What's Stopping Us from Connecting with Ourselves? A Qualitative Examination of Barriers to Self-Connection

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Abstract

Recent research suggests self-connection relates to various aspects of well-being, yet it is not understood what factors stop us from connecting with ourselves. This qualitative study seeks to understand the barriers that prevent people from obtaining an awareness of the self, acceptance of that self, and acting in alignment with the self. Twenty-seven participants journaled about self-connection for fifteen minutes per day for five days. All but one participant brought up various barriers to the three components of self-connection. In general, the barriers participants reported reflected both internal (i.e., feeling lost, negative self-judgment, a lack of motivation, avoidance, and prioritizing others) and external factors (i.e., time, work, ability to meet basic needs, and powerlessness). This research highlights the importance of understanding what barriers exist to self-connection. More research is now needed to focus on developing interventions to help circumvent these barriers.

Keywords Self-connection · Barriers · Well-being · External · Internal

1 Introduction

Research has long focused on the impact of connection (Brown 2003; Chu et al. 2010; Cohen 2004) and disconnection from others (Cacioppo et al. 2011; Eisenberger 2012; Herrman and Jané-Llopis 2012). Recently, researchers have begun to also examine the potential impact of self-connection on well-being. Self-connection is conceptualized as (1) an awareness of oneself, (2) an acceptance of oneself based on this awareness, and (3) an alignment of one's behavior with this awareness (Klussman et al. 2020a). Nascent research suggests strong relationships between self-connection and various

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health and well-being outcomes (Klussman et al. 2020a, b). Although research has examined related constructs to self-connection (Carlson 2013; Pronin et al. 2001; Vazire and Mehl 2008), none has yet looked at the barriers to self-connection, as defined here. If self-connection increases well-being, it is important to understand what prevents people from being self-connected. This study seeks to satiate this need by examining the barriers to self-connection that exist in people's everyday lives.

1.1 Social Connection

Social connection has often been investigated through the lens of social support. Previous research has defined social support as providing resources (e.g., instrumental, informational, and emotional) to help others cope with stress (Cohen 2004). Social connection, in particular, is important throughout the lifespan (e.g., Arbeit et al. 2016). It is a means to buffer stress, promote positive psychological states, and provide motivation for self-care (Cohen 2004). In addition, it is associated with a variety of health indicators (Brown 2003). For this reason, research has long focused on how to facilitate social connection by identifying and removing the barriers to social support.

A study of barriers to social inclusion indicates that there are three major categories impacting social connection and isolation. One set of barriers involves environmental factors, including those related to the social, physical, and economic environment (e.g., Futch Ehrlich et al. 2016). Another category of factors is those related to internal disabilities (i.e., the internal factors impacting inclusion and exclusion) and includes stigma and safety, mental distress, and coping strategies. The third and final group involves factors related to having an active lifestyle or occupational features that impact inclusion and exclusion, including the value of the occupation and occupational deprivations and demands (Smyth et al. 2011). While the study of social inclusion and exclusion has been quite prolific over the past decade, Wright and Stickley (2013) found that the concepts are still quite unclear and misunderstood.

1.2 Self-Connection

Self-connection looks at how people connect to themselves rather than to others. Research suggests that self-connection consists of three components: awareness, acceptance, and alignment (Klussman et al. 2020a). The first component of self-connection is awareness, or an understanding of the “self”. The self can be understood as who one believes they are internally and includes a deep understanding of one's values and goals that may or may not be reflected in how they behave (Schlegel and Hicks 2011). Research has highlighted a multitude of psychological benefits that may arise from self-awareness (Carlson 2013; Schlegel et al. 2009; Schlegel et al. 2012), including perceiving greater meaning in life and better decision making (Schlegel and Hicks 2016; Schlegel et al. 2011). Some ways that we can come to know ourselves are through objective self-observation and self-knowledge (Bandura 1991; Carlson 2013; Wilson 2004).

The second component of self-connection is self-acceptance, or actively accepting the self and one's personal values and beliefs. The awareness of the self should allow one to observe experiences as they truly are, creating a more accurate image of the self. This self-image leads to self-acceptance, a crucial component of self-connection. While

this component and the self-awareness component are importantly similar to mindfulness, and research can gain from considering mindfulness alongside self-connection, they are importantly distinct. Mindfulness focuses on developing a distance between the self and one's consciousness. This distance is proposed to help develop an ability to observe patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors across contexts (Bandura 1991). Conversely, self-connection is concerned with going more deeply into oneself. Additionally, the self-acceptance component of self-connection does not require a lack of judgement, as in mindfulness, but instead that one accepts who s/he is.

The final component of self-connection is acting in alignment with oneself through external behaviors. That is, when people are truly self-connected, they experience a sense of consistency between internal values and beliefs and external behaviors. Research highlights links between the alignment of one's internal self and external behaviors with well-being (Schultheiss and Brunstein 1999; Schultheiss et al. 2008; Sheldon et al. 2004; Sheldon 2014), psychological health (Schlegel et al. 2009, 2012), and feelings of meaning in life (Baumeister et al. 2013). Self-alignment is an important and distinct aspect of self-connection that relates to the consistency between oneself and one's behavior.

1.3 Barriers to Self-Knowledge

Research has shown that people frequently do not have consistent or accurate access to the unconscious motives and feelings that drive their behavior. Attempting to introspect and reason through one's behavior often leads to erroneous conclusions (Wilson 2004) that equally misinterpret and fail to predict both negative and positive outcomes (Sheldon et al. 2010). Reviews of the research have found that, while humans have some insight into how they behave and feel, it is far from perfect (Vazire and Carlson 2010). Consequently, research suggests that close others are sometimes better than us at predicting our own behavior and responses (Vazire 2010; Vazire and Mehl 2008).

In developing a theoretical model to explain these discrepancies, Vazire (2010) identified two specific areas of difference in self-other knowledge: informational differences and motivational differences. Informational barriers to self-knowledge occur when we have limited or incorrect information about the self. Pre-existing cognitive structures, social norms, and current cognitive load may all impact one's ability to accurately process the information received (Bandura 1991; Barrouillet et al. 2007; Carlson 2013; Exline et al. 2012). Motivational barriers are barriers that are based on common perceptual biases—a self-enhancement motive and a self-verification motive. People consistently show a positive bias in their perceptions of themselves, perceiving themselves in a more positive light than others (Gosling et al. 1998; Pronin 2007). People also often pay selective attention to information that confirms their preexisting beliefs (positive or negative) about themselves (Swann Jr and Brooks 2012).

2 Current Research

Theoretical and empirical evidence is emerging for the benefits of self-connection on well-being (Klussman et al. 2020a, b), yet little is known about what prevents people from being self-connected and experiencing these benefits. Due to the limited research

on the topic, we chose a qualitative approach to best identify these barriers and to direct future research (Lasch et al. 2010). We aimed to examine what barriers people discuss in their everyday experiences of disconnection.

As part of an intervention investigating the effects of journaling about moments of self-connection in everyday life, we focus here on the comments that related to preventing participants from being self-connected. We used thematic analysis to understand how people talked about the barriers they experienced to self-connection. In particular, we focused on barriers to self-connection as it pertains to the three components of self-connection, (1) being aware of oneself, (2) accepting oneself, (3) acting in alignment with oneself (Klussman et al. 2020a).

3 Method

3.1 Participants

We recruited a community sample through online posts as well as in-person recruitment at a local gym in the San Francisco Bay area. Sixty-six participants were initially enrolled in the study and randomized to either a control or self-connection group. Fifty-one participants completed at least five journal entries over the course of the study. Twenty-five were in the control condition and 27 were in the self-connection group. For the purpose of this study, we were only interested in the participants from the self-connection group since they focused each journal entry on writing about self-connection within their daily lives. Of the 27 participants who completed all five journal entries, 93% were female with an average age of 33.92 ($sd = 12.05$). They were mostly White (42%) or Asian (31%), college educated (58% Bachelor's degree; 31% Postgraduate degree), and living in suburban (62%) or urban areas (38%). See Table 1 for individual participant demographics.

3.2 Procedure

This study was approved by the IntegReview independent institutional review board. All identifying information has been changed to preserve anonymity. Participants were asked to journal for at least 15 min per day for five days (over the course of one week). Although we recommended writing in a quiet, private location, they were able to determine where and how (i.e., online or paper-pencil) they completed the journal entries. Participants were asked to send us their entries each day via email. Each participant was given a unique anonymous study ID, and we anonymized all entries before analysis. Below are the directions that each participant saw.

For the next week, we would like you to spend at least 15 min/day, for at least 5 days, writing about any moments of self-connection you experience. By self-connection, we mean moments where you felt a sense of closeness to yourself and/or were particularly aware of and attuned to yourself, either in terms of your wants/needs, your purpose in life, your deepest values, beliefs, or moments when you found your relationships, actions, or other aspects of your life deeply reflecting those values,

Table 1 Participant demographics

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Race
Participant_1	48	Female	White
Participant_2	66	Female	White
Participant_3	53	Female	White
Participant_4	30	Female	White
Participant_5	30	Female	Asian
Participant_6	26	Female	Hispanic
Participant_7	21	Female	White
Participant_8	39	Female	Mixed
Participant_9	24	Female	Mixed
Participant_10	30	Female	White
Participant_11	60	Female	White
Participant_12	26	Female	Asian
Participant_13	53	Female	White
Participant_14	23	Female	Asian
Participant_15	45	Female	White
Participant_16	29	Female	Mixed
Participant_17	24	Female	Black
Participant_18	47	Female	Hispanic
Participant_19	25	Female	Asian
Participant_20	26	Female	Asian
Participant_21	28	Male	Mixed
Participant_22	26	Female	White
Participant_23	24	Female	Asian
Participant_24	35	Male	Asian
Participant_25	30	Female	White
Participant_26	32	Female	White
Participant_27	35	Female	Asian

beliefs of sense of purpose. In your writing, we'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts about connection. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. The only rule is that once you begin writing, you continue for at least 15 min.

Each time you complete a journal entry, we ask that you immediately email it to us. If you complete your journal entries in paper-pencil form, we ask that you take a picture (with a smartphone, for example) or scan it and email it to XXX@connectionlab.com. We will also collect hard copies at the end of the study period. If you complete an electronic version of your journal entries, we ask that you either cut and paste them into the body of an email, or attach them and email them to XXX@connectionlab.com. Please note that all journal entries will be kept completely confidential, should not contain your name (instead they should contain your Study ID Number), and will not be read by study staff until after you have completed the study.

3.3 Analysis

Themes were identified using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify and categorize what barriers people discussed that prevented them from self-connection. We took both a deductive (themes identified in past social and self-connection research) and inductive approach (paying attention to novel themes that emerged from the journal entries). We avoided latent analyses or interpreting meaning beyond what could be clearly understood from participants' entries. Throughout our analysis, we used NVivo software to categorize and code the journal entries (QSR 2018).

4 Results

Ninety-six percent of participants ($n = 26$) wrote about barriers they experienced that prevented them from being self-connected. In an effort to organize their comments, we have categorized them as either those related to things outside of the self (i.e., external) versus those inside the self (i.e. internal). We present these categorizations and the themes that emerged within each category next (see Fig. 1).

4.1 External Barriers

Sixty-seven percent of participants ($n = 18$) brought up external barriers to self-connection (i.e., barriers outside of their personal control), including those related to

Fig. 1 Organizational framework of barriers to self-connection. Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; each represents the number of people who mentioned that type of barrier at least once in their daily entries

time, work, basic needs, powerlessness, and others that were clearly external but unique to their personal life experiences and not easily categorizable.

Time Thirty-three percent of participants ($n = 9$) wrote about not having enough time to devote to self-connection. Three of these wrote about the busyness of their lives impacting their ability to take time to be self-aware. One participant stated, “Yesterday...I was working hard. I didn’t have any time to think about myself” and later, “sometimes I don’t notice all those things, because I am busy. Everyday.” (Participant_15). Another participant wrote, “I need to ‘parcel out’ what I can handle on any given day, both practically and emotionally” noting that self-awareness caused emotions that prevent her from “just do[ing] what needs to done” (Participant_11). A third participant wrote, “I think it can be really difficult, or at least take a few days, to... be present and allow yourself to feel connected” continuing, “It gets harder as you get older...More obligations, more people, more things” (Participant_4).

Six participants wrote about not having enough time to do the things that are in alignment with their values. Regarding work, one wrote, “It makes me feel like I’m wasting all my time working instead of enjoying more of my life” (Participant_21). Another participant similarly stated, “I don’t get to do the things that really bring me joy. It’s meeting after meeting”. This participant later wrote, “I feel a little irritated that I don’t have as much alone time as I thought I would” (Participant_18). Similar statements came from other participants, writing, “I struggle with balancing ‘me time’ with commitments” (Participant_13). Another wrote about struggling to schedule time, writing, “while having quiet time to myself is important to me... I also really value a good nights sleep”. This participant later wrote, “I felt that familiar creeping anxiety that I experience when I feel I’m running out of time. All of a sudden I felt anxious about the things I still had (“had”) to do” (Participant_5). A different participant wrote, “I feel my interests are being stifled and ... the empty weird feeling I have inside is due to being unable to schedule all the events I want” (Participant_17). A participant who found out her father was diagnosed with cancer expressed, “I also have to be the person that will...be there for my dad while dealing with school and my other responsibilities...no one knows what I’m dealing with” (Participant_7).

Work Twenty-two percent of participants ($n = 6$) brought up work requirements as barriers to their self-connection. One participant wrote about work preventing self-awareness. She described, “yesterday, I tried to relax and not think about anything. Sometimes it’s hard because of so many deadlines at work” (Participant_15). Two participants wrote about work preventing them from acting in alignment with their values. One wrote, “it made me realize that I truly didn’t love the job that I was doing and that I didn’t want to stay at that job for a long time”. He continued, “I just don’t like working...I realized that I need money to pay rent and survive, so I rolled out of bed and got ready for work”. This participant later wrote, “I truly think that if I didn’t have to worry about paying bills and rent, I’d have a much simpler, happy life...I’m just not a huge fan of sitting in an office the whole day when...I could be at the beach or something” (Participant_21). Another participant wrote, “Today I went to work and I am realizing that I am hating being at [work] more and more each day” because they

are “long and emotionally draining days at work” (Participant_12) and thus she did not have the energy to act in alignment with her goals.

Three participants described their work environments as enjoyable, yet often situations prevented them from acting in alignment and ignited negative emotions. One participant did not feel support from her superiors and thus barred from acting in alignment with her values, writing, “Just streamline and optimize - it’s who I am and what I enjoy...To have push back on this from a senior person just because, makes me very frustrated” (Participant_16). Another participant who was very passionate about the work she did wrote, “I love the work I do and if given the choice to be left alone to do it, I would.”. This participant valued working privately and did not enjoy confrontation or having to work with a team, yet her job required a team building workshop. She wrote, “I wish I could feel comfortable with the process but I’m not...I would rather do something different like go to the dentist...I guess I’m much more anxious about this than I thought” (Participant_18). A different participant described an experience at work where she could not act in alignment with herself or express her ideas describing, “You know where I did not feel connected? During a meeting today where everyone was talking over each other. ... so then I just sit there because what’s the point” (Participant_10).

Basic Needs Eleven percent of participants ($n = 3$) wrote that their ability to meet their basic needs was a barrier to self-connection. Two participants wrote about difficulties in fulfilling basic needs preventing them from being self-aware. One participant wrote, “after spending the last ten or twenty years obsessing about fickle meaningless things like finding food or a place to sleep for the night it seems habit to not think about things I cannot change” referring to a previous comment that “Finding these things, meaning... a purpose for living, etc...- are luxuries for the rich and idle” (Participant_25). Another participant wrote about the need for sleep impacting his ability to be self-aware, writing, “It was like pulling teeth yesterday and it was difficult for me to tap into anything deep” (Participant_24). One participant wondered if her inability to meet her needs prevented her from acting in alignment and wrote, “I feel as if I have nothing to look forward to because I am not able to meet my needs” (Participant_6).

Powerlessness Eleven percent of participants ($n = 3$) wrote about being powerless to change external situations that prevented them from acting in alignment with values. One participant wrote about her inability to act in alignment with herself due to external societal factors, writing, “I am an American, born and raised, but I still feel a sense of powerlessness and inability to speak in many situations based on my race and ethnicity” (Participant_23). Another wrote that she was feeling powerless and cynical because of the current political climate and not feeling able to do enough to promote a change, writing, “with everything that’s going on at the borders, like a bad horror movie. Seeing the images makes me feel like disconnected with so many things because I’m so removed...I donated as much as I could” (Participant_26). Finally, a participant who was struggling wrote, “there is not much I can do right now about my current situation but keep working hard on the few opportunities I have” (Participant_6).

Other Eleven percent of participants ($n = 3$) also wrote about other external barriers to self-connection, particularly alignment, that were related to aspects of life other than time, work, basic needs, and a sense of powerlessness. Two participants wrote about the value they placed on having connections with others and how lacking connections with others prevented them from fully aligning their behavior with their values. One participant described the experience of missing connections to others since she moved writing, “I haven’t really felt close connections and I kept those close...so it’s actually easy for me to think of many times when I haven’t felt that centered with myself” (Participant_26). Another participant wrote about her desire and personal values of being in nature with friends and inability to find people to go with her, writing, “Ever since I stopped working at summer camp, I miss nature a lot. I’m a gl camper so it’s hard to find people who are not as intense as full camping but also actually would like to be in the woods” (Participant_17). One final participant described a barrier to living at home due to health reasons stating, “I can’t live at my house. I fall down the stairs all the time. I wish I could live there. it would make my life so easy” (Participant_1). This prevented her self-connection because, at her current residence, a roommate made it impossible to act in alignment with her values.

4.2 Internal Barriers

Eighty-one percent of participants ($n = 22$) wrote about various internally caused barriers to self-connection, including feeling lost, negative self-judgement, lack of motivation, self-avoidance, and putting others’ needs before their own.

Feeling Lost Twenty-six percent of participants ($n = 7$) described the sense of feeling lost as a barrier to acting in alignment with their self. One participant described, “Currently, I don’t feel like my life is in line with my life purpose (undefined at this point) but definitely not the current life I lead” (Participant_17). Another participant wrote, “I thought I was sure about my life path, beliefs ... but now everything is shattered”. She described, “I need to reconsider a few important things about my purpose in life. What’s more important? What’s going to make me happier?” (Participant_6). A different participant wrote, “I had to finally start to ask myself...what made me “me”. I’m not sure I ever knew that to be honest...”. This participant also described, “I am trying to figure out...who I am and what defines me outside of my role as mother” and concluded, “I feel like I don’t know how to fix this” (Participant_8). Another participant wrote, “Why do I keep the house? It’s just full of ghosts....Do I hold onto it just for the memories? Probably. Maybe because I was happy back then?”. This participant then continued, “Why do I put up with this? Do I like the torture? Is there something that makes me feel like I deserve this?” (Participant_1). In both instances this participant was unsure about what she valued and that led to an inability to act in alignment with that.

Three participants questioned the decisions they made about their careers and felt blocked from self-connection. One participant questioned “Is it even worth it? There are so many times throughout the day (and especially today) where I stop and question if I want to keep pushing forward” (Participant_23). Another participant wrote, “I’d say I think about my future a lot... if I should just give up everything and go travel. Start my

own business? I usually have a thousand questions for myself about my future” (Participant_21). One participant, who made a decision not to attend medical school wrote, “This made me feel free, like I was in a cage before...but soon after I realized I had lost a sense of purpose; and lost myself...when all things would go wrong; [medical school] was something that kept me energized, and...got me out of bad times” (Participant_14).

Negative Self-Judgement Twenty-six percent of participants ($n = 7$) wrote about feeling internally conflicted from not accepting their true selves, preventing alignment and blocking self-connection. Three participants wrote about negative self-judgment as preventing them from acting in alignment with their selves. One participant wrote about mindfulness, “It’s all about being present, which is the most annoying,...nonsense ever, I know... I mean ok yeah but actually no. But... maybe yes?”. This participant later went on to write, “this is me outwardly reckoning with two opposing forces, one that says being mindful is good and you should do more of it, and the other that just rolls its eyes at the very notion of this stuff”. In a different context, this participant described a class, “I stayed in it out of a sense of pride for NOT quitting but I really, really wanted to bounce outta there. It was a total waste of time” (Participant_10). A different participant who wrote, “I am learning to have (or try to have) patience with myself” (Participant_11). Another participant wrote that she “*want[s]* to be someone who doesn’t take their stress out on others” yet struggles to do so writing, “I...don’t accept that disconnect. So I guess I have to... Either become her or... accept me for me”. This participant further questioned, “am I...not believing in myself/ my abilities because I am trying to be too honest with myself?...Am I too worried about being ‘me’ that I hold myself back from things that would stretch me?” She was so worried about being “authentic” she could not accept who she actually was, writing “are my insecurities about ‘I’m not enough’” (Participant_5).

Three participants wrote about not accepting the choices they made. One participant wrote, “I laid there with the thought I had made peace with my decision but as the tears rolled down my face I second-guessed. I wish I could reverse time”. This participant continued, “this is one of those situations where I don’t think I will be able to forgive myself for some time now”. She finally wrote that her biggest barriers to self-connection were, “the enormously high expectations...because I want to be perfect” (Participant_8). Another participant remarked, “I can’t have love and trust...I can’t maintain confidence when I’m surrounded by toxic people who want to spread their toxicity” (Participant_9). A different participant who wrote, “in the past few months, I have not felt a sense of self-connection. I have felt internally conflicted” continued by saying, “I think that I am scared of taking big decisions, making the wrong choices, and settling for less”. This participant wondered, “am I just lying to myself because I am scared to restart?” (Participant_6). The participant who decided not to pursue medical school wrote, “knowing that am not happy by working at a hospital I don’t want to pursue it, but part of me still does” continuing, “I think the stress of making it in life, and making sure I don’t turn out to be a failure has been affecting me” (Participant_14).

Lacking Motivation Nineteen percent of participants ($n = 5$) wrote about knowing and accepting who they are and what activities lead to a sense of self-connection but lacking the motivation to act in alignment with that knowledge. Regarding exercise, one wrote,

“If I exercise I feel less anxious and happier. And more ME...It can be so hard to motivate...I really have to push myself” (Participant_3). Another wrote about how she has “fitness goals” but that “it is hard in this miserable weather to commit to the gym” (Participant_13). One participant wrote, “I told myself that I would check in with a couple of people, but I never really set it as a priority to do so” and “Generally, my self-control is not very strong and I’ll somehow find a way to justify that it’s okay to buy food instead of eating my meal-prepped lunch” (Participant_19).

Two participants wrote about struggling to act on their values. One participant wrote, “I get sad to think I haven’t felt this connection as much as I used to”. She wrote that the barrier was “remember[ing] that it takes work and... carving out time” (Participant_4). Another participant reflected, “the occasion reminded me that the true me is not really a part of their [university] world and never will be” continuing that she did not want to be a part of “the ivory tower’ and its unrealistic inhabitants who were cut off from the real... world” (Participant_2).

Distraction/Avoidance Thirty-three percent of participants ($n = 9$) wrote about avoiding various aspects of self-connection because they were afraid. One wrote about not wanting to connect with herself because “most of this self-connection is sad. The most depressing loneliest dreariest thoughts come out if you think too hard...Actually, I feel happier when I don’t think about any of the things in your prompt” (Participant_25). Another participant wrote that she recently struggled to “face myself fully”, because she was “afraid of being this or that, tired, cold, alone” (Participant_4). A different participant wrote, “Overall today, I’m halfway connected to me- and halfway confused about what matters to me and wanting to run away from myself...In some ways, all I want to do is escape from connection to myself” (Participant_9).

Four participants wrote about avoiding acting in alignment with themselves. One participant discussed being very focused on getting a new camera lens, then remarking that “it is ultimately a distraction from the... fulfilling and oftentimes uncomfortable part of photography” (Participant_24). A different participant described, “The very thing I want for myself...is out of reach only because I spend my energy on peripheral things that don’t matter” (Participant_8). Another participant wrote, “sometimes life’s worries get in the way”. This participant was so afraid that “I might regret my decision...[that] I am wasting time not doing anything about my dreams” (Participant_14). One participant wrote, “I suppose avoiding any interaction allows me to avoid the possibility that they may not find me to have any desirable qualities at all” (Participant_25). One final participant suggested inconsistent behaviors due to, “Sometimes I worry about being judged or that I am asking for something ridiculous” (Participant_3).

Three participants wrote about avoiding acting in alignment with their values to avoid being alone. One participant wrote, “I have not yet found someone who’s values and beliefs match mine enough for me to consider a real future with them. Instead, I choose people I know I don’t see a future with to help me pass the time” (Participant_22). Another participant wrote, “I write and think about all the good things and fantasize/ romanticize them. I completely forget about the bad things”. This participant wrote about a current relationship noting, “I’m just sick of feeling so...dissatisfied. I keep suppressing it...because I keep hoping either I will change or this...dynamic will change” (Participant_9). One participant wrote, “I am essentially leading my current

boyfriend on...My problem is that I want to wait for my friend to get old enough to be with me but I don't want to wait alone" (Participant_20).

Prioritizing Others Fifteen percent of participants ($n = 4$) described putting others' needs before their own as a barrier to acting in alignment and finding self-connection. One participant wrote, "Lately, I have been so focused on others that it has been hard to take time out for myself" (Participant_22). Another participant described, "I got so consumed and sucked in by other peoples crisis and lives that I not only forgot who I was but also found myself in a sad empty mush" (Participant_8). An additional participant wrote about feeling unable to act in alignment and fulfill her needs because "Instead of putting myself first and just asking...worry about them instead of myself" (Participant_3). One participant wrote, "This has honestly been the most stressful and sad 24 hours of my life. I, of course, have to be strong for my dad but it is honestly tearing me apart". She then went on to write, "I also have to be the person that will listen and be there for my dad while dealing with school and my other responsibilities on campus" (Participant_7).

5 Discussion

Self-connection has recently emerged as a promising avenue for research designed to increase well-being (Klussman et al. 2020a, b). Despite significant attention to self-knowledge barriers (e.g., Carlson 2013), little is yet known about the barriers that prevent people from becoming fully self-connected. To begin an investigation into these barriers, the current study asked participants to journal about self-connection in their daily lives. Ninety-six percent of participants spontaneously brought up barriers to self-connection. This suggests that the experience of facing barriers to self-connection is widespread. Our results also highlight the numerous types of barriers people face when attempting to be self-connected.

Participants wrote about barriers to all three components of self-connection; awareness of oneself, acceptance of oneself, and alignment of one's behavior with this awareness. The most common barriers to self-connection were barriers to alignment, and almost every participant brought up at least one way in which they were unable to act in alignment with their selves and behavior. In general, these were both external and internal barriers. External barriers to self-connection included time, work, ability to meet basic needs, and powerlessness. Internal barriers to self-connection included feeling lost, negative self-judgment, a lack of motivation, avoidance, and prioritizing others. The types of barriers provided by participants are just some examples of individual experiences and should be taken as a starting point to a larger and longer investigation.

A common thread throughout the journal entries was not having enough time or mental space to become self-aware. In our busy, chaotic world, there is ever increasing pressure to do and accomplish more, and that appears to be one of the largest obstacles affecting how and if people connect to themselves. Responses also highlight the impact of several other external and internal pressures on our ability to know, accept, and act as our selves. However, simply journaling about self-connection seemed to overcome

some of these barriers. One participant noted that “Starting these entries has consciously made me aware of how little time I take to self-reflect and self-connect” (Participant_19). Another wrote about struggling to make time for themselves, writing “this journaling experience has reminded me of how important it is to spend time alone with myself, my thoughts, my feelings, my needs, and my desires” (Participant_22).

Another theme that emerged was work preventing all three aspects of self-connection. When self-connection is blocked at work, both individual well-being and the well-being of the company may suffer. However, this requires further investigation. For example, if people do not feel connected to themselves in the work that they are doing, how will that impact their focus and attentiveness to the task? What about their decision-making skills or motivation? Will their job satisfaction decrease? Future research still needs to understand this better.

5.1 Future Directions

Using a thematic approach with a small sample size, the results should be viewed only as a guide for future research. Additional qualitative and quantitative examinations are needed to fully understand and be able to recommend ways to overcome barriers to self-connection. It is also worth noting that the barriers to self-connection discussed in this paper are what participants spontaneously brought up about their daily lives. There are many other possible barriers in people’s lives that could also prevent them from being self-connected. For example, life circumstances including those related to health, financial, cultural, political, and societal factors may also affect people’s ability to act in alignment with their values and goals. Additionally, cultural influences may dictate how aware and connected one is to their personal internal values and whether or not they accept them.

This research highlights the need to better understand the various barriers and to design ways of overcoming these barriers to self-connection, including knowing oneself, accepting it, and being able to act in alignment with that self. Future research should first aim to further understand what barriers exist to self-connection, employing quantitative methods and experimentally examining the relationships between various barriers to self-connection and well-being. To accomplish this, the development of a scale of self-connection is first required to measure overall self-connection, as well as the three individual components. Only then can quantitative research begin to understand these barriers. Once future research understands the mechanisms by which people become self-connected, it can create interventions to overcome these barriers.

Another potential line of research and method of intervention could be in the form of a daily diary. Similar to this study, participants would be asked to reflect on specific moments of their lives and note what their barriers to self-connection are. Then, they would rate how meaningful these moments are and think of ways to overcome the barriers in the future. It would also be interesting to investigate how to help people feel more self-connected in the workplace. This could include examining if leaders play a part in helping employees become more self-connected. Yet another option would be to study if more flexible work schedules allow for increased self-connection. Many participants in this study commented on work requirements hindering their time to become self-aware and companies would be wise to find ways to remedy this.

It is also important to investigate the impact of various cultural and social expectations on self-connection and the barriers to it. For example, culture may affect people's ability to act in alignment with their personal values and social factors could impose values placed upon them from society. Additionally, looking at socioeconomic factors such as race, income, and education could shed further light onto barriers to self-connection that are unique to certain groups of people and may highlight specific intervention points for those people.

6 Conclusions

This research highlights the need to understand what barriers exist to self-connection. Almost every participant in this study brought up barriers they faced in their daily lives when attempting to experience self-connection (i.e., self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-alignment), highlighting the difficulties people have in finding this type of connection. In addition, barriers seemed to be unique to the individual experience, yet commonalities emerged including both internal and external factors. Future research should continue to investigate ways in which one might overcome barriers to self-connection and thus increase well-being for people around the world.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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