

## Principles of Adlerian Psychology

“To see with the eyes of another,  
To hear with the ears of another,  
To feel with the heart of another”  
- Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler (1870-1937), a founding father of psychology, was a holistic thinker who understood people in terms of their relationships – relationships with self, loved ones, work associates, and community members. This thinking reflects two of his fundamental beliefs: that individuals have a strong **need to belong** through their social connections and they **strive toward self growth, fulfillment and empowerment**. In a healthy individual, these needs to connect and belong move beyond the self and are instead rooted in a larger desire to make a difference in the lives of others – in one’s family, community, and the world.

In the early years, when personality begins to develop, the individual attempts to find a place of significance in their world. Feeling significant can also provide the individual with a vital sense of meaning in their life. Adler understood that the family was the testing ground for young children and, as such, he guided parents to help their children ‘find their way’, for example, by assisting them to develop the types of behaviours that will prove useful and meaningful in their relationships, both in the present as well as in the future. However, when this fails to occur, for any number of reasons, the child often carries misguided notions about themselves and others which act to interfere with their sense of well-being, self-esteem and, in turn, with the healthy development of interpersonal relationships. This being so, many may turn to counselling for help. One of the central goals of Adlerian counselling and therapy, in particular, is to help individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves in such a way that permits them to experience their lives as significantly more meaningful and fulfilling.

Another key feature of Adler’s psychology is ‘**social interest**’. Adler used this term to describe an innate quality in all of us that, if nurtured and developed in an encouraging environment such as in the family of origin, the workplace, or in psychotherapy, it can lead one to a life of inner fulfillment and connectedness. Social interest, in short, is based primarily on the understanding that we are members of a larger social ‘whole’. The absence of social interest can lead individuals to believe they must exist for themselves alone. Adler observed how those who sought to compensate for their own sense of inadequacy and inferiority by constantly competing against, or diminishing, others would experience personal difficulties in their lives. Consequently, in order for these individuals to experience life in a more fulfilling way, they will need to foster a sense of social interest by developing and nurturing their compassion and empathy for others. In doing so, the individual will ultimately develop a style of life that is not only personally meaningful, but that is also in accord with the needs of others.

As each of us move through our own lives meeting the tasks of life, such as responsibilities to self, intimate partner, family, colleagues, community members, and to a spiritual ‘other’, we hope to do so with the knowledge that we have created a meaningful existence for both ourselves and others. This was the basis of Adler’s philosophy of mental health and, as such, he rooted his psychology on the understanding that we need to focus on the strengths, creativity and resourcefulness of individuals in order to achieve healthy, optimistic sustaining relationships.

For a more clinical definition of Adlerian Psychology, [click here](#).