

REAL SELF

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 15, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *REAL SELF*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=47865>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Psychodynamic Theory, Existentialism

1. Core Definition

The **Real Self**, often referred to as the genuine or true self, represents the totality of an individual's innate potential, unique wishes, authentic emotions, and inherent capacity for personal growth. It is the internal nucleus of personality--a dynamic, yet stable, core that drives the individual toward self-actualization and fulfillment, provided external constraints do not interfere. This concept stands in stark contrast to socially imposed expectations or pathological attempts to construct an image, emphasizing the intrinsic value and goodness of the person before societal molding takes place.

In its purest form, the Real Self is neither perfect nor flawless; rather, it is characterized by **authenticity** and a deep awareness of one's own subjective experience. It encompasses both conscious and unconscious drives, centering on what the individual truly is, rather than what they feel they ought to be. This foundational concept is critical within humanistic thought, particularly in the work of theorists like Carl Rogers, who viewed the restoration and nurturing of the Real Self as the primary goal of psychotherapy.

The maintenance of the Real Self requires psychological congruence, meaning that an individual's internal experience aligns truthfully with their external behavior and communication. When this alignment is achieved, the individual operates from a position of integrity, making choices that truly reflect their organismic needs and unique developmental trajectory. Conversely, when the environment forces an individual to adopt a **False Self** or strive toward an unattainable **Ideal Self**, the Real Self becomes submerged, leading to neurosis, anxiety, and deep-seated dissatisfaction.

2. Historical Development and Context

The philosophical roots of the Real Self concept can be traced back to ancient Greek notions of "knowing thyself" and the existential emphasis on authenticity. However, the term gained prominence as a psychological construct during the mid-20th century with the rise of the humanistic school of thought, often termed the "third force" in psychology, standing against the deterministic views of Freudian psychoanalysis and the mechanistic models of behaviorism.

Key figures such as Abraham Maslow laid the groundwork by focusing on human potential and the hierarchy of needs, asserting that humans possess an innate drive toward self-actualization. This inherent striving for growth became synonymous with the expression of the Real Self. The humanistic movement sought to shift the focus of psychological study away from pathology and toward health, personal responsibility, and the subjective experience of the individual.

While the term is most robustly developed in humanistic theory, variations of the concept also appear in psychodynamic contexts. Karen Horney, a neo-Freudian, extensively explored the tension between the "Actual Self" (which is closely related to the Real Self, representing the person as they currently are, with all their imperfections) and the "Idealized Image" (a neurotic construct designed to compensate for perceived shortcomings). Horney's work highlighted how attempts to escape the Real Self result in the formation of rigid, defensive personality structures.

3. Carl Rogers' Perspective: The Organismic Self

Within Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Therapy (PCT), the Real Self is often conceptualized as the **Organismic Self**. This is the biological and psychological core that is guided by the Organismic Valuing Process (OVP)--an innate ability to assess experiences accurately based on whether they maintain or enhance the organism. Healthy infants are viewed as fully functioning individuals whose actions are congruent with their OVP, fully expressing their Real Self.

Rogers argued that problems arise when children are introduced to **Conditions of Worth**, typically imposed by parents or society. These conditions dictate that love and acceptance are contingent upon behaving in ways that contradict the OVP. For example, a child may learn to suppress genuine anger (part of the Real Self) because their caregivers only accept "nice" behavior. This external pressure forces the individual to deny aspects of their true experience, leading to incongruence and the construction of a self-concept based on others' expectations, rather than reality.

Therapy, according to Rogers, is the process of peeling back the layers of these imposed conditions to allow the client to reconnect with their Real Self. Through the therapeutic relationship characterized by **unconditional positive regard**, empathy, and congruence on the part of the therapist, the client can safely explore their denied experiences and integrate them back into a unified, authentic self-concept. The goal is to move from a state of defensiveness and rigidity to a state of psychological freedom where the individual can fully experience the present moment and trust their own inner guidance.

4. Karen Horney's Perspective: The Actual vs. Idealized Self

Karen Horney approached the Real Self from a psychoanalytic perspective, focusing on the interplay between self-perception and neurosis. She defined the "Actual Self" as the self as it exists at any given moment--the combination of potential and reality. However, she emphasized that neurotic individuals often develop an "Idealized Image" in an attempt to escape the painful reality of their Actual Self, which is often viewed critically (the "Despised Self").

Horney's concept of the Real Self represents the healthy potential inherent in the person--the possible self that could emerge if the individual successfully overcame their neuroses and

embraced their actual characteristics without denial or distortion. The **Real Self**, for Horney, is the underlying force striving toward wholesome development and true self-realization, often obscured by the neurotic pursuit of the unattainable Idealized Image.

The neurotic search for glory involves striving relentlessly to actualize the Idealized Image, leading to severe self-alienation. The individual confuses the idealized, perfect self with their genuine self, resulting in self-contempt when they inevitably fail to meet impossible standards. The therapeutic task, in Horney's framework, is to help the patient relinquish the neurotic claims of the Idealized Image and accept the inherent limitations and strengths of their actual, imperfect, but authentic Real Self.

5. Key Characteristics of the Real Self

The Real Self manifests through a set of distinctive psychological and behavioral characteristics that reflect a state of psychological health and integration. These traits distinguish the authentic individual from those living under the constraint of external expectations or defensive neuroses.

One crucial characteristic is **congruence**, which is the alignment between what is experienced internally (feelings, thoughts) and what is expressed externally (behavior, communication). A person operating from the Real Self is transparent and genuine, not needing to adopt masks or roles. Another key trait is **openness to experience**. This involves a non-defensive stance toward both positive and negative internal feelings and external events, allowing for continuous learning and emotional processing without filtering or distortion.

Furthermore, the Real Self is characterized by **authenticity**, a deep sense of personal responsibility, and a flexible, creative approach to life's challenges. The individual trusts their inherent wisdom (the OVP) and displays an internal locus of evaluation, relying on their own feelings and judgment rather than seeking constant external validation. This self-reliance fosters robust self-esteem rooted in reality, rather than fragile, contingent esteem dependent on performance or approval.

Congruence: Harmony between experience and awareness.

Acceptance: Unconditional positive regard for oneself, including flaws.

Spontaneity: Ability to react genuinely to situations without predetermined scripts.

Self-Determination: Actions are driven by internal motives rather than external pressure.

Creative Potential: Utilization of unique talents and inherent capacity for growth.

6. Contrast with the Ideal Self and False Self

Understanding the Real Self is clearest when it is contrasted with two related but distinct concepts: the Ideal Self and the False Self. The **Ideal Self**, particularly in Rogers' terminology, is the person

one feels they should be or want to be, often incorporating goals and values absorbed from society, parents, or peer groups. While having goals is healthy, when the Ideal Self is drastically disconnected from the Real Self, it creates painful tension and anxiety, forcing the individual into a state of perpetual striving and self-rejection.

The **False Self** (a concept often associated with D.W. Winnicott, though applicable here) is a defensive structure adopted primarily to meet the demands of a critical or non-responsive environment. It functions as a protective shield, sacrificing authenticity for the sake of survival and acceptance. While the Ideal Self is something one strives *for*, the False Self is a behavioral persona one *performs*. Crucially, both the Ideal Self and the False Self inhibit the expression of the Real Self, leading to a life lived in alienation from one's true desires and emotions.

The individual dominated by the Ideal or False Self often suffers from chronic feelings of emptiness, fraudulence, or meaninglessness because their actions are not sourced from their core identity. Recovery and psychological maturation involve abandoning these defensive constructs and embracing the less glamorous but infinitely more rewarding task of simply being the Real Self--imperfect, growing, and authentic. The integration of the self occurs when the self-concept (how one sees oneself) begins to match the organismic experience (the Real Self).

7. Significance in Therapeutic Practice

The concept of the Real Self forms the ethical and practical cornerstone of humanistic and existential therapies. The primary objective is not merely symptom reduction but the facilitation of **self-discovery** and the integration of previously denied aspects of experience, thereby allowing the Real Self to emerge and guide behavior.

In therapeutic settings, the recognition and acceptance of the client's Real Self is achieved through the therapist's establishment of the "core conditions," particularly unconditional positive regard. This non-judgmental acceptance creates the necessary psychological safety for the client to drop their defenses and explore their deepest feelings and contradictory impulses without fear of rejection. This process enables the client to challenge their internalized Conditions of Worth and transition from an external locus of evaluation to an internal one.

Furthermore, understanding the Real Self is vital in treating personality disorders and neuroses rooted in self-alienation, such as those described by Horney. Helping the client recognize the gap between their neurotic Idealized Image and their actual, resourceful self is the catalyst for genuine change. When the individual ceases the exhausting effort of maintaining a perfect façade, the energy previously spent on defense becomes available for constructive personal growth, allowing their true potential--the core definition of the Real Self--to be realized.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound influence on clinical practice, the concept of the Real Self faces several academic and empirical criticisms. One major critique stems from its basis in humanistic philosophy, which often prioritizes subjective experience over quantifiable data, making the concept difficult to operationalize and test empirically. Critics argue that the inherent goodness and innate growth potential attributed to the Real Self are philosophical assumptions rather than verifiable psychological facts.

Another significant challenge relates to cultural specificity. Critics argue that the emphasis on radical **individual authenticity** and internal self-reliance may be heavily biased toward Western, individualistic cultures. In collectivist societies, the healthy expression of the self often involves harmonious integration within the group structure, where self-definition is relational rather than purely autonomous. What constitutes the "Real Self" might thus vary significantly across cultural contexts.

Finally, there is debate regarding the stability of the concept itself. Postmodern and social constructionist perspectives argue that the self is not a fixed, singular entity but a fluid collection of narratives constructed through social interactions. From this view, searching for a single, unchanging "Real Self" is a misguided endeavor, as the self is constantly being re-created in response to context and language. Nonetheless, for practitioners, the Real Self remains a powerful, aspirational concept guiding psychological healing toward wholeness and integrity.

Further Reading

[Carl Rogers \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Karen Horney \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Self-Actualization \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Congruence \(Psychology\) \(Wikipedia\)](#)