

Personal Growth

What to Do When You're Having an Identity Crisis

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By **Dr. John Delony**

Who am I?

If you're asking yourself that question, you're in good company. Scholars, philosophers, psychologists, teachers, rabbis and pastors have debated identity for centuries. It's hard to put it into words—and yet it's so foundational to how we make meaning in this world.

When you feel like you're in the middle of an identity crisis, you might feel scared and disoriented—like you're treading water in the middle of the ocean. But it doesn't mean

there's something wrong with you. Like the seasons, identities change. Relationships grow and end. Shifts in identity are part of what happens when you grow and gain wisdom.

I'm going to share some helpful ways to move through this crisis—but first, let's define what we mean by *identity* in the first place.

What Is Identity?

Your identity is the story you tell yourself about yourself. It's the way you make sense of your purpose and value in the world and your relationship to the people and communities around you.



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On the surface, we often express our identity by talking about our job, talents, relationships or even personality tendencies: “I’m a writer” or “I’m a hunter” or “I’m a mom” or “I’m a control freak.” But these terms we use are *labels*. They’re shortcuts to summarize a much more complex story we’re telling ourselves about ourselves.

How Does Identity Develop?

As I said above, identity is the story you tell yourself about yourself. But this key story is formed by three different types of stories woven together: the stories you’re born into, the stories others tell you, and the stories of your experiences.

Let’s unpack each one.

1. The Stories You’re Born Into

Nobody chooses the family, race, country, time period and culture they’re born into. We’re just dropped into the middle of the action—beginning a new scene in a complex and lengthy movie. Before we even speak a word or take a wobbly step, we’re watching and listening and absorbing a set of expectations about who we are and what we can and cannot do in the world.

Here’s what this looked like for me: I was born to barely-middle class white folks in a suburb of Houston. I attended, high-pressure schools where we were pushed to grow and achieve

and compete. I was expected to go to college. I was expected to go to church. These things weren't up for debate.

Beginning in middle school, I was expected to get a job (or two or three) and work with excellence. My friend circles all talked in certain ways, laughed and joked in certain ways, and loved and showed up for one another in certain ways. All of these things told me a story about who I was day after day.

Your story is just as unique as mine. You didn't choose many parts of it, and yet it has shaped you.

2. The Stories Others Tell You

In addition to the broader story you're born into, the people closest to you will tell you stories about the world and about yourself that will shape you too.

Generally speaking, our parents, caregivers or immediate families have a huge say in the stories we believe about ourselves. We rely on our parents for guidance and interpretation about the world around us, so what they say—and more importantly, how they act toward and around us—*matters*.

Maybe your mom told you every single day that she loved you—or maybe she put you down for being overweight. Either way, you were absorbing and believing the things she said. Maybe your dad was highly in tune with you, and you felt deeply loved and connected. Or maybe your dad [bailed on you](#), and though he never said a word, his absence was a loud and brutal story about how little you mattered. You internalized all of these stories.

As we age, the circle of influence expands—we listen to stories from teachers, friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, and people on social media and in entertainment. These stories take root in our bodies and ultimately inform gene expression, immune function and healthy aging. In fact, well into our adulthood, we'll be shaped—both positively and negatively—by the stories that people tell us. [Choose your friendships](#) wisely.

3. Your Stories of Your Experiences

Our experiences—what we witness and do and create and work on—also help form our identity. We learn about ourselves and the world through active participation in our own story. Experience is the greatest teacher.

Think about the variety of ways we use our experiences to tell the world who we are:

- **Career:** *I'm an entrepreneur. I'm a teacher.*
- **Accomplishments:** *I'm an Ironman athlete. I'm a Grammy-winning artist.*
- **Trauma:** *I'm a cancer survivor. I'm a refugee.*
- **Interests:** *I'm a painter. I'm a two-time regional shuffleboard champion.*
- **Relationships:** *I'm a grandfather. I'm a widow.*
- **Failures and violations:** *I'm a thief. I'm a liar. I'm a cheater. I'm an idiot.*

Once again, these are just labels. To truly understand your identity, you've got to back up from the label and ask what story it's telling.

What Causes an Identity Crisis?

An identity crisis happens when you realize the story you've been telling yourself is a lie—or it's simply not working anymore. An identity crisis happens when the stories you tell yourself simply run out of gas. They don't hold up in the face of truth and reality anymore.

Picture yourself as a train and your identity as the tracks underneath you. The tracks guide you and allow you to move forward. An identity crisis happens when the tracks run out, often during a life transition or a hardship. You're a writer, and you get fired from your dream job. Or you're an athlete, and you're in a car crash and lose your ability to walk. Or you're a world-class stay-at-home mom, and your kids graduate and go off to college, and you find yourself in an empty nest.

What now?

The tracks run out, and you stall. You realize that you haven't been telling yourself the truth for a long, long time. You have to decide who you are underneath all of the labels and masks of accomplishment.

You have to distance yourself from the stories and get serious about asking: *Who am I? And what do I want to build next?*

What Are the Signs of an Identity Crisis?

When you're going through an identity crisis, here's are a few signs to watch out for:

1. Blame, Resignation and Resentment

Blame is a telltale sign that the story you're telling yourself is starting to unravel. As you begin to question the story you were born into and the stories others have told you, you might feel

angry or even betrayed. You may have experienced great loss, trauma and shortcomings, but you get to choose the story you tell yourself, both in the immediate aftermath and years down the road.

If you're not careful, you'll just throw in the towel and believe that this is as good as it gets—or as bad as it gets. You'll be filled with a sense of powerlessness in your story. And that resignation can quickly lead to bitterness and resentment. And resentment is the death blow for all relationships, even the one with yourself. Fight, scratch and claw your way from resentment—never give in.

2. Questioning Your Values and Beliefs

As your story unravels, you begin to question the values and beliefs that are woven throughout that story. Maybe you have a crisis of faith and leave the church, or maybe you decide to join the church after being an atheist. Maybe you vote red when you've always voted blue, or blue instead of red.

Or maybe it's not that obvious. Maybe you let go of a personal belief you've held for a long time or decide to end a defining relationship. Whatever it looks like for you, don't run from the doubts and questions. Lean into them and take them to people you trust.

3. Feeling Like You Don't Belong

Something in you has changed, and you don't quite fit into the neat little box you were a part of before. You find yourself lonely in a crowded room . . . or you find yourself lonely all by yourself. You're untethering yourself from your groups or from the ways of thinking that have previously defined you, and it's scary. As you search for yourself, you're also searching for a new community where you fit in. It might take some time, but if you are diligent in your search, you *will* find the relationships you're looking for.

What to Do When You're Going Through an Identity Crisis

While *crisis* sounds alarming, an identity crisis could be the best thing that's happened to you! A cornerstone of psychological and emotional maturity is stopping to ask yourself: *Is the story I'm telling myself true? And is it the one I want to be living?* More deeply, you ask yourself: *What do I actually want with my one tiny, precious, wild life?*

Yes, an identity crisis is scary. But brave and courageous people head off into the woods and carve a new path.

You, my friend, are courageous.

So, grab your machete. Let's go.

Examine your current story.

When the stories you've been telling yourself no longer add up, pause and ask yourself where you got them in the first place. Distance yourself from them and look at them objectively. We absorb hundreds of stories automatically, especially as children, and many of them do more harm than good. Talk to yourself like you'd talk to a friend:

- Ask, *John (of course use your name), where did that story come from? Who told you that?*
- Listen to your thoughts about yourself.
- Write down your answers. Get them out of your head and onto the paper (where they have way less power).
- Make a list of the beliefs and values you saw modeled in your home.
- Reflect on the people who have helped shape you. Who were the loudest voices? What did they say? Why did they say it?

Be curious and [empathetic](#) with yourself as you explore. [Forgive yourself](#) for past mistakes. Don't hold on to bitterness—it doesn't serve you.

Challenge your current story.

Once you know your story, you must demand evidence. You have to ask yourself: *Are these stories true?*

Here's an example: Let's say you're going through an identity crisis after a heartbreaking divorce. The story you're telling yourself might be: *I'm a failure. I have nothing to live for. I'll never find anyone else. My community will reject me.*

Demand evidence of those thoughts. Is it *actually* true that you're a failure? What is a failure, anyway? We all make mistakes—do you really believe you can't learn from them instead of letting them bury you? Where did you pick up the story that divorce means you're worthless and that you'll be lonely forever? Who told you that?

Don't accept your story as gospel truth. Challenge it. Demand proof.

Find people who will listen to, love and support you.

Remember: The people in our lives that we're closest to have a profound impact on our identity. Spend time with your friends and family who open your heart and your mind to new possibilities—who look you dead in the eye and say, “Hey, you don't have to live like this any longer.”

If you don't like your current story, find a hero to follow. We all need mentors and guides who are modeling the story we want to live. This could be someone you know in real life, or it could be someone influential you admire from afar.

Let go of the old story.

At some point in this process, you get to make a choice: Do you want to continue to live this old story or create a new one?

A great way to do this is to talk to yourself in the third person, as though you were giving advice to a friend. Using the example from above, if your friend came to you and said, “John, I hate this divorce because I'm such a failure, I'm going to be lonely forever, and I have nothing to live for,” you would immediately challenge them because their story is not true. Try talking to yourself like someone you care about and love.

It's here that you stand up and say, *I'm sick and tired of giving so much power to other people*—an old girlfriend, a pastor who hurt you, a bully in the fourth grade who made fun of you for being fat. I want you to picture yourself walking up to that person, grabbing the pen out of their hands, and saying, “Thanks, but I've got it from here.”

You get to write the next chapter.

Decide what kind of person you want to be.

As you start writing your new story, base your identity on the kind of person you want to be—not on what you accomplish. (This point and the next one are heavily influenced by author and speaker James Clear. His incredible book *Atomic Habits* helped me reimagine how identity can impact our actions, and not the other way around.)

Your identity is not a sum total of all the things you've done. Your identity is the person you are. Instead of thinking of yourself by what you accomplish—*I'm a touring musician*—think of what gives you joy. You can still be a creative person and make music, even when a global pandemic shuts down your industry.

This deeper level of identity—being a good steward of your body, or a person who is kind and patient, or a disciplined worker, or someone who creates—can't be taken from you, even with all of life's transitions and unexpected challenges. Focus less on what you can do and more on who you are.

Make decisions based on the kind of person you want to be.

Once you decide what kind of person you want to be, you can work backward from that outcome by choosing the mindset and habits that will help you become that person.

If you want to be the kind of person who works hard at their job to grow their influence and increase their responsibility, then what kind of decisions does that person make? They probably wake up early. They form friendships and bonds at work. They have integrity. They work very, very hard.

As you write a new chapter in your story, look forward to the person you want to become, then make decisions that will help you get there.

And remember: You are bold and courageous. Now go make it happen.

Improve Your Mental Health and Relationships

Your identity is ever-evolving—just like you are. It's one of my greatest joys in life to walk alongside people like you as you write your story. Each of us needs encouragement, support and a few good laughs along the way.

On [The Dr. John Delony Show](#), I help live callers learn how to heal from past hurts and trauma so they can be well. Tune into the show on YouTube or your favorite podcast streaming platform for more mental health and relationship coaching content. You are worth being well.

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Dr. John Delony is a mental health expert with two PhDs from Texas Tech University—one in counselor education and supervision and the other in higher education administration. Before joining Ramsey Solutions in 2020, John spent two decades in crisis response, walking with people through severe trauma. Now at Ramsey Solutions, John writes, speaks and teaches on relationships, mental health, anxiety and wellness. He also serves as co-host of *The Ramsey Show*, the second-largest talk show in the nation that's heard by 18 million weekly listeners, as well as host of *The Dr. John Delony Show*. In 2022, John's book *Own Your Past, Change Your Future* instantly became a #1 national bestseller. You can also find John featured on DailyMailTV, Fox Business and *The Minimalists Podcast*. [Learn More.](#)

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