

The Dangers of an Identity Crisis

Nearly everyday in my practice I encounter suffering. Frequently this is caused by a crisis of identity. It may not seem like a big deal, but this loss of identity can become deadly in severe cases. In most cases an identity crisis causes a different kind of death. There is death to dreams, death to potential, death to relationships, death to happiness and inner peace, and almost an overall “slow death” within the individual’s body and being.

It is common for clients to question their value and self worth. In some cases their worth is determined by their belongings, job titles, bank statements or lack thereof. Defining self worth by what we have can be very dangerous especially in this economic climate. Historically suicide rates have risen during difficult economic times since people have not realized the source of their true worth.

Many allow others to determine their worth. They must be a part of the in crowd or in a relationship to feel significant. For some, value is only found by being loved by their significant other. Some will even tolerate abuse just to remain in these relationships. Depression and suicidal tendencies may accompany this abuse or the loss of these relationships.

Some people feel more accepted when they are drinking, using drugs, gambling, etc. Hurting people frequently drift to these ways of escape to numb the pain. Addiction often has at its root, loss of identity and purpose.

Identity issues can also be related to appearance. Clients often determine their worth by their weight. They are often willing to risk harm or death just to be thin. Others will hold themselves captive in their homes and skip social functions to avoid rejection. Many others simply perceive themselves as ugly and forget that they are an original design by the World’s Greatest Artist.

Most of us have had to relearn how we define our identities. Society’s value systems have tried to destroy us. We were never taught the importance of our individuality and great purpose in life. Falsely we were taught that we could be anything we wanted to be. Little emphasis went into teaching us that we were just supposed to be the best we could be. Sadly many continue living in misery as they pretend to be something they are not.

As parents we must exercise caution to not become caught up in our children's accomplishments. It feels good to see them be rewarded, but we must be careful to remind them that they are loved "just because." Our love for them must be unconditional. They also must know that they are valuable in spite of any disabilities, challenges, inadequacies, hurts or failures.

In therapy I frequently use a children's book by Max Lucado entitled "You are Special" to give a client a new perspective on their identity. Sadly, this little book portrays our society quite accurately.

The author uses little wooden people named Wemmicks to demonstrate how people treat one another. Each Wemmick is given a box of gray dots and a box of golden stars to stick on one another. The pretty Wemmicks and the ones with special abilities get stars. Wemmicks that are ugly and clumsy get dots. Eventually stars and dots cover their entire identities as those with stars get more stars and those with dots get even more dots. There seems to be no escaping this pattern, but one Wemmick does find a solution. She accepts neither dots nor stars, they simply do not stick. Amazingly, this Wemmick has found the secret - her identity and purpose comes from God, her creator.

There is so much to be learned from this little story. Countless psychological problems are related to one's identity and feelings of worthlessness. Counseling offices would have fewer clients and a lot fewer tears would be shed if we all learned this secret too.