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The Disinhibited Self

It's what you do in your free time that will set you free – or enslave you.
– Jarod Kintz

I had spent several years very active in Flickr when one day my wife suggested that I try the new photosharing groups in Google+. I resisted the idea. I didn't particularly want to have to start all over in another social media. Nevertheless, because I was a cyberpsychologist studying online photosharing, and because Google+ was supposedly the Next Big Thing, I reluctantly gave it a try. Without really looking over recent posts in one of the groups that seemed active, I jumped right in to post my own message. I stated who I was, a cyberpsychologist specializing in online photosharing, along with a photo and image pointing to my online book about photographic psychology. The next day I received a message indicating that I had been banned from the community. What? That had never happened to me before. When I contacted the group moderator, he very briefly stated that I had inappropriately, right out of the gate, marketed myself. When I questioned his decision to ban me, he didn't reply. At first annoyed, I then reconsidered the situation. After all, in the real world, I would never pop into a room full of people talking and then announce myself without first finding out what was going on there.

THE ONLINE DISINHIBITION EFFECT

As cyberpsychologists such as Joinson (1998) and myself noted early on, people tend to say and do things in cyberspace that they would not ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, and express themselves more openly. We called it the *online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004a). It is an important force that contributes to the acceleration and amplification of social processes in cyberspace, as well as helps explain the *privacy paradox*, how people express concern about their online privacy even though their behaviors do not reflect those concerns (Barnes, 2006). In this chapter, we will focus on the dimensions of cyberpsychology architecture that influence online disinhibition, particularly the identity, social, text, reality, and sensory dimensions.

In one of the earliest papers about this phenomenon, Holland (1996) attributed it to developmental regression. "Talking on the Internet, people regress," he begins the essay, "It's that simple." Drawing on traditional psychoanalytic theory, he considered the three major signs of regressive behavior in cyberspace: flaming; sexual harassment; and, curiously, extraordinary generosity and openness. He then traces these regressions to the transference reactions people have to the computer itself – unconscious fantasies about power, dominance, sex, narcissistic gratification, oral engulfment, and parental love. At the heart of the regression is the individual's tendency to confuse the person with the machine. Some people see the computer as human while viewing other people online as something less than human, resulting in a disinhibition of sexual and aggressive drives.

BENIGN AND TOXIC DISINHIBITION

Implicit in these kinds of observations is the fact that the disinhibition effect operates as a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, and wishes. They show unusual acts of kindness and altruism, even to strangers, as researchers noted in the free sharing of music through peer-to-peer systems such as Gnutella (Adar & Huberman, 2000). Although we could conceptualize these behaviors as a form of regression, we might also see them as an unleashed human need to better understand oneself, connect compassionately with others, or resolve personal problems. I call these kinds of actions *benign disinhibition*.

By contrast, the disinhibition effect can be anything but friendly. People explore the dark underworld of the Internet, places of hatred, violence, and crime that they would never visit in the real world. Or they spout rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, and even threats, a phenomenon that gained worldwide attention when online bullying and stalking grew into a serious problem. Rick Warren, an evangelical Christian, put it simply: "I just think the internet had made us ruder." In these cases, regression serves as an apt explanation, because such behaviors escalate into a developmentally immature catharsis of primitive impulses. I call these actions *toxic disinhibition*.

The distinction between benign and toxic disinhibition is as elusive as any categorical attempt to tell good from bad. For example, hostile language during text messaging could be a therapeutic breakthrough for those who chronically repress anger. In an increasingly intimate email relationship, people might open up with very honest self-disclosures, then later regret it, feeling exposed, vulnerable, or shameful. An excessively rapid, even false intimacy might develop that later destroys the relationship when one or both people feel overwhelmed or disappointed. In the very wide variety of online subcultures, what is considered antisocial behavior in one group may be considered very appropriate in another, which demonstrates that cultural relativity will blur any simple contrasts between disinhibition that is positive or negative.

We might define benign disinhibition in terms of *working through* as conceptualized in psychodynamic theory, or as the *self-actualization* proposed in humanistic perspectives. People attempt to grapple with and resolve psychological problems, to explore new dimensions to their identity. By contrast, toxic disinhibition is simply a fruitless repetition compulsion or acting out of pathological needs without any beneficial psychology change. In some situations, what the person is doing could be benign, toxic, or a mixture of both, as in online sexual activities otherwise avoided in the real world.

What causes this online disinhibition? What is it about cyberspace that loosens the psychological barriers against inner feelings and needs, regardless of whether they are benign or toxic? In this chapter, I will describe the factors that are at play (see Figure 4.1). For some people, one or two of them produce the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases, these ingredients interact with each other, supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect. Depending on the person and the situation, disinhibition can be intense, mild – or completely absent, because some people online behave very much the way they do in-person.

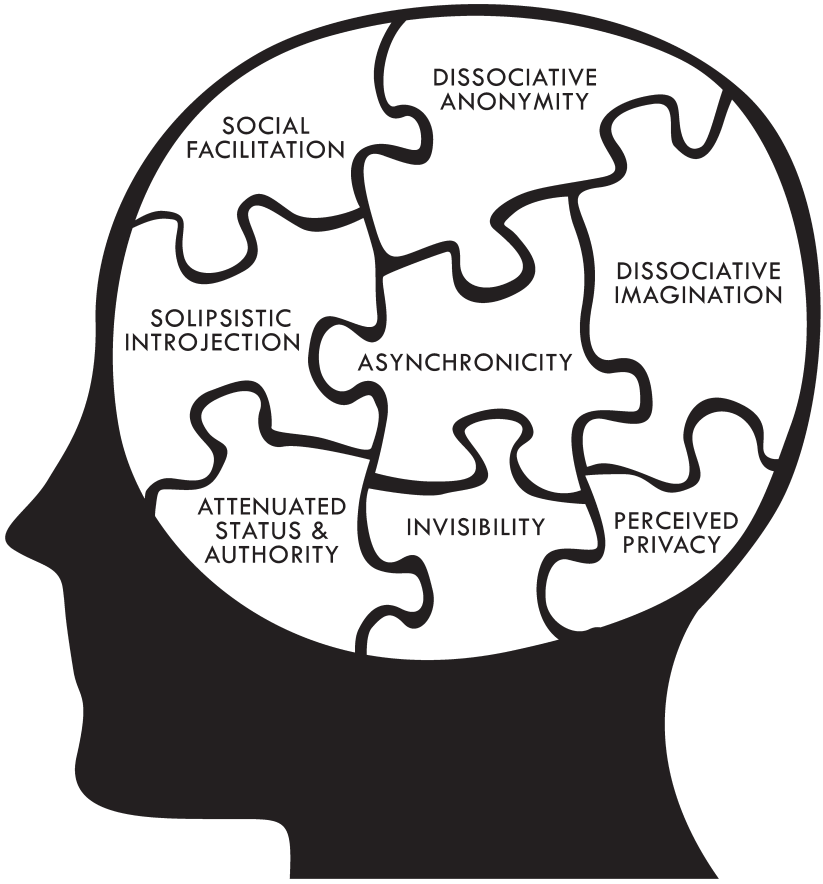

FIGURE 4.1. Ingredients of the online disinhibition effect.

YOU DON'T KNOW ME (DISSOCIATIVE ANONYMITY)

As we move around cyberspace, other people cannot easily determine who we are, even though they are aware of our presence. Usernames or email addresses might be visible, but this information does not reveal much about a person, especially if the username is contrived and the address comes from a large Internet service provider. Technologically savvy, motivated people can detect the location of a computer or mobile device, but for the most part others only know what we tell them. If so desired, we can hide some of our identity, conceal all of our identity, or completely change our identity. We can have no name, as the word "anonymous" indicates,

or we can conceal our identity behind the mask of a contrived persona. In their research, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) also introduced the idea of *unidentifiability*, referring to missing information about one's identity, usually information that could not be discerned just by seeing and hearing someone, such as background, occupation, social status, and home or work address.

Even as common knowledge about technology rose to the level of everyone knowing that true online anonymity never exists, that our devices always leave a footprint of our identity in cyberspace, some people still operate under the assumption that others do not know who they are. Their needs and expectations in the moment override rational reasoning.

When people move through cyberspace via encrypted connections, as in the famous TOR (The Onion Router) network, they raise their level of anonymity to such a heightened degree that even technical experts have a difficult time determining their identity. It comes as no surprise that in these digital realms, often referred to as the *dark* or *deep web*, disinhibited behavior can skyrocket, leading to all sorts of antisocial behaviors and crime.

Anonymity is an important force contributing to the disinhibition effect. When people think their identity remains hidden, they feel less vulnerable about letting out what otherwise remains suppressed. Whatever they say or do will not be directly connected to the mainstream of who they are, or so they believe. Through dissociation, they do not have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self in that particular situation becomes a compartmentalized self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can disown responsibility for those behaviors, almost as if morality and conscience have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche. People might even convince themselves that those online behaviors "aren't me at all." They belong to the artificial me projected into cyberspace.

As early as 1905, social psychologists such as Gustave Le Bon described how the *deindividuation* of a person in a crowd of people tends to unleash antisocial actions, which is largely due to the anonymity of blending in with the group. In other real-world situations as well, anonymity causes disinhibition, as when people let loose their opinions in a suggestion box or wear masks to hide their faces during a public demonstration. Applying the well-known effects of anonymity to online behavior is an example of how traditional ideas in psychology can be translated into cyberpsychology.

Seeing another person as anonymous also causes disinhibition. As social psychology has long recognized, the nameless, faceless stranger easily turns

into a target for aggression and acting out. People who create destructive viruses, often as an expression of their underlying hostilities, do not know or see the victims of their assault. In social media, people who blatantly express political, religious, and racial beliefs often offend their contacts, including friends and family. By not making a conscious effort to remember exactly who makes up their audience, by allowing their audience to slip into a quasi-anonymous state within their minds as they blindly seek affirmation for their beliefs, they more easily fall prey to toxic disinhibition. People might also perceive the anonymously ambiguous other as a loving parent, a confident, or a rescuer to whom they open their hearts.

Disinhibition coming from an anonymous self can often backfire. While some people reply negatively to a toxically disinhibited person, others will simply write off, ignore, and even disown that person. People also rarely trust anyone who insists on remaining anonymous, even if that person's behavior seems benign. When people hide, chronically refusing to show who they truly are, why should they be accepted as "real" people?

YOU CAN'T SEE ME (INVISIBILITY)

In many online environments, other people cannot see you. As you browse through websites, blogs, and social media, people may not even know you are there at all, with the possible exception of technical experts who have access to software tools that can detect traffic through the site, assuming they have the inclination to keep an eye on you, one of maybe thousands or millions of users. This invisibility, or the belief that one is undetected, flying below the radar, gives people the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise would not. It is the type of invisibility that encourages deindividuation, when people feel that they can blend in with the gigantic crowds of users online, when they think that no one will notice them.

The power to be unobservable overlaps with anonymity, because anonymity is the concealment of identity. But there are some important differences. In text communication such as email, chat, blogs, and text messaging, others might know a great deal about who you are, but they still cannot see or hear you – and you cannot see or hear them. Even with everyone's identity known, the opportunity to be physically invisible might amplify the disinhibition effect. You do not have to worry about how you, or others, look and sound when you type something. Witnessing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a gasp, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can either slam the breaks on what people are willing to say or very subtly influence them. Moment-by-moment

feedback in the form of facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and verbal utterances – often that we detect subconsciously – modulate what we are willing to say and do. Without it, we tend to go off on tangents, wandering into disinhibited territories.

In psychoanalysis, the clinician sits behind the patient in order to remain a physically ambiguous figure, without revealing any body language or facial expressions, so that patients have free range to discuss whatever they want without feeling inhibited by how the analyst physically reacts. In everyday relationships, people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. It is easier not to look into the other's face. Text communication in particular offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted. In their research, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) found that lack of eye contact is an especially important feature of the online disinhibition effect. When we do not have to look into another person's eyes, we can minimize the inhibiting awareness that we are being observed.

SEE YOU LATER (ASYNCHRONICITY)

The temporal dimension of cyberpsychology architecture plays an important role in online disinhibition. During asynchronous communication, people do not interact with each other in real time. Others may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply. Not having to deal with someone's immediate reaction can be disinhibiting. In real life, it would be similar to speaking to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and then returning to the conversation when you are willing and able to hear the response. Immediate, real-time feedback from others tends to have a very subtle, yet powerful effect on the ongoing flow of how much people reveal about themselves. In a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others, moment-by-moment responses from companions will shape the ongoing stream of self-disclosure, usually in the direction of conforming to the social norms of the situation at hand.

In email, discussion boards, blogs, and many other forms of social media where there are delays in feedback, people's trains of thought might progress more steadily toward deeper expressions of what they are thinking and feeling, be it toxic or benign. Without an immediate response from others, we more easily get lost in our own ruminations, which encourages the kind of free association that bypasses the defense mechanisms that censor our words. Some people even experience asynchronous communication as

form of running away after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it "out there" where it can be left behind. Munro (2002), one of the first online psychotherapists, aptly described it as an *emotional hit and run*. The quintessential example would be people who cannot overcome the anxiety of breaking up with a romantic partner face to face, so they hit their companion with a "Dear John" text message, then quickly disappear.

It's All Inside My Head (Solipsistic Introjection)

Absent face-to-face cues combined with text communication can alter our perception of self-boundaries. People feel that their minds have merged with the mind of the online companion. Reading another person's message is experienced as a voice inside one's head, as if that person magically has been inserted into one's psyche, what psychoanalysts call an *introjection*. If we not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, we might assign one inside our imagination. We might even create a visual image of what we think that person looks like and how that person behaves. The online companion now becomes a constructed character within our intrapsychic world, a character that is shaped partly by how the person actually presents him or herself via text, but also by our expectations, wishes, and needs. Because the person might remind us of other people we know, we fill in the image of that character with memories of those other acquaintances, as in transference reactions. Transference encourages the shaping of this introjected character when similarities exist between the online companion and significant others in one's life, as well as when one fills in ambiguities about the personality of the online companion with images from past relationships or from characters in novels and film.

As the constructed character becomes more elaborate within our minds, we start to subconsciously experience the text conversation as taking place within our heads, as if it is a dialogue between us and this character in our imagination, as if we become authors typing out a play or a novel while the characters speak to us. Throughout the day, we carry on these kinds of internal conversations, regardless of whether the relationship we ponder is online or offline. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or very honestly confronting a friend. In our imagination, where it is safe, we feel free to say and do all sorts of things that we would not in reality. During online text communication, a person's mind weaves these fantasy role-plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition. All of cyberspace is a stage, and we are merely players.

When reading another's message, it is also possible that you "hear" that person's words using your own voice. We tend to subvocalize as we read, thereby projecting the sound of our voice into the other person's message. Unconsciously, it feels as if we are talking to/with ourselves. When we talk to ourselves, we are willing to say all sorts of things that we would not say to others.

A colleague of mine in Twitter once said, "I have always thought of Twitter as a sort of muttering-to-self service in which one might occasionally be overheard." In social media, solipsistic introjection operates when people experience their posts as a kind of disinhibited murmuring to themselves, with seemingly no one listening. When that internal conversation between parts of oneself is interrupted by the occasional visitor who does post a reaction to one's musings, that visitor's response might fit right into the imaginary play inside one's head, steer it in a new direction, or completely derail it.

it's just a game (dissociative imagination)

People might feel that the imaginary versions of themselves they create in cyberspace exist in a different realm, that one's online persona along with online others live in a not-quite-real, even dreamlike dimension separate from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. Some people see their online life as a kind of game with rules that do not apply to everyday living. Once they get up from the keyboard and return to their daily routine, they leave behind that game, along with their persona they created for it. They relinquish responsibility for what happened in a seemingly fabricated world that has little to do with reality. This *dissociative imagination* surfaces clearly in online fantasy games when a player consciously creates an imaginary character who undertakes fantasy adventures, but it also can infiltrate other online activities. During my interview with a man who regularly participated in an avatar community, he described how his wife accepted the fact that he used his avatars to have cybersex with other people. In the eyes of his wife and himself, his online sexuality was not "real." For similar reasons, authorities such as the police sometimes fail to understand victims who come to them with tales of having been abused online. In their eyes, what happened in cyberspace did not seem real enough to warrant concern or intervention. Fortunately, cultural attitudes about such online abuse are changing.

People who suffer from poor reality testing in general, especially those with psychotic conditions, will have a very hard time determining what

is fantasy in cyberspace and what is not. But in this age of ours, when the media injects imagination into almost everything we see, including so-called "reality shows," everyone's ability for reality testing is being challenged. We frequently call into question the veracity of anything we witness in the media, with the outcome being the assumption that "anything goes."

Although anonymity amplifies dissociative imagination, dissociative imagination and dissociative anonymity usually differ in the complexity of the dissociated self. Under the influence of anonymity, the person moves toward invisibility, toward becoming a non-person, resulting in a significant reduction of identity. During dissociative imagination, the self that is expressed, but split off, tends to be more elaborately constructed.

JUST BETWEEN YOU AND ME (PERCEIVED PRIVACY)

In the news, we often hear reports about important people in business, politics, and entertainment who get themselves into trouble by sending text messages that clearly provide incriminating evidence of their misdoings. Even a modestly sophisticated Internet user realizes that such records can be accessed by those with the skill, and hopefully the legally sanctioned power, to do so. So why did these prominent people shoot themselves in the foot? What persuaded them to think their loose lips were somehow exempt from public scrutiny?

In addition to solipsistic introjection as an explanation, we see in these examples the power of *perceived privacy*. Some researchers apply this term to how secure people feel when they reveal personal information about themselves during online business, financial, and other official transactions. In a more general sense, the term refers to the fact that people – in either a very naive or dissociated manner – subconsciously experience themselves as being in a private encounter with companions in cyberspace, even when they rationally know better. Educated Internet users understand in the reality-oriented part of their minds that whatever they send out via their computers and mobile devices is being recorded on some company or government server. However, in another dissociated part of their minds, one ruled more by the emotions of the moment, they ignore the potentially very public nature of their disclosures. Especially during text communication, when we experience that blending of our minds with those of our companions, we subconsciously assume we are alone with those people.

It also comes as no surprise that people feel their privacy has been invaded when someone explores the various nooks and crannies of their social media accounts or conducts an Internet search to find out about

them. Even when everyone knows that such information is wide open to the public, both the person searching and the person being searched might feel this is a type of stalking. The different online spaces that contain the many facets of a person's identity might be available for all to see, but that person might experience it as personal, private territory. Just as people in the physical world have an invisible zone around their body that they feel belongs to them, that should be occupied only by people they trust – what psychologists call "personal space" – so too people have their *online personal space*. You can enter it, but they might feel intruded upon. This is why advocates of online privacy insist that people have the right to become invisible to search engines if they so choose.

Device interface visually reinforces perceived privacy. When we look into our phones and computers, and into the little windows where we type our messages, all of our senses tell us that we are inside a box – in fact, a visual box inside the physical device box. It feels like a private, personal space. We see little or no evidence of anyone else being there, other than the people who reply to our messages. Everyone else is an "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon. We might even think of perceived privacy in terms of evolutionary psychology. The more sophisticated, advanced, and rational parts of our brain tell us, "Someone else could see this." But the more simplistic, self-centric, and sensory part of our brain says, "There ain't nobody here but you and me inside this box."

Many people believe they have a right to privacy in digital realms such as email, text messaging, closed discussion groups, web browsing, and account records. This right to privacy will continue to be one of the most important legal and ethical dilemmas in the history of the Internet. Adamantly believing, even defiantly, that one's online activities *should* be confidential might amplify one's disinhibition. By contrast, our growing uncertainty, skepticism, and anxiety about how well our confidentiality is protected might reduce perceived privacy as well as the disinhibition it stimulates.

we're equals (attenuated status and authority)

While people are online, their status in the real world might not be known to others, or it might not have as much impact as it does in the real world. Authority figures demonstrate prestige in their dress, body language, and the embellishments of their settings. The absence of those cues in cyberspace, especially text environments, reduces the impact of their authority. If people online cannot see them in their surroundings, they do not know whether a person is the president of a major corporation sitting in

an expensive office or is some ordinary soul lounging on the sofa at home. Even if people do know something about someone's offline status, that elevated position might have less bearing on the person's online presence. In many environments, everyone has an equal opportunity for self-expression. Regardless of status, wealth, race, and gender, we all start off on a level playing field. Although people's status in the real world will ultimately have some impact on their powers in cyberspace, what often determines online social influence is your skill in communicating (including writing skills), your persistence, the quality of your ideas, and your technical know-how. Unfortunately, some people interpret that ability to acquire power as a sanction to use it with hostile intentions, sometimes against the people they perceive as authorities whom they can "take down."

Due to a fear of disapproval or punishment, people are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure in the real world. While online, in what feels more like a peer relationship with the appearances of authority minimized, people are much more willing to speak out or act out. The traditional culture of cyberspace maintains that everyone is an equal, that the purpose of the net is to share ideas and resources among peers, what has been called *net democracy*. As cyberspace expands into new realms, many of its inhabitants see themselves as innovative, independent-minded explorers and pioneers, even as rebels. They develop an anarchistic "wild, wild West" attitude about their adventures. This atmosphere contributes to disinhibition and the minimizing of authority.

Everyone Else Thinks It's OK (Social Facilitation)

The social environment can reinforce, amplify, or fail to dampen the disinhibition effect. Unfortunately, in some forms of social media, the audience witnessing the actions of a toxically disinhibited person might actually take delight in what they see, perhaps even resonating vicariously with the person as a voice for their own frustrations – what Anna Freud (1937) would call an *identification with the aggressor*, a phenomenon very evident in our cultural fascination for antisocial rebels and psychopaths. The unleashed ranting or attacks against someone or something transform into an online performance that others reward with comments of praise and such buttonized responses as "likes," a topic I discuss in Chapter 5, "Electrified Relationships." The toxic self of the disinhibited person becomes publically idealized. When other people join in to fuel the hostilities, a competition

ensues in which the disinhibited people try to outdo each other (which can also occur with intimate self-disclosures in benign disinhibition).

In other situations, the audience passively observes the hostilities without interfering, perhaps out of fear that they too might become a target. Not wanting to get involved, or thinking that someone else will intervene, they relinquish their own sense of personal responsibility, implicitly giving the disinhibited person permission to continue – a phenomenon reminiscent of the *bystander effect* as described by the social psychologists Darley and Latané (1968). In a very different kind of scenario, couples in social media persist in openly expressing their amorous attraction to each other while uncomfortable or even annoyed bystanders say nothing, except perhaps thinking to themselves, "Get a room, why don't you?"

"There is something awe-inspiring in one who has lost all inhibitions," said F. Scott Fitzgerald – a feeling that probably contributes to the contagious nature of toxic disinhibition, but also to benign disinhibition, as when we see people online reinforcing each other's generosity and empathy.

BEING SUSCEPTIBLE OR RESISTANT TO DISINHIBITION

There is a tendency to conclude that cyberspace determines the disinhibition effect. When people do things online they would not do otherwise, they might even say, "Cyberspace made me do it" – an issue that comes up in legal cases involving men who, claiming they succumbed to the temptations of online disinhibition, attempted sexual activities with police officers disguised as minors. But the concept of person/situation interactions suggests that the phenomenon is more complex than that, as does research indicating that online self-disclosures are not always different from those that occur offline (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012). Some people are disinhibited in cyberspace, some are not. Some people are disinhibited only in certain ways or in particular circumstances.

We must take into consideration how different traits and personality styles make some people more susceptible to the online disinhibition effect while others are more resistant to it. Individual differences play an important role in determining when and how people become disinhibited. The more intense the underlying needs of a particular person – be they benign or toxic – the stronger the push toward expressing them. The less a person understands the technical aspects of computer-mediated communication, the more likely that person will make decisions about self-disclosure based on misperceptions of perceived privacy. Differences in writing and image-creation skills account for carefully controlled expressions of self

versus clumsily disinhibited ones. People who operate mostly in the receptive mode of their online activities, who watch what is happening online but rarely participate, tend to avoid the possibility of being disinhibited

The personality types described in the previous chapter provide a useful framework for understanding individual differences in online disinhibition. These personality types vary significantly in their reality testing, defense mechanisms, and tendencies toward inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional; compulsive personalities show more restraint; schizotypal individuals are prone to fantasy; paranoid people are very protective of their privacy; and narcissistic people assume the privilege of saying what they want. Trust, extroversion, impulsivity, hypomania, guilt, and shame all emerge as personality traits that modulate disinhibition. Online disinhibition will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's offline behavior, while in other cases triggering dramatic changes.

People differ in how much they vacillate between feeling disinhibited versus restrained as they move in and out of the various locales of their online lifestyle. A person might be openly expressive in social media with friends, even more so than in the real world, but feel uncharacteristically guarded in an online workgroup. To varying degrees, people shift up and down along what we might consider a *disinhibition/inhibition continuum*. People will also differ in how they might feel simultaneously disinhibited and inhibited within a particular online situation. For example, people reveal intimate details about themselves to a cyberspace companion, but will not disclose their phone numbers, home addresses, or places of work. Relying on dissociation, they are trusting and suspicious at the same time.

LEAKS IN THE PERIMETER

Changes in self-boundary play an important role in online disinhibition and personal identity. Self-boundary is the sense of what is me and what is not me. It is the experience of a perimeter marking the distinction between my personality – my thoughts, feelings, and memories – and what exists outside that perimeter, within other people. The awareness of having a distinct physical body, the perception via the five senses of an outside world, the feeling of a psychological distinction between what I experience versus what others experience, and the sensation of the physical/psychological self moving cohesively along a linear continuum of past, present, and future – all contribute to self-boundary.

Life in cyberspace tends to disrupt this framework of self-boundary. Especially in text communication, the physical body and its five senses no longer play as crucial a role as in face-to-face relationships. In cyberspace, what others know or do not know about me is unclear. As we move back and forth through synchronous and asynchronous communication, the feeling of a linear past, present, and future becomes more obscure. As a result, these altered states of consciousness tend to destabilize self-boundary. The distinction between inner-me and outer-other becomes ambiguous, which accelerates solipsistic introjection. The person shifts to what psychoanalytic theory calls *primary process thinking*, in which divisions between the experience of self and other become more diffuse, while interpersonal perceptions become more subjective and emotion-centered. Within the transitional space of online social experiences, the psyches of self and other overlap. We allow the hidden self to surface because we no longer experience it as a purely inner self. This blending of the disinhibited inner self with the perception of other people can generate deep understanding and compassion – or the sense, sometimes vague and sometimes distinct, of a toxic intrusion into one's private world, resulting in suspicion, anxiety, and the need to defend one's exposed and vulnerable intrapsychic territory.

As with other aspects of personality, there are significant individual differences in the degree to which people experience the changes in self-boundary that lead to disinhibition. A person's developmental level of being able to relate to other people as distinct human beings – what psychoanalysts call *object relations* – will determine the susceptibility to the unimpeded feelings that surface in the psychological merging with online companions. Some people possess a healthy flexibility in lowering and reestablishing their self-boundary as a way to experience relationships more deeply; some people show a rigidity of self-boundary that blocks out other people; and in borderline and psychotic disorders, people lack the ability to differentiate themselves from others, which can lead to poor reality testing along with exaggerated, dysfunctional disinhibition.

THE TRUE SELF AS ILLUSION

On more than a few occasions in my interviews, people reported that they feel more like their true selves while online. For those who enjoy writing, they believe they express their inner being more honestly and fully than in their everyday lives. For others, the images they share in social media are a very intimate expression of who they are. Some researchers claim that the online disinhibition effect contributes to these articulations of

the "true self." A woman with repressed hostility unleashes her anger in a social media post, or a shy man openly expresses his secret affection for his cyberspace companion. They seem to be expressing what they genuinely feel. If personality is constructed in layers, with a core true identity hidden beneath surface defenses and the seemingly superficial roles of everyday social interactions, then does the disinhibition effect release it?

Raising this question in cyberpsychology once again demonstrates how this new environment has become a laboratory for exploring longstanding questions about human nature. The very concept of a true self has been tempting in the history of psychology because it helps people articulate their subjective experience of what goes on inside them. In humanistic psychology, the concept also works well as a motivational tool for self-actualization, because people often talk about discovering who they really are. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, this thing called "self" is complex. The idea of a "true" one might be too ambiguous, arbitrary, and rudimentary to serve as a useful concept when investigating the online disinhibition effect.

The Inhibiting Self Is True

The concept of disinhibition can mistakenly lead us into thinking that what is disinhibited is more real or true than the part of us that inhibits. If we believe that peeling away repression and other defense mechanisms uncovers the real self, we overlook the fact that our inhibitions also define our personalities. Psychoanalytic clinicians believe that understanding defenses is crucial to the success of the therapy because it reveals how and why we suppress certain thoughts and feelings. Bypassing defenses to get to the supposedly true self bypasses the opportunity to understand the reality of the inhibiting self. In cyberspace, some disinhibited people reveal otherwise hidden parts of themselves, but they might not grapple with the unconscious reasons why they usually suppress these things. They miss the opportunity to discover something important about their true self.

Joe, who is shy in person, thrives socially in cyberspace thanks to the online disinhibition effect. He feels that what he reveals about himself online is the real Joe. But his shyness is also a true aspect of his personality. If online companions, who had formed the impression that Joe was outgoing, finally met him in person, they might very well conclude that Joe is "really" shy. They would also wonder what about his personality causes him to be shy in person but not online. It is an important part of his identity.

A True Self Here and There

While some aspects of one's personality are disinhibited online, other aspects might be inhibited. People show some parts of themselves, but not others. Online environments might encourage this compromise between some things being revealed while other things are kept hidden. In email, Joe reveals to Sue for the first time that he loves her, but she cannot see his hesitant voice and body language. The email reveals his desire to show affection while disguising his reluctance about it. These compromises point to the polarities that operate within all of us. We encompass ambivalent, sometimes contrary emotions, simultaneously. Sometimes we think, act, or feel one way, and sometimes the opposite. Neither one is more true than the other.

Inside all of us there are different constellations of memories, feelings, and beliefs that make up the various parts of our identity. We might even think of them as the different "selves" within us, with each one being true. Depending on its cyberpsychology architecture, each online environment allows for a different expression of these inner selves. The self expressed in one place is not necessarily deeper, more real, or more authentic than another. Each environment allows us to see the different perspectives of that complex thing we call "self."