

Shadow work: Why you should be cautious of the TikTok self-help trend

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

I doubt the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), in all his prescience, would have predicted that his work would one day fuel a [TikTok trend](#) called "shadow work."

Life coaches and self-help gurus on the platform promote the

exploration of [shadow](#) as a path to self-development. The exercises they recommend include thought experiments imagining parental rejection, journal exercises recalling a misunderstood talent that was neglected, and the accomplishment of perfect peace through radical self-acceptance.

All of this is apparently based on a premise of [Jungian psychology](#): if we accept the parts of ourselves we despise or disown, they can become assets to us.

Our uncontrollable rage, when welcomed, can become powerful positive self-assertion. Our habitual lying, put to good use, may be the ability to write an engaging novel. The monster that chases us in a recurrent dream may have wisdom for us if we stop and turn to consult it.

Jung apparently said that [90% of the shadow is pure gold](#). There are riches to be found in the darkest corners of human consciousness.

The kinds of exercises touted on TikTok as shadow work, though, can be found in many therapeutic approaches. It is not unusual, for example, in [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (a type of talk therapy) to ask anxious clients to imagine the worst that could happen to explore the resourcefulness they possess to cope with it.

Existential psychotherapy finds that while anxiety about dying can make people more defensive and prejudiced, deeper reflection on mortality brings people to a more accepting stance as they consider how they would like to be remembered.

[Studies of "journalling" practice](#) suggest that reflecting on uncomfortable truths about ourselves is an effective way to gain wisdom in living. These are just a few examples, but they show that something very much like shadow work can be effective without having to buy into the entire Jungian explanation of how [personal development](#) works.

It is not a bad idea to invite people to think about some of the more difficult areas of their lives. In this sense, TikTok is on to something. The problem is that to learn from confrontation with something difficult, we must be able to do two things at the same time: feel the negative emotion (fear, shame, sadness or whatever) and be able to think about it enough to come to a more helpful perspective.

Effective shadow work is not just raking up old psychological wounds for the sake of it, but coming to a new acceptance and understanding of them so that our capacity and resilience grow as a result.

We need other people

The problem with shadow work arises when we run into powerful emotions that completely take us over. Even without a traumatic personal history it is possible to run into feelings of shame, rage and terror that so overwhelm us we have no capacity left to think about them. At such times, when we can't think—we need other people to do the thinking for us.

This is why we turn to friends, or a good therapist, to help us when we reach the edge of our ability to regulate ourselves. This is not to say that we can't learn beautiful things from traumatic experiences. We can. But we have to gain some degree of psychological recovery from our trauma before we go delving for life lessons in the deepest, darkest events of our lives.

This is something that Jung knew but seems to be missing from the TikTok trend.

When I listen to the self-help gurus glibly advocating shadow work as a way of being a better person, I can only assume that none of them know the history that led Jung to establish the concept.

It is true that he emerged from a period of [psychological crisis in his late thirties](#), joyfully clutching new insights into the human mind. But commentators are still divided on whether this was a kind of spiritual enlightenment or a psychotic breakdown.

Either way, it tells us that confronting the shadow, while creative and illuminating, is not to be taken lightly.

I find it difficult to believe that anyone who has explored their shadow in any depth could commend it without a sober note of caution. It makes me wonder if the TikTok advocates of shadow work are oblivious to the most obvious shadow question that confronts them: what would it be like if no one ever watched you on TikTok?

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