



HOW TO BELONG WHILE BEING AUTHENTIC

Life coach Maryam Ghouth explores the relationship between ‘belonging’ and maintaining one’s authenticity, and what we can do to strike a balance between the two

Psychologists from across the world have written about the importance of belonging and the traits we have developed in order to protect ourselves against social exclusion and rejection.

One complication involved with the idea of the need to belong is that humans, unlike other mammals, also have a strong need for individual autonomy, self-actualisation and being true to themselves.

These two needs are equal in strength but can sometimes work in opposite directions especially when belonging to ‘the tribe’ conflicts with what we really believe in and stifles who we want to be.

Does our need to belong compromise our authenticity?

It’s quite natural for us to want to be accepted, respected and loved, as they are part of what makes us feel like we belong. Belonging remains essential to our wellbeing and has primal evolutionary roots

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but sometimes we may take this need to a level that compromises our authenticity.

When our thoughts and our behaviours become means for eliciting a positive response or avoiding a negative response at the cost of our values rather than for building meaningful and genuine connections – which is ultimately what our need for belonging requires – we run the risk of becoming inauthentic.

In essence, the shift from belonging to constant approval-seeking has become one of our greatest obstacles to authenticity and one that subsequently tarnishes many relationships.

How does this shift impact us?

When we become consumed with what others think of us we can lose sight of who we really are and end up feeling dissimulated and conflicted.

Festinger, an American social psychologist suggested that the cognitive dissonance we feel, which refers to the mental stress and discomfort when having conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours, could give rise to irrational and maladaptive behaviour.

It can also lead to behaviours that burden our conscience with shame such as dishonesty and hypocrisy. It causes distrust and insecurity in relationships which moves us further away from a sense of connectedness.

How do we strike a balance between being true to ourselves and belonging?

1. Start with self-acceptance:

Brené Brown, the author of the *The Gifts of Imperfection* says: “Belonging starts with self-acceptance because believing that you’re enough is what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable and imperfect”. She further explains that when we don’t have a sense of self-acceptance, we shape-shift, twist ourselves into a human

pretzel and turn into chameleons that hustle for worthiness.

While I maintain it is natural to want to be liked, an excessive need for it can become a hollow substitute for belonging. It makes us pick the wrong relationships and ignore the most important one – a relationship with ourselves.

When we accept ourselves we create an environment that invites all we need to both flourish and belong.

2. Quality not quantity:

Whether in the form of friendships or romantic relationships, humans need to love and be loved.

The ‘belongingness hypothesis’ – proposed by social psychologist Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary – include two main features. First, people need constant, positive, personal interactions. Second, people need to know that the bond is stable, mutual and based on a sense of longevity.

It can be challenging to foster meaningful relationships that feature the prerequisites above if our attention is pulled in so many different directions. The social choices we make would better serve us if they were built on quality rather than quantity.

3. A need not a goal:

When we see the need to belong as an ultimate goal that governs our purpose rather than a need that supports our purpose, it can lead to an obsession with what people think and feel about us.

Much like our obsession with money, if we saw it as the ultimate goal in life rather than a need to support our goal in life, it can lead to all kinds of limiting behaviours such as gluttony and greed.

This mindset cannot only blind us from seeing what we actually do have but also distract us from achieving our greatest potential. As the ‘Iron Lady’ Margaret Thatcher once said: “If you set out to be liked, you would be prepared to



compromise on anything at any time and you would achieve nothing.”

4. Authenticity requires values:

It’s hard to be true to ourselves and live authentically if we don’t really know what principles, virtues and standards we wish to live by let alone what they entail.

For example, you wish to marry someone your parents don’t approve of. One of your values is ‘being a good son or daughter’ and the other is ‘freedom’. Knowing your values will help you determine what being a good son or daughter entails to you and whether that clashes with your value to be free to marry the one you love.

Values guide our thinking and actions like a moral compass. They help us live a life that is more meaningful and congruent with our true selves because we’re leading from what is important to us.

In her book *Imperfect Spirituality: Enlightenment for Ordinary People*, Polly Campbell writes: “When you’re willing to discover and live from your deepest values, life not only becomes a more fulfilling and passionate adventure but it also becomes easier”.

5. Authenticity isn’t rebellion:

Some people think that being authentic is being rebellious.

Many exemplary achievers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother

Teresa, Nelson Mandela and Abraham Lincoln went through the ceremonies and rituals of convention with grace and a good-humoured shrug. They neither accepted it all like sheep nor rejected it all like rebels.

Rebellion may have served certain causes but it is not a necessary condition for individual authenticity. For example, just because you are a smoker, doesn’t mean you bulldoze your way into someone’s home with a cigarette in your hand under the premise that you are being authentic and true to yourself.

Wanting the freedom to be who you are should come with fully understanding the responsibility that goes with it.

6. Authenticity doesn’t necessitate an explanation:

Sometimes we so desperately want people to understand and accept our flaws so we hang our dirty laundry for the them to see and judge, hoping they will love us unconditionally. This behaviour can sometimes be rooted in approval seeking. While authenticity necessitates integrity and honesty, the world is not our confession booth.

We’re entitled to explore, trial and deviate from the norm without having to share our innermost stories with everyone.

We can define the parameters

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of our relationships with people and honestly communicate the boundaries we do not wish to cross.

In conclusion...

The need for belonging and for autonomy can be combined into a single need: finding a viable balance between the two.

The reality is that we live in a world that is based on social norms whether it comes from our families, communities, religions or governments – the rules are there and our need to belong is real.

But belonging doesn’t require the adherence to all rules all the time and authenticity doesn’t preclude adapting to cultural sensitivities or norms.

Belonging occurs when we build meaningful bonds and honour the values of what belonging entails to us. Whether it’s by showing compassion, empathy, loyalty or support, it is you who needs to define the framework of your values and use it as a moral compass to guide you through the decisions you make.

Authenticity requires that we become more self-aware to understand our values and more committed to align them with our actions. It also involves a high degree of self-acceptance and owning everything that makes us who we are while resisting the urge to constantly validate or explain ourselves. Though there’s no escaping our need to belong, there’s also no escaping the fact that our ability to make real connections is hindered if we do not connect with ourselves, first and foremost.

And finally, pleasing everyone is virtually impossible and can blind us from who we are and move us further away from a true sense of belonging. As Aesop, the Ancient Greek fabulist said: ‘In trying to please all, he had pleased none.’

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