



The Iceberg of Traits

Imagine your identity as an iceberg. At the top, above the waterline, are the traits you identify with—those that you express openly and often, the ones you’ve been praised or rewarded for. Below the surface are the traits you’ve disowned—the ones you’ve been criticized for, the ones that caused you pain, or the ones you feared would lead to rejection.

The traits below the surface don’t disappear. They remain a part of you, hidden in the unconscious. And while you may not see them, they still exert an influence. Sometimes, they surface in unexpected ways—through strong reactions to others, conflicts in relationships, or moments of frustration when life feels out of balance.

An Exercise: Exploring Your Iceberg of Traits

Take a moment to reflect on your own life. How has your family, culture, or environment shaped the traits you identify with today? The following exercise will help you explore your iceberg of traits.

Step 1: Identify the Top of Your Iceberg

Start by thinking about the traits you are most proud of—the ones that feel central to who you are. Write down a list of these traits. For example: “hardworking,” “kind,” “independent,” “responsible,” “creative,” etc.

Ask yourself for each trait:

- When did this trait first appear?
- Who did I learn this trait from?
- In which situations does this trait mostly emerge?
- How does this trait show up on the outside?
- How this trait has been praised or rewarded in my life?

- What are the benefits for me to have this trait?
- How did this trait help me feel worthy or safe?

Step 2: Reflect on the Bottom of Your Iceberg

Now, think about the traits you dislike—the ones you avoid associating with. These might be traits you dislike in others or traits you've been criticized or punished for in the past. Write down a list of these traits. For example: "lazy," "selfish," "needy," "irresponsible," "reckless," etc.

Ask yourself for each trait:

- When did you decide you were not this trait?
- Was this trait criticized, ridiculed, or punished in your family or culture?
- Was there a relative, a friend, or an acquaintance who was criticized, ridiculed, or punished for showing this trait?
- Are there specific moments or interactions that made you reject this trait?
- How do you generally suppress this trait?
- What quality this trait possesses, that would benefit you?

Step 3: Consider the Impact

Reflect on how these dynamics have shaped your identity. For example:

- What benefits have come from identifying with the traits at the top of your iceberg?
- What challenges or limitations might arise from disowning the traits at the bottom?

This exercise is not about changing who you are or forcing yourself to embrace traits you've disowned. It's simply an opportunity to explore how your environment has shaped your identity and to notice what may be lingering below the surface.