

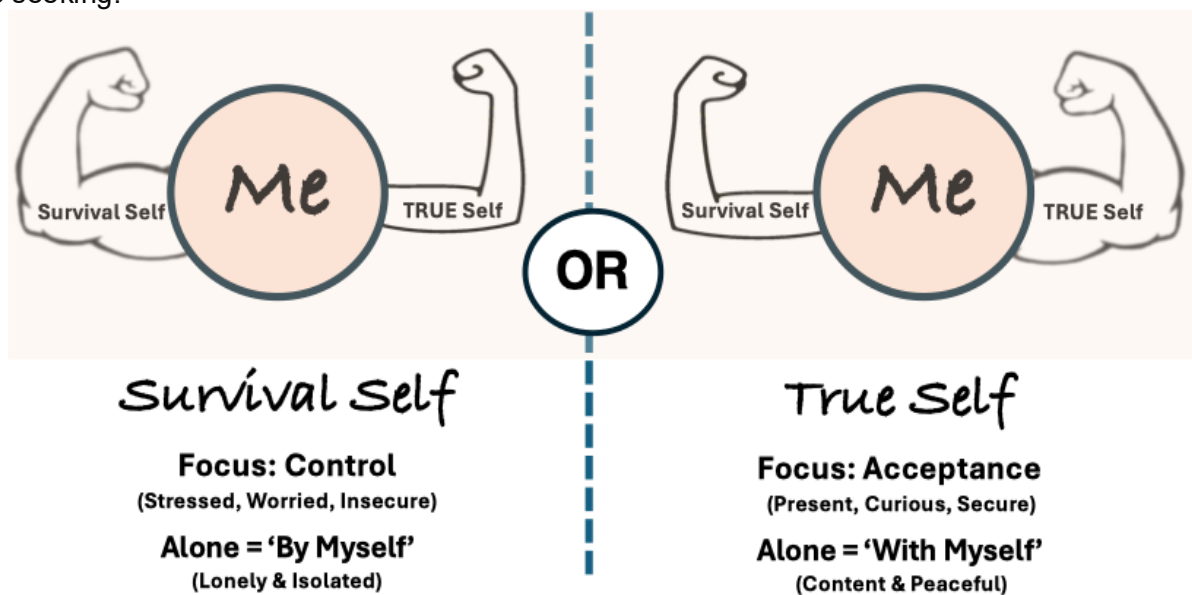


Flexing Your 'Self' Muscles

To 'Flex' in a physical sense is to tighten or contract your muscles. Our muscles naturally flex when we lift heavy objects or when we brace in response to danger. In psychology, this idea of bracing in response to danger is also referred to as a stress response where our survival instincts enable us to fight, flee, flop or fawn. These survival instincts are very useful aspects of our human nature and form what we would call our 'survival self'.

Without our 'survival self' we wouldn't be able to respond to physical danger effectively. However, as adults, our 'survival self' can be activated in response to a range of difficult situations that may not actually be physically dangerous per se. As a result of childhood traumas such as emotional or physical abuse and neglect we may end up becoming adults with an 'over-activated survival self' which is flexing anytime we feel uncomfortable as opposed to when we're actually in physical danger. In some cases, we may be constantly flexing our survival self to the extent it becomes our dominant way of living.

You can see in the diagram what life is like if we are constantly flexing our 'survival self' – hypervigilant to threat – seeking to control everything (passively or assertively). When we're by ourselves or alone our primitive instinct of 'safety in numbers' makes us seek others for connection and validation. However our hypervigilance also makes us personalise any interpersonal tension and withdraw from the same support we are seeking.



The healthy alternative to constantly flexing our 'survival self' is to reconnect with, and learn to flex, our 'true self'. Our 'true self' is who we were when we were born – our deepest sense of identity, our uniqueness, our inherent nature. Our 'true self' loves and aligns our mind and body, is curious about the world, open to learning and wants us to evolve into self-regulated responsible adults (as per nature's agenda). Our 'true self' prioritises acceptance over control, seeks out joyful experiences and strives to live a peaceful existence.

For many people, as their adult lives progress, the muscles of their 'true self' become weak as they are constantly flexing their 'survival self' to try to keep up with relevant social and material expectations. Long term flexing of our 'survival self' leads to burnout and breakdown unlike the long-term flexing of our 'true self' which leads to a more peaceful and joyful life!