

COVENANT

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Feeding Souls: Towards Psychological and Spiritual Well-Being



The theme for this edition of Covenant is “Life to the Full” as inspired by the Gospel passage of John 10:10, where Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” This is often not

only interpreted as eternal life but also as a life filled with purpose, meaning, and spiritual abundance. It speaks to the idea of experiencing a life fully blessed and enriched by a relationship with God.

In all its complexity, the human essence is often perceived as a divine revelation, a manifestation of the ultimate transcendence (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This profound view of humanity’s nature suggests that within each individual lies the potential for spiritual enlightenment and psychological fulfillment.

In pursuing psychological and spiritual well-being, individuals uncover an inner unity that empowers them to ascend and draw closer to their divine essence. This journey intertwines psychology and spirituality, delving into the intricate mechanisms of human happiness and fulfillment (Richards & Bergin, 2005).

Contemporary psychology highlights the intimate connection between psychological well-being and fulfilling fundamental human needs, such as security, belonging, self-esteem, and fulfillment. When these needs are adequately met, individuals are more likely to experience a profound sense of wholeness and inner contentment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

From a spiritual perspective, diverse traditions teach that true happiness stems from recognizing our intrinsic connection with the divine. This realization finds expression through various spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, and contemplation, enabling individuals to transcend egoic limitations and commune with the divine presence within and around them (Emmons, 2005).

Considering the act of creation, one can conceive that God bestowed upon humanity the capacity to achieve spiritual harmony and unity. However, realizing this potential necessitates a conscious commitment to cultivating one’s relationship with the divine and actively pursuing spiritual growth.

In this quest for psychological and spiritual well-being, it is crucial to acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual and the diverse paths to happiness that may unfold for each person. Embracing this diversity requires openness to exploration and experimentation with different spiritual practices and psychological approaches.

The significance of Southdown lies in its supportive environment for individuals seeking spiritual growth and psychological healing. Whether through psychological assessments, clinical interventions, or residential programs, Southdown endeavours to accompany individuals on their journey toward inner renewal. Central to our mission is the encouragement of continual personal growth, the pursuit of truth, and the cultivation of love and compassion towards oneself and others. Our guiding principles echo our vision for well-balanced individuals, flourishing communities, and spiritually fulfilled lives.

In seeking to live each day to the full and by discovering unity within ourselves, we can soar like eagles, transcending the constraints of our human condition and drawing closer to realizing our divine nature. True happiness and soulful peace await in this state of harmony and completeness.

Sincerely,

Rev. Francois Diouf, OSB, Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer

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The Profound Interplay of Friendship, Self-Esteem, and Empowerment

By Rev. Francois Diouf, OSB, Ph.D.



According to Aristotle, “all art, and all investigation, and likewise all action and all choice, tend towards some good” (see Tricot and Vrin, 1972). Aristotle uses the word “all” four times in this sentence, encompassing all human actions. Whatever a person does, they do with some end in view, some good. In the labyrinth of human existence, few facets shine as brightly as friendship, self-esteem, and empowerment. These concepts, rooted in both ancient wisdom and modern psychological understanding, form the bedrock upon which we build our identities and seek fulfillment. Through the lens of Aristotle’s timeless philosophy and contemporary clinical insights, let us delve deeper into the intricate dynamics of these essential elements of human experience.

Friendship: A Sanctuary for Healing

Aristotle, the revered philosopher of antiquity, viewed friendship as a social construct and a sacred space for mutual support and healing (Nicomachean Ethics). He famously remarked, “Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies,” encapsulating the profound intimacy and empathy that characterize genuine companionship. Indeed, Aristotle believed friendship was indispensable for human flourishing, serving as a refuge from life’s trials and tribulations. According to Yalom (2002), “The great majority of individuals seeking therapy have fundamental problems in their relationships; by and large, people fall into despair because of their inability to form and maintain enduring and gratifying interpersonal relationships.” In his timeless, beautiful sonnet, John Donne’s assertion, “No man is an island,” further underscores the intrinsic human need for relationship and fellowship. Countless psychology studies have reaffirmed friendship’s vital role in promoting emotional well-being and resilience (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Whether in times of joy or sorrow, having trusted confidants by our side provides solace and strength, reaffirming our shared humanity.

However, the path of friendship presents its own set of challenges. As Aristotle observed, conflicts and misunderstandings are inevitable in any relationship. From petty disagreements to profound betrayals, the journey of friendship is marked by moments of joy and pain. And yet, it is through these trials that the bonds of friendship are forged, deepening our understanding of ourselves and others. Many individuals on their journey to healing fall into the trap of what I call the Mirror Bias¹. This bias obstructs the path to healing by distorting perceptions of oneself, making it challenging to identify and confront underlying problems or issues. When individuals lack awareness of their true selves, they may struggle to accurately assess their circumstances, leading to ineffective coping mechanisms and unresolved emotional struggles. This is a need for knowing oneself. Though limited, Morfaux (1980) gave a philosophical-psychological definition of the self that captures the *Mirror Bias* concept when he stated that the self is “the subject’s awareness of its own unity and continuity.”

¹ *Mirror Bias* is a concept I often used when I was a Junior Master. It encapsulates the tendency to resist or evade acknowledging one’s true self, thus hindering personal growth, flourishing, and realizing one’s potential. In psychological practice, *Mirror Bias* emerges as a significant obstacle to healing, as it becomes challenging to address and overcome issues when individuals are unaware or in denial of their true nature.

Self-Discovery and Self-Esteem: The Essence of Being

At the heart of Aristotle's philosophy lies the notion of self-knowledge or self-awareness as the key to self-fulfillment. The Ancient Greek philosophy associated with the saying, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom," highlights the fundamental link between self-awareness and personal growth. In the quest for self-esteem, one must first come to terms with their strengths, weaknesses, and innermost desires. However, to better understand the self, Morfaux's definition is limited. Aristotle posits the identification between the self and what the person is constitutively. This journey is more than being *myself*; it is being the *real self*.

Modern psychological research corroborates Aristotle's insights, emphasizing the importance of self-esteem in fostering resilience and mental well-being (Orth et al., 2008). Individuals who possess a healthy sense of self-worth are better equipped to navigate life's challenges and pursue their goals with confidence and determination. Conversely, low self-esteem can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, hindering personal growth and fulfillment.

Empowerment: A Path to Wholeness

In the realm of clinical practice, empowerment takes centre stage as therapists work diligently to equip individuals with the skills and resources needed to overcome adversity and thrive in their lives. Research has consistently underscored the transformative impact of empowerment-based interventions on promoting mental health and overall well-being (Zimmerman, 2000).

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Conclusion

In the tapestry of human experience, friendship, self-esteem, and empowerment weave a narrative of resilience, transformation, and renewal. From Aristotle's timeless wisdom to the latest findings in clinical psychology, the journey toward self-discovery and fulfillment is a testament to the enduring human spirit and an open door to happiness. Achieving this happiness necessitates a transformative shift in behavior and identity, not merely for a fleeting moment but over an extended period. Central to this process is the cultivation of self-friendship—a profound connection with oneself that involves seeking inner unity and directing actions toward one's highest aspirations. By fostering this inner alignment, individuals discover joy in nurturing their well-being, laying the foundation for genuine self-fulfillment.

Aristotle presents a multifaceted understanding of the self, viewing it as both individual and identical to itself, comprised of both body and soul and manifested through actions and powers. This philosophical framework is pivotal in informing Southdown's approach to therapy, where empowerment lies at the heart of our holistic methodology. At Southdown, we cultivate a nurturing and supportive environment, empowering our residents to reclaim their agency and forge their unique path toward healing and growth. Through evidence-based interventions and personalized care plans, we aim to instill a profound sense of hope and resilience in those we serve, empowering them to embrace life to its fullest potential.

As we navigate the complexities of existence, let us cherish the bonds of friendship, cultivate self-awareness, and embrace the transformative power of empowerment. In doing so, we unlock the door to a life lived authentically and abundantly.

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SCAN TO GIVE

Nurturing Complex Trauma Recovery: From Surviving to Thriving

By Nadine Crescenzi, RT-Qualifying



Complex trauma refers to prolonged and severe experiences of trauma and includes a range of adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, interpersonal violence, oppression, unresolved ongoing conflict, as well as ruptures in formative attachment relationships. Unlike single incidents, intergenerational trauma, or other types of trauma, it is characterized by its chronic nature and the cumulative impact of multiple traumatic events, often beginning in childhood. This ongoing turmoil negatively impacts one's self-identity and perception of the world. At a cellular level, prolonged chronic trauma disrupts one's neurochemistry, nervous system, and bodily homeostasis. Dr. Nadine Burke Harris (2015) explains that prolonged exposure to toxic stress affects the development of a child's brain, as well as the development of their immune and hormonal systems, and even influences how their DNA is read and transcribed. She further explains that toxic stress continues into adulthood, significantly increasing the risk of ongoing health concerns.

It is important to recognize that each individual's experience with complex trauma is unique, and the effects of trauma can vary widely from person to person. However, when adults have experienced prolonged and severe trauma, it can manifest in a range of psychological, emotional, and interpersonal consequences, often keeping them entrenched in survival mode, and inhibiting their capacity to live life to the full.

Occasionally, experiencing one's internal alert system is normal. However, when a person lives in a state where they never feel safe and trust is foreign, they remain in survival mode or stuck in a fight-or-flight-or-freeze state. Rodski (2019) explains that our unconscious mind cannot recognize the difference between real danger and what our imagination perceives as dangerous. Further, being stuck in a prolonged state of fear enhances reactivity, impulsivity, aggression, muscular tension, and the risk of addiction. In turn, one becomes more self-focused, fearful, and closed-hearted, reducing trust, compassion, and connections in relationships with others and with God. Levine (2020) explains that trauma gets stuck beneath our awareness. The body automatically responds to perceived threats by sending a signal to the brain that there is danger. Our body temporarily reacts by preparing for the fight, flight, freeze response, or collapsing into a state of helplessness. Remaining in toxic stress is harmful—significantly increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, fatigue, emotional dysregulation, weight gain, memory impairment, and health issues, and is toxic to our well-being. In this chronic state, life continues, and the trauma cycle is

unknowingly perpetuated in relationships with others, while maladaptive survival skills acquired in childhood are integrated, often lacking the coping skills to lead one toward resilience. Maté (2019) states, "Not only are more people stressed and traumatized, they're also less resilient because resilience requires connection and communal support."

Due to trauma, one can get stuck without progress, stuck in a reactive response to certain experiences or stimuli. At an unconscious level, the brain may perceive a situation as dangerous because it resembles a traumatic experience from our past. These reactive cycles can go on for years, even a lifetime, unconsciously. Van der Kolk (2014) explains patterns such as rage, shutting down, compliance, or defiance are established in childhood as a means to survive. Maté (2019) explains, "...the child, in order to 'belong' and 'fit in,' will automatically, unwittingly, and unconsciously suppress their emotions and their connections to themselves for the sake of staying connected to the nurturing environment, without which the child cannot survive." Maté continues by stating, "Furthermore, if the parents themselves are not in touch with their feelings, they can't tolerate the child's feelings because they threaten them." This trauma cycle keeps one in a state of survival with the goal of making it through the day. They are not able to see into the future without worry or angst and are constantly stimulated by negative past experiences. In survival mode, the brain's focus is to overcome current challenges. Cognitive and executive functioning skills are impaired, and they are unable to think about or plan for the future.

Moving From Surviving to Thriving

So, how does one move from surviving to thriving? Healing from complex trauma often involves a multifaceted approach, including psychological support with trauma treatment therapies focused on addressing past traumas, enhancing resilience, and nurturing feelings of safety and belonging. At Southdown, for example, in our outpatient and residential programs of psychotherapy and spiritual direction, we are dedicated to providing our clients with unconditional positive regard, in a safe and non-judging environment where we meet each person where they are on their journey. Social support systems, including friends, family, and support groups, are another essential element offering validation, understanding, and a sense of belonging. Holistic practices also play a vital role in the healing process of complex trauma by addressing the interconnected aspects of an individual's well-being—that is, the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions,

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fostering healing and facilitating personal growth. As an art psychotherapist (RT-Qualifying), and fitness instructor who leads mindfulness and breathing practices, I offer the following suggestions to support individuals in their transition from merely surviving complex trauma to actively thriving.

Individuals can shift out of survival mode by becoming aware of their feelings and thoughts and acknowledging the reality of their situations or personal history. This awareness helps them understand that they do not need to carry all the responsibility alone. In setting daily intentions and future goals, they give themselves permission to move beyond survival mode and see the broader scope of their lives. They can allow themselves to pause, knowing that constant movement is not necessary. By being mindful and accepting of their reality, they can let go of self-judgment and observe their thoughts without being controlled by them. Integrated minds are more reflective, contemplative, flexible, and creative, offering individuals the power to choose how they navigate each day and plan for the future.

However, this transformation requires patience and time. The process might seem simple, but for those who have endured complex trauma, it is far from it. Awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and family patterns empowers individuals to make positive changes and develop new habits. Neuroplasticity is the brain's capacity to adapt, reorganize, and structurally change—developing new neural pathways takes time. Just as negative behaviours were learned over time, positive ones can be cultivated through conscious effort, allowing individuals to feel more centered, peaceful, creative, and joyful.

Calming experiences activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which moves individuals to a calm, flexible, and open state which may seem unfamiliar. The reality is that by setting intentions and with consistent practice, individuals can gradually make these new behaviours second nature. This takes several months and maybe longer. Change comes in many forms and healing is not a linear journey; everyone's path is unique. Mindfulness practice is a way to listen to our own bodies and minds and to trust our experience, which increases self-awareness. Individuals can start by establishing a routine that prioritizes their intentions and need for self-care, utilizing techniques like breathwork and grounding practices, and nurturing self-compassion, which are vital steps in moving from surviving to thriving.

Acknowledging moments of goodness and practicing gratitude each day fosters self-compassion, kindness, and empathy. This helps us to see the inherent goodness in ourselves, others, and the environment around us. Lastly, by listening to our inner selves, and our imagination, and by embracing our creativity, we can be empowered to access hope, love, joy, curiosity, and wonder, and open ourselves to all the possibilities life has in store for us.

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Covenant is produced and published by The Southdown Institute. Its purpose is to inform and educate the readership about clinical issues that surface in our work and to invite integration of the emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives.

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18798 Old Yonge Street
Holland Landing, ON L9N 0L1 Canada

Tel: 905 727 4214
Fax: 905 895 6296
Email: administration@southdown.on.ca

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