “truly our own,” as



opposed to those that are imposed on us by peer pressure, parental pressure, or societal norms? This is not always easy, but part of the answer lies in the difference between being “outer directed” or “inner directed.”

Outer directed. Someone who is outer directed takes their goals and life pattern from someone or something outside of himself or herself. For example, a high school student may decide to go to the college their parents want them to go to. Someone in a popular group who is outer directed may let the norms

of the group determine how they dress, what food they eat, who they associate with, and how seriously they take school. Outer-directed employees rely on others to determine their hours, what projects they work on, and what they wear. Of course, in many cases this is the definition of being an employee, but it also helps explain why some people don’t like their jobs.

An outer-directed person is also more likely to be influenced by advertising, by what is “popular,” and by society’s norms. Such a person doesn’t have to be a “goody two shoes” (a phrase popularized by a children’s story published by John Newbury in 1765), but they are more likely to conform to the expectations of others. These “others” could be parents, church leaders, a peer group, or the expectation of the society they live in.

Inner directed. John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher and political economist, gives us some guidance on being an inner-directed person. In his essay, “On Liberty,” he talks about the ideal of individuality, and the importance of making one’s own decisions about fundamental issues in life. Mill says, “A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character.” (Mill, “On Liberty,” page 189). The concept of “being yourself” that I am developing here is quite close to the concept of individuality that Mill describes later in the essay. In the third chapter, Mill contrasts someone who makes up their own mind about how to lead their life with someone who simply conforms to what society dictates.

Do we choose our desires, as Mill would have us believe? Aren’t desires simply there, without being chosen? In today’s world of advertising, in which ads are prevalent in every medium, it is sometimes difficult to know when a desire is our own and when it is simply the result of constant advertising. Of course, some desires are natural, like the desire for sex and the desire for food. But desires for specific products like Pepsi or a new Lexus are conditioned by ads we see for

these products. Obviously, these ads are intended to influence our desires, and often they have the intended effect.

We are not born with a blank slate; people are born with different interests and tendencies. As part of our development, we may choose to reject certain desires and impulses as not being representative of who we really are. Or, we may acknowledge certain desires, but choose not to act on them due to the consequences. Making these choices is part of developing a theory of life. If this theory of life is based on a coherent philosophy of life, the chances of internal conflict are reduced.

What is the Self?

Much has been written by philosophers and psychologists about what the “self” is. One intuitive way to understand the self is “**the center of decision making and set of core values, feelings, and emotions.**” Most people understand what it is to make a decision. Our core values are the fundamental ones that determine our character. These are not more fleeting values like “I will eat mostly protein.” Instead, they are values like honesty, a love for expression, love for other people, and a desire to be successful.” These are values that define who we are at a fundamental level and shape our entire life pattern.

We are constantly having to make choices. Some of these choices are so called “no brainers,” like the decision to get up in the morning. Others involve a choice between doing what we want to do, or feel is right to do, and what others expect. If someone is prohibited from wearing jeans to work, they will most likely choose to wear the expected clothes than risk losing their job. (Although in my case, the desire to wear jeans was one factor that ultimately propelled me to have my own company.) When choosing what to eat or drink, we are influenced by what tastes good and also what is healthy (though not everyone cares about being healthy). Students in college have to balance studying vs. “having fun.” People in businesses have to decide how much to work, or whether to “float by” by doing the minimum. All these decisions influence who we are and are a reflection of our core values.

In some cases, people may internalize some outer-directed norms and make them their own. If being thin is “in,” some people will go to great lengths to lose weight so they can attain a certain figure. I am one of them. While I concede that being thin is a society-induced pressure point, I justify this by believing that I will be healthier if I work out and eat wisely so as to lose weight and also look thin. I care about how I look and I prefer to look thin. People learn to identify themselves with certain brands of cars, food, jeans, and other commodity products. This is not just being outer directed; it is consciously making a certain brand a part of one’s self.

One of my favorite television shows is called *Squawk Box*, which airs on weekday mornings on the business cable channel CNBC. In a recent episode, Joe Kernen, a stock analyst, said to another commentator, Liz Claman, “Our ratings would go through the roof if you would just be yourself more often.” While it is difficult for television commentators to be themselves on the

air, since much of what they say is scripted, *Squawk Box* is so popular partly because it is unscripted, and the commentators are not afraid to be themselves. Tim Russert also credited the “Be Yourself” philosophy as the key to his ability to feel at ease when he was moderating *Meet the Press*.

What it is to Be Yourself

Being yourself involves making a decision to act in a way that expresses your core values, feelings, and emotions. Core feelings and emotions include love, hate, anger, pleasure, fear, jealousy, and happiness. Cataloging the emotions and explaining how they exist within the self is a complex subject that is beyond the scope of this discussion. The famous French philosopher René Descartes attempts this in his treatise, *The Passions of the Soul*. But a few examples should help make this clearer.

Someone who has to choose between marrying someone they love and someone their parents choose for them may have to decide between happiness and some other unpleasant consequences. The parents may disown the person if they make the “wrong” decision or may stop supporting them.

A career choice is another example. Some people choose to do what makes them happy, while others choose based on money, even if the work isn’t enjoyable. Some people just have to work whether the work is enjoyable or not. People have to decide whether to be “true to themselves” or whether the advantage of an “outer-directed” goal outweighs this choice.

Ideally, we would be true to ourselves in as many situations as possible. Unfortunately, life isn’t always conducive to that. Some people are born into circumstances that give them few choices, and “being yourself” has to remain an ideal they can never achieve. This is true, for example, of people who can only choose from jobs they don’t enjoy. Some people never meet that one special person, and some people never fall in love. More common is that someone loves someone else who doesn’t return this love, while the other person is in love with someone totally different. The novel *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham is full of such tragic situations and it is a common theme in many movies, books, and television shows. It is a common theme because, sadly, it is a common experience and one might say, “To live is to know it.”

My Own Struggle to Be Myself

I have spent most of my life from childhood until today in the struggle to be myself. In grade school and high school, I was never part of the “popular” group, and never felt that I belonged. But I took my classes very seriously and learned as much as I could during this time. When I started college, I planned to go into either drama or philosophy. I took a course in each subject and fell in love with philosophy. I studied philosophy all through college and went on to get a PhD in philosophy of mind.

While writing my PhD dissertation, I started writing software manuals. After spending over two years at two technical writing jobs, I was laid off from both. My second job was with Wang

Labs and the industry was undergoing fundamental change. I taught technical writing at Northeastern University for a year, but this job ended after a year.

I had put a lot of extra effort into all three jobs but was laid off from all three. I decided I may as well work for myself; then at least the extra effort will be for a purpose. I also wanted to wear jeans to work. So, in 1986, I started my first company, Idea Network. I then accepted an opportunity to write software training manuals for Siemens, which was my introduction to process control. In 1991, I switched from technical writing to market research, working for five different companies until 1998, when I founded Flow Research.

I had to make some practical decisions along the way that limited my ability to be myself. After receiving my PhD in philosophy in 1984, I found it impossible to get a teaching job in philosophy, due to a market heavily oversupplied with new PhDs and a limited number of positions. My choice then was to start my own business. This had the advantage that I could be more self-directed, but it was hard to sustain a regular income at first. Working for Siemens paid better, and I was working in a relaxed atmosphere. When I made the switch to market research in 1991, I found that it didn't pay as well, and I had to work much harder to make ends meet.

After writing a dozen or so market research studies, I realized that in order to do a good job, I needed to understand the markets I was writing about. In 1993 I decided to focus on flow and instrumentation. This was also a way to integrate my love for philosophy of mind with market research. Since I view the mind as a biological sensor, I thought that by studying mechanical and electronic sensors, I would learn more about the mind. I addressed this subject in the book *The Tao of Measurement: A Philosophical View of Flow and Sensors*, which I cowrote with Dick Morley. This is a subject I am still working on.

In retrospect, my decision to start my own business was a key turning point in my life. I wanted to teach philosophy, but that avenue was not open to me at the time. I ended up continuing to do technical writing for 3 ½ years. At the same time, I became an adjunct philosophy professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and later on at Lafayette College. Making the switch from technical writing to market research was more difficult financially, especially at first, but I found it more fulfilling.

My life examples are typical of what many people go through – a lot of people find they have to compromise or change their career goals to meet the reality of the economy, their training, or what happens to be available to them. In my case, however, I ultimately found a career that was satisfying and allowed me to apply my philosophy in real life.

Being Yourself in Multiple Areas

Being yourself is not just one thing – it has many dimensions, and it is a matter of degrees. Perhaps you can be yourself at work in the clothes you wear, but you find it difficult to be yourself with your supervisor or manager. Or, if you are a supervisor or manager, you may find it difficult to be yourself with your direct reports. In some work situations, rules or norms that

govern employee interactions may override the need or ability of people to be themselves. For example, if you are given an assignment you clearly do not want, you may decide to do it anyway and not say anything because keeping your job is more important to you than expressing your feelings about the assignment. Perhaps the next assignment will be more to your liking.

This is why the idea of values is so important to the idea of the self. We can to some extent control the kind of person we are by deciding on our most important values. Keeping one's job is likely to be high up in the list of important values, and so will govern when you get up, go to bed, go to lunch, and how you interact with others at work. If you are fortunate enough to work at something you truly enjoy or love, then keeping that position is equally important. The difference is that you are more likely to find your work more fulfilling than someone who doesn't like their job.

Being yourself in interactions with other people is one of the most difficult aspects of remaining true to yourself. This is especially true in dealing with one's parents, one's siblings, or in dealing with anyone with authority over us. It is not that you can't tell these people how you feel about them – it's that the consequences of doing so are such that it may not be worth doing so. My mother was a deeply religious person and was constantly pressuring me to attend church. I found church boring, especially the sermons, and I hated to dress up to go. She won this battle in grade school and much of high school, but once I was in college and on my own, I was able to make my own decisions about church.

In fact, I think that churches would be more successful if they changed their format to appeal to a younger generation. The order of the services in some churches today is much the same as it was 30 or 40 years ago. This could help explain why most people who attend church today appear to be over 50 or 60 years old. There is little chance for self-expression at church, apart from the occasional hymn.

So in some cases, we have to repress our desire to be ourselves because that value is outweighed by the desire to keep a job, or to maintain harmonious relationships with other people. If you really tell your boss what you think of him or her, you may find yourself without a job. You may find that you have to be selective in what you share with your parents about your activities. This is not really a form of dishonesty; it is simply a recognition that the importance of certain relationships outweighs the value of being totally yourself with these people. You may feel that you are being "fake," but this goes back to our concept of being yourself as expressing your core values. If one of your core values is keeping a good relationship with your employer and/or people at work, then this value may outweigh the value of being yourself with people who you need to maintain a good relationship with, whether you are forced to be "fake" or not.

People who Seem Incapable of Being Themselves

I know some people who seem incapable of acting spontaneously, or who seem to rehearse everything they say in their head before they say it. Even though I have known some of these

people for a number of years, I haven't felt comfortable pointing this out to them. These people either do not know what it is like to be themselves, or they at least can't be themselves around me. Likewise, I find that I can't be myself around them.

I think the key to understanding these people is to look back at the idea of being yourself as the expression of core values, feelings, and emotions. Some people have repressed their feelings and emotions so completely that they have lost touch with them. These people speak from their head and not from their heart. It is possible to repress feelings by consciously preventing yourself from exhibiting the behavior associated with the feeling or emotion. This is as true of "positive" emotions like love as it is of "negative" emotions like hatred and anger. Someone who consistently represses the expression of these feelings and emotions may lose the ability to recognize them and may also lose the ability to express them. Therapy is probably the best course of action for these people.

Being Yourself is a Matter of Degree

Because of the number of barriers to being yourself, and the number of situations in which you have to compromise your true nature or feelings, you may find that the number of situations in which you can be fully yourself is limited. If you can't be totally yourself at work, with your parents, or with your siblings, then the number of situations in which you can be yourself is limited. Perhaps you can be yourself with your friends, or you have a creative hobby that gives you an outlet for your internal need and desire to express yourself.

Alternatively, maybe you can find a project at work that you can really put yourself into and make a positive contribution. You might find some co-workers that you can freely share your feelings with. You might even find that there are some subjects that you can be honest with your parents or siblings about. This may take some time because, like people say, you can't choose your relatives. Sometimes you can choose your co-workers or improve your job situation, however. After two years of being a software writer at Wang Labs, I was able to lobby to become the Education Coordinator for the technical writing department. I found this more satisfying than being a technical writer because I was able to recruit people to give training classes to the technical writing department.

The more people you can be yourself with, open up to, and be honest with, the more you will be an authentic person. I find, though, that sometimes it is just as easy to "play a role" in dealing with people and I don't always feel the need to get involved in a personal way with the people I'm dealing with. For example, when buying groceries or going out to eat, I sometimes find it simplifies my life just to say "Fine, thank you," when the clerk says the obligatory "How are you?" If I feel communicative or not in a hurry, I might make a personal comment to the clerk, but this is not always the case. My values are such that in some situations, getting through a line or paying a bill outweighs my desire to express myself.

Summary: **Pick and choose your battles.** In some cases, it is not advisable to express your feelings and emotions. Doing so may jeopardize a more important relationship or circumstance in your life. Even so, you may be able to find areas of the relationship that lend themselves to self-expression. In the meantime, try to focus on other areas in your life where being yourself and self-expression are possible. This could be with friends, in a hobby, or in just doing things on your own where you are in complete control of the situation. Examples are posting to Facebook, posting to YouTube, watching TikTok, listening to music, watching a movie or TV show, reading a book, writing an article or a book, or traveling within the country or internationally.

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Please send comments to Jesse Yoder at jesse@flowresearch.com. Thank you!