

Embrace your SHADOW SELF

Expert Jan Day reveals how understanding this part of yourself is the key to a better relationship

Our shadow selves are the parts of ourselves that we would rather not see, so we've hidden them away and are unconscious of them. Usually, they are aspects of ourselves that are judged as negative, but they can also be powerful, vital and joyous. Most of us go to great lengths to keep our shadow selves buried in order to protect our self-image. Facing up to them is often a painful process but it can be a productive one.

Identifying your shadows

There are a number of different ways you can find out what your shadow selves may be.

- The things we resent, judge, reject and react to are sure signs of our shadow selves. For instance, if my sexuality is in shadow, I might make comments like: "She's a bit wild isn't she?" about someone who is not afraid to show their sensuality.
- It sounds strange, but traits we admire in others might also relate to our shadow selves and the people we look up or idolise may represent aspects of our own self. For instance, I might say of a teacher: "He is so wise" and not be acknowledging my own wisdom that I hold in shadow.
- Behaviours that we repeat involuntarily can indicate shadow selves. If I've got self-control or certain feelings in shadow, I might over-eat or compensate in other ways.

Very common disowned parts or shadow selves are:

- Anger
- Sorrow
- Needs
- Power
- Sexuality
- Vulnerability
- Wisdom

“

When we begin to own our shadow selves we can feel more loved and accepted

”

The impact in relationships

We tend to meet our shadows in all our relationships. We are often attracted to people who exhibit the parts that we have pushed away within ourselves. So someone who is quiet, free-flowing and artistic may be attracted to a person who is powerful, authoritative and super-organised. Initially they will be delighted by the opposite characteristics in each other, finding them charming and attractive. It feels like 'chemistry'.

However, in some instances arguments can arise because of the disowned parts we've kept in shadows. When we feel vulnerable or under stress we might not like the way our partner reacts and the initial traits that first attracted to us them suddenly become intolerable.

In this way, we tend to react strongly when we see our shadows in other people. The bonding can be positive (as in the honeymoon period) or negative (especially at a time when feel vulnerable), resulting in rage, blame or judgement. Over time, negative bonding becomes a pattern and we find ourselves having the same arguments over and over again. We don't understand where all the love went. We can't hear or understand the other's point of view and we just seem to keep hurting each other. Our shadow selves are getting triggered and we go into defensive mode.



Embracing your shadow selves

The way forward to healthy, intimate relationships is to work on consciously exploring and revealing our shadows so that we can integrate them and let those parts of us live. In doing so, we become more whole and the emotional texture of our relationships becomes richer and deeper, as well as less filled with dramatic arguments. Individually, we feel safer in the world (because we don't have to be afraid of those pesky feelings showing up in other people) and more confident. We'll often feel more vital and alive because our energy is not being wasted keeping our shadow selves at bay.

Shadow work undertaken through psychotherapy sessions or personal development workshops can help you to begin to build an awareness of your shadow selves. That means coming into contact with all the vulnerability and feelings that caused you to create that shadow self. As you begin to own these different parts of yourself, your self-esteem will become stronger. Your loved ones will see more of you and will be able to react in a way that makes you feel more loved and accepted. Your emotional landscape will get richer and your relationship becomes stronger because of this deeper intimacy and trust.

For example, you might be someone who never seems to get angry, and think you are simply not a cross person. In this case, your anger may be in shadow. When your partner gets angry about something and expresses it, you may react by either getting frightened or blaming them, and therefore what often results is an argument.

When you can begin to own your feelings and express them, you will become much more able to hear your partner when they are annoyed.

At first, you might just express your fear about your partner's anger and show a sense of vulnerability. This is the first step to connecting from a place of intimacy. As you begin to own your anger, you will start to be able to hear each other and a deeper level of emotional connection happens. Eventually, you will fully own this feeling and be able to express it clearly. Having access to your anger enables you to set healthy boundaries and speak clearly about things you care about. It gives a clarity that was previously missing. Your relationship will become more dynamic and richer and your sex life will probably improve because of the depth of emotional intimacy between you.

When we are able to see our own shadow selves, we can accept those parts in others. This promotes healthy, conscious relationships, builds trust, allows for growth in the relationship and allows us to step out of rage, judgements, righteousness and victimhood. Perhaps the biggest benefit is that when we begin to own our shadow selves we can feel more loved and accepted because we have been seen more fully both by ourselves and each other.

Prioritising your partner and involving them in decisions will enable you both to grow from the experience without feeling torn between loyalties.

Jan Day is a relationship expert.
For more information visit janday.com