

identity crisis

noun

Simple Definition of *identity crisis*

Popularity: Bottom 40% of words

- : a feeling of **unhappiness and confusion** caused by **not being sure about what type of person you really are or what the true purpose of your life is**

Full Definition of *identity crisis*

1. *1* : personal psychosocial conflict **especially in adolescence** that involves confusion about one's social role and often a sense of loss of continuity to one's personality
2. *2* : a state of confusion in an institution or organization regarding its nature or direction

What Is an Identity Crisis?

How Our Identity Forms Out of Conflict



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An identity crisis can happen at many different points in a person's life. Plume Creative / Digital Vision / Getty Images
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You have probably heard the term '**identity crisis**' before and you probably have a fairly good idea of what it means. But where did this idea originate? Why do people experience this kind of personal crisis? Is it something confined to the teenage years?

The concept originates in the work of developmental psychologist [Erik Erikson](#) who believed that the formation of identity was one of the most important parts of a person's life.

While developing a sense of identity is an important part of the teenage years, Erikson did not believe that the formation and growth of identity was just confined to adolescence. Instead, identity is something that shifts and grows throughout life as people confront new challenges and tackle different experiences.

What is an Identity Crisis?

Are you unsure of your role in life? Do you feel like you don't know the 'real you'? If you answer yes to the previous questions, you may be experiencing an identity crisis. Theorist [Erik Erikson](#) coined the term *identity crisis* and believed that it was **one of the most important [conflicts](#) people face in development.**

According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of **intensive analysis and exploration** of different ways of looking at oneself.

Erikson's own interest in identity began in childhood. Raised Jewish, Erikson appeared very Scandinavian and often felt that he was an outsider of both groups. His later studies of cultural life among the Yurok of northern California and the Sioux of South Dakota helped formalize Erikson's ideas about identity development and identity crisis.

Erikson described identity as:

"...a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters." (Erikson, 1970.)

Research on Identity

In Erikson's [stages of psychosocial development](#), the emergence of an identity crisis occurs during the teenage years in which people struggle between feelings of identity versus role confusion.

Researcher James Marcia (1966, 1976, 1980) has expanded upon Erikson's initial theory. According to Marcia and his colleagues, the balance between identity and confusion lies in making a **commitment** to an identity. Marcia also developed an interview method to measure identity as well as four different identity statuses. This method looks at three different areas of functioning: occupational role, beliefs and values, and sexuality.

Identity Statuses

- **Identity achievement** occurs when an individual has gone through an exploration of different identities and made a commitment to one.
- **Moratorium** is the status of a person who is actively involved in exploring different identities, but has not made a commitment.
- **Foreclosure** status is when a person has made a commitment without attempting identity exploration.
- **Identity diffusion** occurs when there is neither an identity crisis or commitment.

Researchers have found that those who have made a strong commitment to an identity tend to be **happier and healthier** than those who have not. Those with a status of identity diffusion tend to feel out of place in the world and don't pursue a sense of identity.

In today's rapidly changing world, identity crises are more common today than in Erikson's day. These conflicts are certainly not confined to the teenage years. People tend to experience them at various points throughout life, **particularly at points of great change** such as starting a new job, the beginning of a new relationship, the end of a marriage, or the birth of a child. Exploring different aspects of yourself in the different areas of life, including your role

at work, within the family, and in romantic relationships, can help strengthen your personal identity.

References:

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