

Eudaimonia: The Aim of Therapy

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.

- Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*

Eudaimonia (εὐδαιμονία) is a Greek word that combines *Eu*, meaning *well, good, easy, enriched, or abundant*, and *daimon*, which refers to the complex Greek concept of *supernatural power*. Eudaimonia essentially translates as “*good supernatural/holy/otherworldly spirit*”. The word is also associated with *well-being, human flourishing, and good life*. Eudaimonia is the opposite of *Noseo* (νοσέω), meaning *ill-being and mental and physical unwellness*. It is no secret that humans (and all life forms) want the good and do not want the bad.

Much of psychotherapy, coaching, personal training, physical therapy, self-help, etc., involves identifying your unique good and addressing what prevents you from having it. Psychotherapy, in particular, aims to help you develop the knowledge and organization of the Self so that you can live a life that is good for you and others. The following addresses these questions: What is the Self? What is Eudaimonia (healthy Self)? How do you build Eudaimonia? How does a therapist help you build Eudaimonia?

I write this essay as an attempt to explain primarily to myself the nature of the goal of my work as a therapist and a client, as well as to describe the environment of the human psyche that I experience as “geometrical” for lack of a better word. What I mean by geometrical is that it is organized and has a visuospatial feel. My exploration is foundational, and I attempt to avoid going into too great of detail on anything because I want the underlying scaffolding of the psyche as I sense it to come into relief. I’ve used formatting and color-coding on key terms because I am describing diagrams. I find that when I describe diagrams in paragraphs, the meaning can become murky without some visual aids for the reader.

Before I continue, I want to acknowledge Dr. Paul Conti. As I began working on this piece, I happened upon his discussion with Andrew Huberman on the Structure and Function of Self and his definition of a “healthy self.” I felt inspired to expand on these concepts as I experience them. I also want to acknowledge Dick Swartz, Ph.D., founder of Internal Family Systems. I use some of his language when talking about the Self and parts. The work of these two people, along with many others, helps me put words to how I sense the structure of the human psyche in myself and my clients.

The first part of this essay has a technical philosophical feel to it. If you do not like that kind of writing but want some practical thoughts on how to build Eudaimonia, skip ahead to the section called *Healthy Character Structure (Eudaimonia) vs. an Unhealthy Character Structure (Noseo)*.

What is the Whole Self?

Color Coded Key of Terms

Whole Self = "I am"

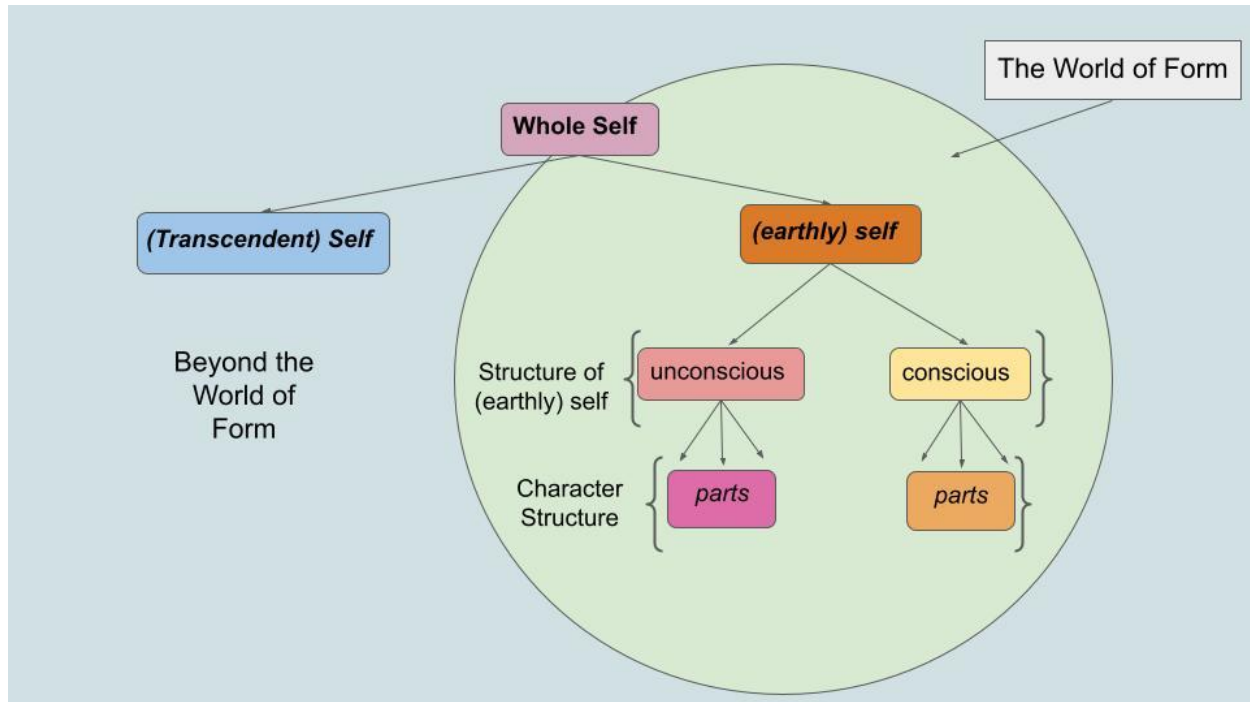
Transcendent, capital-S Self = the higher self; feels like the "true" self to the Whole Self

earthly, lowercase-s self = the ego/vehicle ridden/driven by the Whole Self to navigate the World of Form

Structure of self = the organization of ego/vehicle

Function of self = the action of the ego/vehicle

Character Structure = the temperament and habits; type of vehicle and how it handles

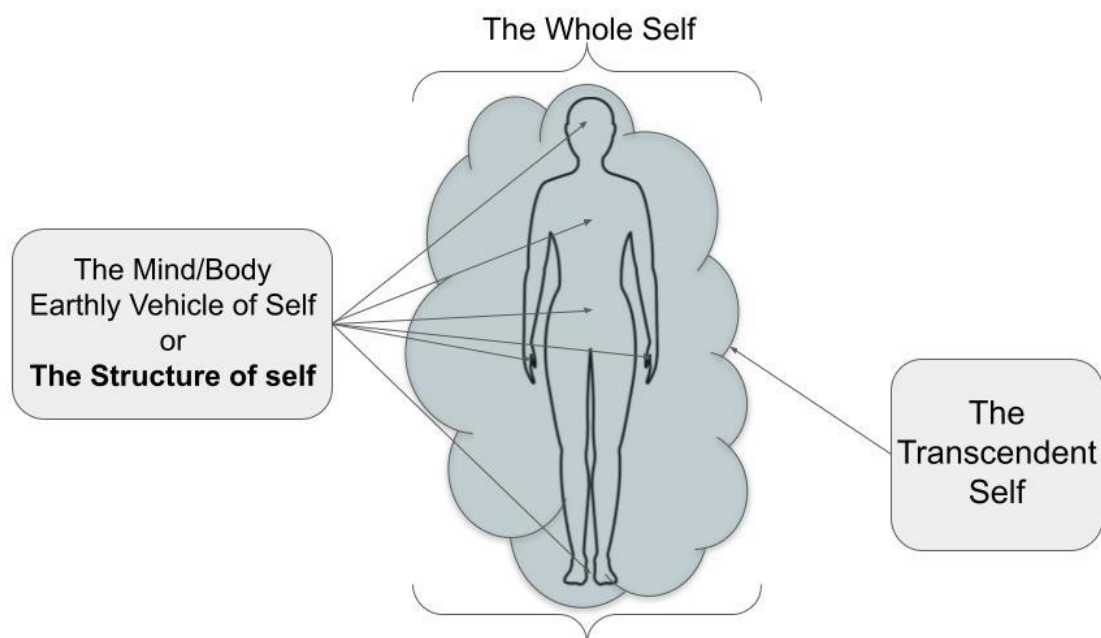


The **Whole Self** is what we mean when we say "I" or "me" (unless we have confused ourselves with one of our parts). It is made up of the **transcendent, capital-S Self**, which is indivisible, and the **earthly, lowercase-s self**, composed of the unconscious, the conscious, and parts. I'm using the words **earthly** and **transcendent** to get the gist of these aspects of self across. The *World of Form* in the image above refers to the **earthly**, material world we can see, touch, and interact with daily from birth until death. *Beyond the World of Form* refers to the realms of spirituality and other mathematical dimensions (think 5th through the 10th or however many physicists talk about these days), the great mystery. The **(earthly) self** has more to do with daily, egoic things. The **(transcendent) Self** is also involved in daily things but includes things outside of time and space. The **(transcendent) Self** experiences life but does not get damaged by, increased by, or caught up in life. The **Structure of (earthly) self** is how the **(earthly) self** is divided and organized. The **Whole Self (Self+self)** experiences all aspects of the self and does things out in the environment and inside the **(earthly) self**. This "doing" is called the **Function of (earthly) self**. The **Function of (earthly) self** is to engage in processes, behaviors, and defenses. The **Whole Self** is the "I," as in "I am here; I am alive now." The **Structure of (earthly) self** is the vehicle of the **Whole Self**. The **Function of self** is the action of the **Whole Self**; the driving of the

vehicle. The **Character Structure** is how the **Structure of self** appears and acts. It is the type of vehicle you drive and how it handles.

The **Capital-S (transcendent) Self**

The **“capital-S” Self** is your sense of meaningful existence, your truest self, the real you. Different types of therapy view this self as a pure, higher self, free from wounding and unhelpful defenses. It is called the *wise self*, *the mindful/resourced adult*, *the adult self*, *the larger self*, *the higher self*, and so on. This **(transcendent) Self** feels calm and alive, connected to everything. I think of it as simultaneously interpenetrating and transcending the **Structure of self**, like a cloud that surrounds and fills the whole body and mind. It interacts with and “rides” the body and mind through this world. The **(transcendent) Self** both *is* the body/mind and is *beyond* the body/mind. When the **(earthly) self** harmonizes with the **(transcendent) Self**, you then have Eudaimonia: the good spirit. The **Whole Self** feels more like itself when it’s aligned with the **(transcendent) Self**.



The **Lowercase-s earthly self: The Vehicle**

The **lowercase-s earthly self** is often called the ego. We need it to interface with the World of Form. We often erroneously think we *are* the **(earthly) ego self** instead of the **(transcendent) Self** or the **Whole Self**, which is how the ego can become unhelpful. It’s like thinking that you are your car or bicycle and that your value is the same as your car’s value. Despite this challenge, the **(earthly) ego self** is necessary and useful. If we were only the **(transcendent) Self**, we would have no vehicle to move through the world.

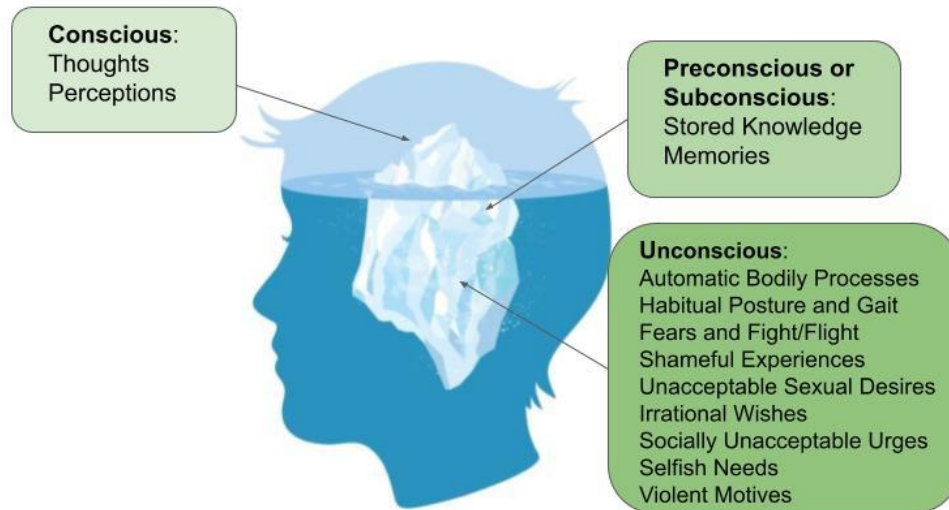
The **Structure of (earthly) self**

The **Whole Self** is *riding* the Structure (vehicle). The **Structure** also anchors the **(transcendent) Self** to the World of Form. The **Structure** is composed of the unconscious and the conscious. The **Structure** can also be thought of as a collection of parts or sub-personalities. So, the **capital-S Self** is sort of like the primary or optimal personality with a transcendent quality to

it, and the **Whole Self** is “riding” and using the parts to navigate the World (both the World of Form and Beyond the World of Form). The **Whole Self** is not the conscious, unconscious, or parts. The conscious, unconscious, and parts make up the vehicle that carries the **Whole Self** through the world.

What is this vehicle made of?

First, let’s talk about the conscious and unconscious. We’ll use Freud’s classic iceberg model to illustrate this:



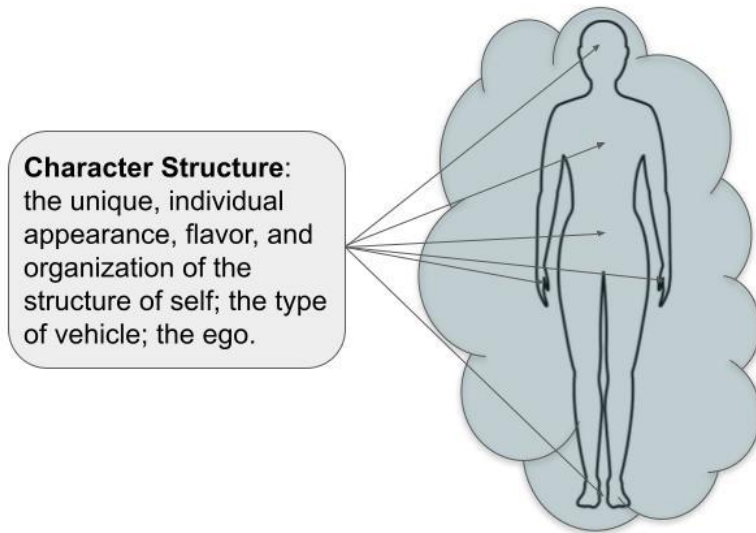
The **conscious** is the part of the mind we often (falsely) think of as the self. It thinks and perceives. We feel good when the conscious mind feels steady and in control. The conscious mind is vulnerable to confusion, fear, and despair. When the conscious is confused, fearful, or despairing, we do not feel good and can’t always make the best choices for ourselves or in our interactions with others. If we voluntarily go to therapy for the first time, that usually means that part of us can sense that the best choices are not being made by the conscious and/or we don’t feel good. Our safety is threatened if the conscious mind becomes extremely confused, fearful, or despairing. Think of someone with psychosis. They are often extremely confused, fearful, and despairing and can have a lot of difficulty navigating work, housing, and relationships. They often end up unhoused against their will.

The **preconscious** or subconscious is the storage unit of the conscious mind. Nothing is super off-limits. These thoughts and memories might be useful later, just not right now.

The **unconscious** is in charge of automatic things like your heart beating, lungs breathing, waste elimination, posture, gait, instinct to fight or flee danger, and seeking nourishment and safety. It also contains memories, thoughts, and feelings that are difficult and overwhelming for the conscious mind. The unconscious creates automatic defenses to protect the conscious from those things. The way the unconscious defends is part of the **Character Structure**. These defenses can be thought of as entire sub-personalities, aka parts. When the unconscious identifies a threat to the conscious mind, it sends thoughts and beliefs to the conscious mind and causes behaviors in the person to protect the conscious mind from getting overwhelmed.

Parts and Character Structure

Parts or Sub-personalities can be mapped onto Freud's iceberg model. Parts reside in the conscious and unconscious and create the **Character Structure**. The **Character Structure** is your unique, individual appearance, flavor, and organization of your *Structure of self*. Anything other than the *(transcendent) Self* and the **Whole Self** is a part and, therefore, contributes to the flavor of the **Character Structure**. The **Character Structure** is the type of vehicle your *(transcendent) Self* and **Whole Self** are riding.



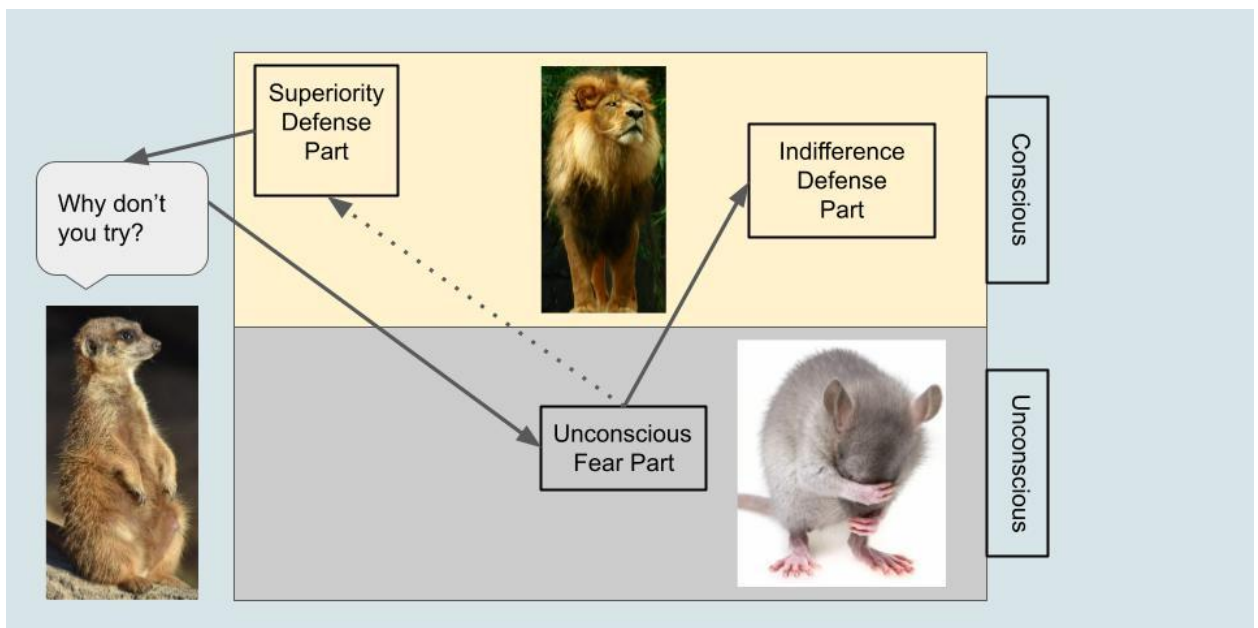
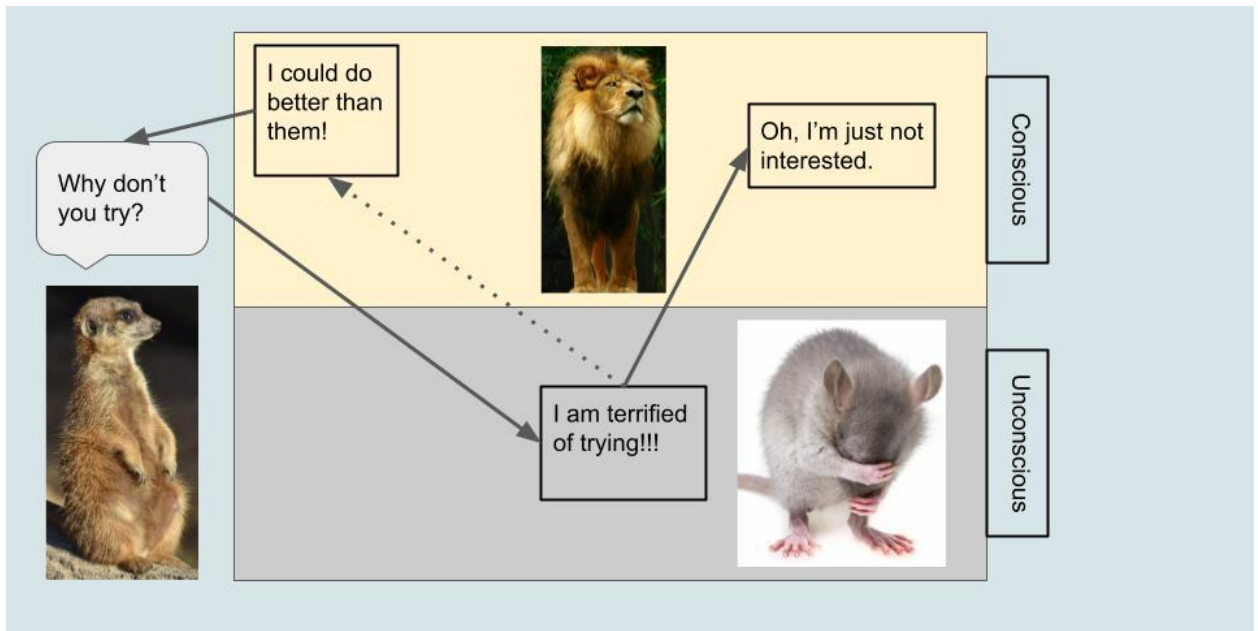
Here are a few examples of how parts are organized and function in the **Character Structure**: Part of me is altruistic, and part of me is jealous. Part of me likes to exercise, part of me likes to get cozy on a misty day, and so on. Each of these parts can be thought of as whole sub-personalities. The part that likes to be cozy has different emotions, motivations, values, and preferences than the exercise part. Both the exercise and the cozy part are considered *acceptable*. When I'm in my cozy part, my exercise part is in my preconscious, ready for use when the time is right.

Parts that are not deemed appropriate or acceptable are hidden in the unconscious. Let's take the jealous/altruistic parts to continue with the example. The jealous part is in the unconscious because jealousy is considered a shameful emotion in my culture, so I'm going to attempt to hide that from myself and others. Even though it's hidden, it still exists and has a role in the system. Altruism is a valuable quality in my culture, so I am comfortable being conscious of this part. It's not that altruism is always good or jealousy always bad. My learned cultural shame, however, hides the jealous part from me. Controlling misplaced jealousy is good, but denying it altogether is not good because that part will act without my knowledge.

Protective parts that act on my behalf without my knowledge also reside in my unconscious. Like clandestine secret agents that protect countries behind the scenes, these parts have determined that the system shouldn't know their existence. If the system knew these protectors, it would compromise their mission. For example, let's say I have unconscious social anxiety and can quickly become overwhelmed socially, but at the same time, I want to see myself as socially resilient. My conscious thinks of me as socially resilient, and my unconscious thinks of me as quickly overwhelmed. To maintain my view of myself as resilient and not

anxious, my unconscious will guide me, without me knowing it, to avoid situations that would reveal my anxiety to me, thereby protecting my consciousness from being overwhelmed.

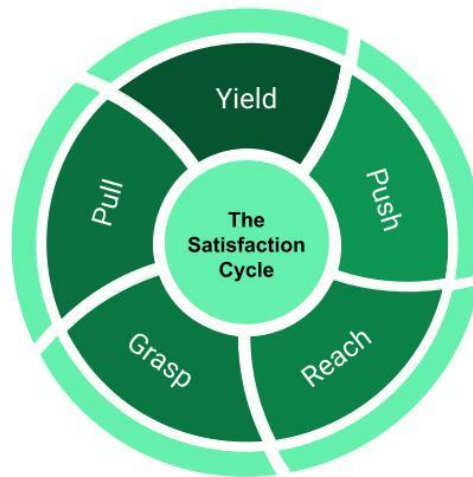
To further illustrate this, let's say someone criticizes a public speaker, saying, "I could do a better job!" but never pursues public speaking. When asked why I don't pursue public speaking, I'll say, "Oh, I'm just not interested," when I actually unconsciously fear public speaking. I criticize the public speaker because the speaker *symbolizes* fears I have not faced but unconsciously wish I could. Criticizing the *symbol* is an unconscious attempt to devalue the achievement (getting in front of an audience and presenting) so I can continue avoiding the motivation to pursue that goal. The upside is that avoiding pursuing this goal prevents my conscious mind from being overwhelmed. The downside is I forgo both becoming resilient and doing something that I might enjoy.



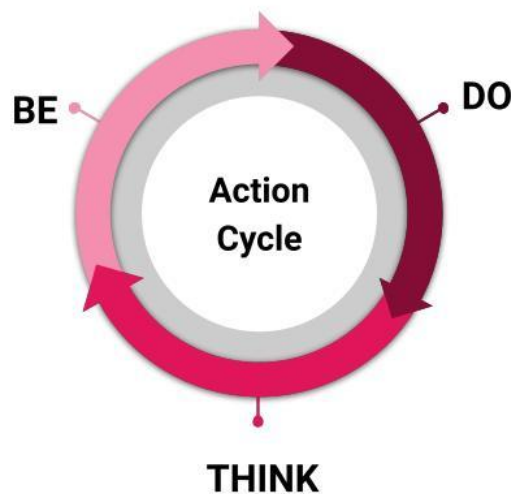
Your parts and their interactions can take over the **Whole Self** and obscure the *(transcendent) Self* when the **Whole Self** starts identifying with the parts. When the *(transcendent) Self* is unobscured by parts, the **Whole Self** can act as a witness and a container that enables you to remain objective and regulated, even in highly challenging situations.

Function of self

The *Function of self* refers to things happening in the person and out in the world. Functions are processes of actions, beliefs, and defenses. In the Somatic Field, we talk about the *Function of self* through the concept of the Satisfaction Cycle from Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's *Body Mind Centering*.



These physical actions (to yield, push, reach, grasp, or pull) are metaphors for how we relate to the environment inside and outside ourselves. Each section of the cycle has an action type and beliefs that make the action more or less available to any particular person. Each of these actions can be used as a helpful or unhelpful defense. The satisfaction cycle is only one way to think of the *Function of Self*. Another version is these three actions in no particular order: reflecting, moving towards/away from the self, and resting or THINK ↔ DO ↔ BE ↔.



Healthy Character Structure (Eudaimonia) vs. an Unhealthy Character Structure (Noseo)

I want to be careful when talking about the “healthy” and “unhealthy Character Structure.” The unhealthy Character Structure emerges for really good reasons initially. The paradox is that it is often healthy to create and spend time in the unhealthy version of the *structure of self*. Trying to jump into the healthy Character Structure is inadvisable, dangerous, and almost impossible to achieve. If one were to achieve such a seemingly rapid transformation, odds are, it would be superficial and potentially disastrous. If the human psyche changes too rapidly, you can experience states similar to psychosis. This is why genuine therapeutic change at the root of the issue can take years and why most short-term therapy models do not make permanent changes for most people and situations. The unconscious will not allow it.

A healthy Character Structure has gratitude and agency built by humility and empowerment (Paul Conti, MD). It becomes harmonious with the *(transcendent) Self*, creating **Eudaimonia**. Healthy pursuit is called *agency*. **Agency** refers to the ability to act independently and make choices. **Gratitude** characterizes healthy reflection and rest. Gratitude means being in a state of mind where you can think of all the good things built into life and what others have done for you. **Humility** is the willingness to see yourself as a part of the whole and to acknowledge that you depend on others. **Empowerment** means accepting the ability and responsibility to take action in the world. You want a **Whole Self** who says, “I am here, I can do good things, and I am part of a greater whole (Conti).”

An unhealthy Character Structure has avoidance and cynicism caused by disempowerment and grandiosity. It is discordant with the *(transcendent) Self*, creating **Noseo**. **Avoidance** in response to excessive conscious or unconscious confusion, fear, and despair is unhealthy. Avoidance feels relieving in the short term but perpetuates the problem being avoided in the long term. **Cynicism** is an attitude of negativity and pessimism projected onto the world and people. The cynic separates themselves from others with a **grandiose** defense, seeing themselves as exceptionally superior or inferior (grandiosity in reverse). They cannot see the gifts of life and the good deeds towards them from others.

How to Build Eudaimonia?

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer a defeat. You will succumb in every battle if you know neither the enemy nor yourself.

- Sun Tsu *The Art of War*.

Swap out “enemy” for *environment* and “battle” for *life challenge* from the quote. To build Eudaimonia, you must, above all, get to know yourself. Secondly, you must know the true nature of the world around you as best you can. Being honest with yourself about your own nature and the nature of the world is a painful process initially. Once you have more clarity, you will want nothing more than to continue to refine the accuracy of your understanding of yourself and the world.

As you progress on the journey of self-knowledge, you will have to learn your basic nature (your propensities, actions you naturally tend towards) and the collection of habits built on top of it. Your habits form from your basic nature’s interaction with the world around you,

which is why life events are crucial to becoming ourselves. Early life events are especially important because early life is when you form your first habits. Those early habits get practiced so much that they become permanent features of your **Character Structure**.

Each habit you acquire is a solution to a regular problem. Habits are not inherently good or bad; they are created to help you survive. Habits either continue to be helpful, or they become unhelpful. You begin to build *Noseo* if you keep trying to do too many unhelpful habits. You build *Eudaimonia* when you can adapt your habits as your environmental circumstances change and demand different behaviors from you. As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.”

People get stuck in unhelpful habit loops because of repetition-compulsion and learned helplessness. Repetition compulsion is an unconscious habit performed without thought, like drug addiction. These habits can include trauma reenactments, when you seek out situations that remind you of previous trauma, like getting into abusive relationships as an adult after growing up in an abusive household. In the short term, repeating the pattern decreases anxiety because it's familiar and gives you a sense that you have another chance to understand or master something that previously caught you off guard. Learned helplessness happens when you are wounded so repeatedly in the same way that you grow more familiar and comfortable with that pain than you are comfortable with states of pleasure and well-being. You know you want things to improve but cannot see any way out of your situation. Learned helplessness is psychological blinders that prevent you from seeing other options, even obvious ones.

To end cycles of repetition-compulsion and learned helplessness, you must address your trauma wounding. Trauma is anything you have experienced in life that has left its mark on your psyche. Like a physical scar, psychological scars alter the makeup of your **Character Structure** forever. We can never forget or erase the past, but we can change how we relate to it so that it negatively affects the present as little as possible. Sometimes, it can be as simple as helping the bodymind to realize that the trauma it's looping on is over now. If you have an ongoing trauma like oppression or chronic illness, you must decide how you will relate to your circumstances. This is not the same as “pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” Zenju Earthlyn Manuel's *The Way of Tenderness* is a fantastic book about remaining tender to ongoing trauma and addressing it in your community, body, and relationships while still carving out the most thriving life possible for your circumstances. You deserve to thrive.

As you address your trauma, you must also sincerely pursue your chosen goals with flexibility and humility. Conti asks, “Do you take care of yourself? Are you happy you're here? Do you engage productively in the world?” As you take care of yourself and work to understand the world, you will naturally become humble and empowered to engage productively in the world. You will feel rewarded by your productivity, which causes your sense of agency to increase. You understand that you do not achieve things alone, which increases your gratitude. Endowed with agency and gratitude, you feel happy to be alive, blessed with *Eudaimonia*. All of this begins with understanding and caring for yourself.

There is no “end” to building *Eudaimonia*. Instead, you learn and enact various processes that are the end in and of themselves. These processes get you through times of the mundane, ecstasy, tragedy, and triumph. They enable you to thrive and, when necessary, survive. Think of the **Character Structure** as a marble sculpture. You start with a chunk of

marble. You begin to chisel a rough shape. Then, most of your time creating the sculpture is spent refining that rough shape. Even when the sculpture is declared “complete,” it still requires protection and restoration from decay and injury. The process is never done.

How a Therapist Helps You Build Eudaimonia

You should find your own approach to Eudaimonia. A therapist can help speed and refine your process. Therapists do many things to help, but they primarily do the following: reflect your (transcendent Self), character structure, and function of self back to you so it is easier to see yourself; support you in accurately seeing your environment; identify blocks that you habitually avoid or defend against; and provide interventions that can help those blocks resolve faster and more permanently. You want to make sure you find a therapist that is the right fit for you.

Time and time again, it is shown that rapport is the most essential component in an effective therapeutic relationship. Your therapist should:

- Center you in the relationship. Your therapy is not about the therapist
- Focus on you physically. In my culture, this is done with eye contact
- Value and ask for your opinion.
- Avoid shaming and humiliating you.
- Acknowledge the therapist’s faults and sincerely apologize when the therapist makes a mistake
- Follow through on promises
- Tolerate your hard feelings towards your therapist as long as you are not abusive or cruel
- Have patience for the unfolding of your process over time; your therapist should not rush or pressure you to change.
- Have done so much of their own therapeutic work that they rarely get uncentred in session, no matter how difficult or challenging your content (except if you are attacking or endangering the therapist. Anyone would be rattled by a real threat).

Having a relationship of rapport with a therapist can be enough to break through old habits and blocks without much fancy footwork from specific types of therapy.

When you come to therapy for the first time, you talk about the problems you want to solve. Think of your “problems” like a puzzle or math equation: “I want to get close to people, but simultaneously, I also fear people. I feel lonely because I don’t know how and/or why this happens and, therefore, can’t act differently. I wonder how I will solve this problem.” You seek help from a professional because you hope they can help you see things in yourself you can’t see on your own so that the problems become simpler and, therefore, surmountable. After being in therapy for a while, you feel less overwhelmed and have more of a sense of the consistent problem areas of your life and the sorts of things that help those problems. You still work hard, but the work is simpler. You have the statue's shape and are now in a state of refinement.

The math problem metaphor is helpful, but I want to add a caveat. Solving psychological problems can be predictable but not straightforward in the conventional sense. You need simple changes like gratitude journaling, adding movement activities to your life, examining your

thought patterns, etcetera, but you also need more intangible interventions like learning to feel your feelings fully and understanding your parts. The intangible pieces are the *daimon* of Eudaimonia. This is where a good therapist is particularly beneficial. Connecting to your *(transcendent) Self* is an art and a practice. I can describe the art to you as I understand it, but you must become the artisan of your own psyche. A good therapist does not only teach you; they midwife your sage within.

The aim of therapy is Eudaimonia, to harmonize your *Whole Self* and *Character Structure* to the *(transcendent) Self*. There are many practical avenues to achieving this harmony, but there are also many mysterious components to the process. You want a therapist who has been trained in both the practical and the mystery and who has done their own work themselves. This is the most important thing for therapy, more than any particular type of therapy. As an adult, you also must take full responsibility for building your *Eudaimonia* while also considering your circumstances (chronic illness, oppression, your particular life situation, etc.). This is the most important thing for you as an individual. There is much more to say about building *Eudaimonia* in a therapeutic relationship than this essay covers. I have done my best to bring forward the foundational aspects of this pursuit.