

S.E.E.K. Your Highest Self: A Cognitive-Existential Framework for Emotional Melting, Identity Realignment, and Self-Efficacy Infusion in the Blues State

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ABSTRACT

The "Blues"—a subclinical emotional constellation encompassing sadness, loneliness, frustration, apathy, and anxiety—occupies a theoretically neglected middle ground between normative emotional experience and clinical depression. This paper introduces two primary theoretical contributions: (1) the Blues Emotional Constellation as a philosophically and phenomenologically distinct construct grounded in the African American blues tradition's understanding of suffering, resilience, and transformation; and (2) the emotional melting mechanism—a four-stage process (recognition, reframing, rechanneling, reintegration) through which negative affect is metabolized into purposeful identity-aligned action and deepened self-knowledge.

Through systematic integration of self-determination theory, cognitive-behavioral frameworks, narrative identity theory, existential-humanistic philosophy, and habit science, we propose that the Blues state represents not a symptom constellation requiring management but a developmental signal of identity misalignment requiring navigation. We introduce the S.E.E.K. Identity Protocol (Sculpt, Elevate, Empower, Know) as a theoretically coherent framework organizing this understanding. Rather than claiming empirical efficacy, this paper articulates the philosophical foundations, theoretical mechanisms, and conceptual implications of understanding subclinical emotional distress through an identity-developmental rather than deficit-management lens. We explicitly acknowledge construct boundary challenges, cultural limitations, and directions for empirical validation.

Keywords

Blues, Emotional melting, Identity development, Subclinical depression, Existential psychology.

Introduction

Contemporary psychology occupies an interesting philosophical territory regarding emotional distress. At one end of a spectrum lies the concept of "normal" emotional experience: the sadness following loss, the anxiety preceding challenge, the loneliness in separation. These emotions are understood as appropriate responses to meaningful circumstances—not symptoms, but signals. At the other end lies clinical pathology: major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, persistent emotional dysregulation meeting diagnostic thresholds.

Between these poles exists a vast and theoretically neglected territory: persistent subclinical emotional distress that is too impairing to dismiss as normal fluctuation, yet too mild to warrant clinical diagnosis or standard psychiatric intervention. Epidemiological research consistently documents that 25 to 30% of adults experience this state at some point [1], often with meaningful functional impact and elevated risk for subsequent clinical depression [2,3]. Yet psychological science has devoted remarkably little focused theoretical attention to understanding this territory's distinctive character or developing intervention frameworks specifically designed to address it.

The present paper argues that this theoretical neglect reflects a deeper conceptual problem: the psychological sciences have inadequate philosophical and theoretical frameworks for

understanding a particular category of emotional experience that does not fit neatly into either the "normal emotion" or "pathology" categories. We lack a language, a conceptual architecture, and a treatment philosophy appropriate to this in-between territory.

Locating the Problem: Between Emotion and Pathology

The Core Problem: Current frameworks force a false choice. Either we treat persistent subclinical emotional distress as "normal sadness" (implying minimal intervention is needed) or we treat it as "depression lite" (implying we should use depression-focused interventions at reduced intensity). Neither captures what may be distinctive about this emotional territory or what interventions might be specifically designed to address it.

Introducing the Blues: A Philosophical and Phenomenological Construct

We propose that the Blues—understood both as a philosophical concept and a phenomenological emotional constellation—provides a theoretically productive framework for this neglected territory.

The term carries resonance in cultural, musical, and philosophical domains that is itself theoretically significant. In the African American musical and literary tradition from which it derives, the Blues represents a particular *way of engaging with suffering*: not through denial or defeat, but through honest, creative, and communal encounter with emotional pain that transforms it into connection, meaning, and resilient selfhood.

Philosophical Grounding

Angela Davis [4], in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, articulates the Blues tradition as a form of cultural self-determination and resistance. Artists like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday created music that explicitly addressed suffering, loss, and systemic oppression while simultaneously asserting agency, dignity, and erotic/intellectual power. As Davis argues, the blues tradition constituted a "hermeneutics of resistance"—a systematic way of reading one's own painful experience against dominant narratives and constructing meaning through creative articulation.

Patricia Liggins Hill [6] extends this analysis through her work on blues poetics, emphasizing how the blues tradition developed what she calls a "literacies of the blues"—epistemological frameworks for making meaning from suffering that center voice, agency, and the transformative potential of honest self-expression. This is not incidental cultural context. Rather, it constitutes the philosophical foundation for understanding the Blues as a psychological construct: that suffering, when honestly inhabited and creatively engaged, contains within it seeds of connection, meaning, and resilient selfhood—not despite the pain, but through authentic engagement with it.

Phenomenological Definition

The Blues, as we propose it, is a subclinical emotional constellation characterized by:

- **Emotional texture:** Sadness, loneliness, frustration, apathy, and diffuse anxiety occurring together
- **Temporal persistence:** Lasting days to weeks (longer than transient mood fluctuation)
- **Functional impact:** Producing meaningful disruption in well-being and daily functioning, though not incapacitating
- **Quality of consciousness:** *Meaningful suffering* rather than anhedonic emptiness—the individual reports that their emotional pain is connected to something that matters, that carries existential weight
- **Preserved capacity:** Retention of ability to articulate values, engage in activities (though with difficulty), and maintain relational connection

This phenomenological description distinguishes the Blues from both transient sadness and clinical depression through its specific emotional texture, its preservation of meaning-making capacity, and its existential character.

The Cultural-Philosophical Distinctiveness of the Blues Construct

A critical theoretical claim requires explicit articulation: the Blues is not merely a rebranding of "subthreshold depression". While substantial overlap exists, the constructs are theoretically and philosophically distinct.

The term "subthreshold depression" is a clinical-administrative construct—created by and for professional diagnostic systems. Its logic is *definitional proximity*: depressive symptoms present but not meeting diagnostic threshold. Its identity is fundamentally *negative*: it is defined by what it is *not*.

The term "the Blues" is a cultural-linguistic construct—created by and for lived human experience. Its logic is *phenomenological specificity*: the specific emotional texture and experiential quality that characterizes it. Its identity is fundamentally *positive*: it is defined by what it is.

This distinction has philosophical implications. When we diagnose someone with "subthreshold depression", we are locating them on a continuum with clinical depression: their experience is understood through a medicalized, pathologizing lens, as a partial version of a disorder. The interventional goal becomes symptom reduction—moving them toward an asymptomatic baseline.

When we understand someone as experiencing "the Blues", we are locating them within a tradition of philosophical understanding that sees emotional pain as potentially generative, meaningful, and connected to authentic values and development. The interventional goal becomes not symptom elimination but transformation: the metabolization of emotional pain into purposeful action and deepened self-understanding.

These are not merely semantic differences. They imply different intervention philosophies, different therapeutic relationships, and different intended outcomes.

Theoretical Productivity: Why the Blues Framework Matters

The philosophical and phenomenological distinctiveness of the Blues construct generates different research questions and intervention strategies than the subthreshold depression framework generates.

Subthreshold Depression Framework Questions: (a) How can we identify individuals at risk for progression to clinical depression? (b) What interventions reduce depressive symptoms most efficiently? (c) How do we screen for depression in community populations?

Blues Framework Questions: (a) What is this emotional state trying to communicate about the individual's values and authentic development? (b) How can we support the transformation of emotional pain into purposeful, identity-aligned action? (c) What is the relationship between honest engagement with emotional suffering and deepened self-knowledge? (d) How does the philosophical wisdom embedded in the blues tradition illuminate psychological understanding?

These are genuinely different research agendas. The Blues framework, precisely because it starts from a different philosophical foundation, generates theoretical questions and intervention hypotheses that the deficit-focused subthreshold depression framework does not naturally generate.

The Theoretical Claim

The Blues framework is more *theoretically productive* than the subthreshold depression framework for understanding this particular category of emotional experience—not because it necessarily explains the same phenomena more accurately (that is an empirical question), but because it generates a different, theoretically coherent, and philosophically grounded set of research questions.

The Gap in Existing Intervention Philosophies

The current landscape of evidence-based interventions for subclinical emotional distress—including cognitive-behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness-based interventions, and positive psychology approaches—each makes distinctive contributions while each leaving a particular theoretical gap.

CBT and Schema Therapy effectively target maladaptive automatic thoughts and identity-level cognitive structures. However, their fundamental stance is *corrective*: the goal is to identify distorted thinking and replace it with more realistic, adaptive cognition. This approach may be less theoretically aligned with Blues-framed work, which does not assume that the individual's perception of identity-value misalignment is distorted but rather that it is accurate and requires response.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy integrates values clarification with acceptance of unavoidable emotional experience. However, its characteristic stance is acceptance-based: the goal is

to develop psychological flexibility and willingness to experience difficult emotions while pursuing values. The Blues framework, by contrast, proposes a more actively *transformative* stance: not merely accepting emotional pain but metabolizing it into purposeful action.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions cultivate present-moment, non-judgmental awareness. However, their present-focused orientation may underaddress the *future-self dimensions* of identity development that Blues-informed work explicitly targets.

Positive Psychology Interventions enhance well-being through cultivation of strengths, gratitude, and meaning. However, most PPIs are designed to supplement positive experience rather than to engage directly and systematically with the specific phenomenological character of negative affect that defines the Blues.

The Theoretical Gap

What is lacking is a comprehensive intervention framework that:

1. Treats subclinical emotional distress not as a deficit requiring correction but as a signal requiring interpretation
2. Explicitly organizes around identity misalignment as the primary intervention target
3. Proposes a specific mechanism for how negative affect is metabolized (not merely managed) into purposeful action
4. Grounds itself in a philosophical understanding that locates suffering as potentially generative
5. Maintains an explicit connection to the cultural wisdom of the blues tradition

The S.E.E.K. framework is designed to address this gap.

Theoretical Foundations: Philosophical and Empirical Grounding

Self-Determination Theory and the Structure of Psychological Need

Self-determination theory [6,7] provides a crucial foundational understanding for the Blues state. SDT proposes that human psychological well-being depends fundamentally on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the experience of acting in accordance with one's authentic values and self-concept—of being the author of one's own actions rather than externally compelled or internally conflicted. Competence is the experience of effectively engaging with meaningful challenges and the confidence that one can accomplish valued goals. Relatedness is the experience of meaningful connection with others who matter—the sense of being known, valued, and cared for.

SDT's empirical research consistently demonstrates that frustration of these needs reliably produces emotional distress, motivational disengagement, and psychological suffering. Moreover, the structure of this suffering—its emotional texture—varies in relation to *which* need is frustrated. *Frustration of relatedness* produces the loneliness and disconnection characteristic of the Blues.

Cacioppo and Patrick's [8] neuroscience of loneliness documents how chronic relatedness frustration activates a hypervigilant threat-orientation toward social information that, while evolved as protection, paradoxically deepens isolation. Conversely, the *frustration of competence and autonomy* produces the frustration and apathy characteristic of the Blues—the sense of being unable to effectively engage with challenges and being fundamentally constrained in one's ability to pursue meaningful goals.

The Blues as Need Frustration State

We propose that the Blues constellation, understood philosophically, represents the subjective experience of simultaneous frustration across these three domains. The emotional texture of the Blues—its specific combination of sadness (relatedness frustration), frustration (competence/autonomy frustration), and apathy (motivational collapse from need frustration)—maps with striking precision onto this theoretical structure.

Critically, SDT distinguishes between need *frustration* and need *thwarting*. Need frustration is the simple absence of satisfaction. Need thwarting is the active blocking of satisfaction by external or internal forces. For many individuals experiencing the Blues, what is occurring is genuine need frustration—the authentic experience that relational connection is difficult, that meaningful work is unavailable, that autonomous self-expression is constrained. This is not distorted thinking requiring cognitive correction; it may be accurate perception requiring response.

Identity, Self-Concept, and Psychological Misalignment: Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical and psychological concept of identity is fundamentally contested territory. Is the self a unified essence, or a continuous construction? Is identity discovered or created? Fixed or fluid? McAdams's [9] narrative identity theory provides a theoretically productive resolution: identity is neither pure essence nor pure construction, but rather the ongoing *narrative that an individual constructs* to give their life meaning, coherence, and direction. Identity is the story one tells about who one has been, who one currently is, and who one is becoming.

This narrative account of identity is philosophically significant because it preserves both authenticity and responsibility. One's identity is authentic in that it emerges from one's actual experience, values, and capacities. But it is also constructed and subject to revision: one can tell new stories about who one is, stories that better capture one's deepest values and most authentic self-expression.

Self-Concept clarity [10], the degree to which one's self-beliefs are clearly defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable, is a crucial psychological variable. High self-concept clarity is associated with psychological well-being, effective self-regulation, and authentic self-expression. Low clarity is associated with emotional distress, self-regulation failure, and confused identity.

Identity Misalignment —the gap between one's current self-

expression and one's authentically valued self-concept—is a philosophical and psychological problem with real emotional consequences. When one is living in ways that fundamentally contradict one's deepest values, one's deepest understanding of who one authentically is, the emotional consequence is not merely cognitive distortion (incorrect thinking) but existential misalignment (authentic disconnection between lived life and authentic self).

The Philosophical Claim

The Blues state, understood through identity theory, represents the subjective experience of identity misalignment. The emotional pain of the Blues is not evidence of disorder but evidence of integrity—evidence that one's authentic self is in dialogue with one's lived experience, and that the gap between them has become impossible to ignore.

This is philosophically distinct from understanding the Blues as "depression lite" or as distorted thinking. It is understanding the Blues as *accurate perception of a real existential problem*: the problem of living inauthentically.

Existential Psychology: Confrontation with Authentic Concerns

Yalom's [11] existential psychotherapy framework identifies four ultimate concerns that characterize the human condition: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.

- **Isolation:** The irreducible existential fact that no one can fully know or be known by another, that one ultimately faces existence alone
- **Freedom:** The recognition that one is always, at some fundamental level, choosing who one is, with no external guarantee
- **Meaninglessness:** The recognition that the universe does not assign meaning; meaning must be created
- **Death:** The awareness of finitude—that one's time is limited
- The Blues constellation can be mapped onto confrontation with each of these ultimate concerns:
- **Loneliness** in the Blues reflects confrontation with existential isolation in its deepest form.
- **Apathy** and loss of meaning in the Blues reflect confrontation with meaninglessness.
- **Anxiety** in the Blues reflects the dread of freedom—the recognition of one's own responsibility for who one becomes.
- **Sadness** in the Blues may reflect awareness of mortality—what has been lost and cannot be recovered.

Frankl's [12] Logotherapy adds that the will to meaning is a primary human motivational force. Frankl's conviction, forged in concentration camp suffering, was that meaning can be found even in unavoidable suffering, and that the human capacity to choose one's attitude toward circumstances represents an irreducible form of freedom and dignity.

The Existential Understanding

The Blues state may represent a confrontation with existential

reality that, while painful, is philosophically and psychologically appropriate. The emotional suffering of the Blues, from an existential perspective, is not pathology but an authentic response to genuine existential conditions.

This understanding generates a different intervention philosophy than deficit-correction: rather than treating the Blues as a malfunction to be fixed, we might understand it as an existential call—an invitation to deeper authenticity, more courageous freedom, more conscious meaning-making.

Narrative Identity and Biographical Integration: Philosophical Meaning-Making

McAdams and McLean's [13] research on narrative identity reveals that individuals who construct redemptive narratives—narratives in which negative or difficult experiences are understood as leading to growth, insight, and enhanced resilience—demonstrate significantly better psychological well-being and therapeutic outcomes than those whose difficult experiences remain narratively isolated or are understood as evidence of defeat.

Redemptive Narration

This process is not optimistic denial. It is the philosophical and psychological work of integrating authentic suffering into a life story in which that suffering becomes comprehensible, meaningful, and developmentally significant. Adler et al. [14] demonstrate empirically that narrative quality—specifically the degree to which individuals construct redemptive narratives that extract meaningful self-understanding from difficult experiences—significantly predicts psychological well-being and therapy outcomes.

The Philosophical and Empirical Claim

The transformation of the Blues from a confusing, isolating emotional state into a chapter of a larger redemptive narrative—a chapter in which one's authentic self insists on being heard, in which confrontation with authenticity gaps leads to genuine development—is itself psychologically and philosophically significant work. This is not "positive thinking" or denial. It is the hard philosophical work of constructing meaning from suffering, of understanding one's own depths, of taking oneself seriously as a developing, choosing, responsible agent.

Habit Science and Identity-Based Behavioral Change: Neuroplasticity and Choice

Graybiel's [15] research on habit formation in the basal ganglia demonstrates that repeated patterns of behavior, especially in consistent contexts, become automated at the neural level. This has philosophical implications: through repeated action, one literally reshapes the brain structure that generates automatic responses. Identity-based habit formation [16] represents a theoretically sophisticated understanding of behavioral change. Rather than change based on outcome goals ("I want to lose weight") or even value goals ("I want to be healthy"), identity-based habit formation organizes around self-concept: "I am the kind of person who consistently acts in alignment with my values".

This shift is philosophically significant because it addresses the problem of motivation and consistency through identity rather than through willpower or external reward. When behavioral change is understood as an expression of who one is, the motivational architecture is different—more stable, more intrinsically compelling, more resilient in the face of difficulty.

Implementation intentions [17] provide specific behavioral mechanisms: "If [situation], then I will [identity-aligned action]". This if-then structure dramatically increases the likelihood of goal-directed behavior by making the choice automatic, delegating it to contextual triggers rather than requiring real-time deliberation.

The Philosophical and Empirical Claim

Sustainable behavioral change in service of authentic identity alignment occurs not primarily through effort or motivation, but through the gradual reshaping of automatic responses through repeated practice in consistent contexts. This is both a neuroscientific fact and a profound philosophical insight: *we become who we practice being*.

The Emotional Melting Mechanism: A Theoretical Specification

Conceptual Definition and Philosophical Positioning

We propose emotional melting as a central theoretical mechanism: the progressive metabolization of negative affect—through a structured sequence of cognitive-existential engagement—into purposeful action, deepened self-knowledge, and strengthened identity coherence. The metallurgical metaphor is theoretically intentional. In metallurgy, melting does not destroy material but transforms its form: it releases material from rigid structure into fluid potential that can then be deliberately shaped into something stronger, more refined, more useful.

Similarly, emotional melting does not eliminate Blues emotions but releases them from their rigid, self-referential, ruminative structure into a fluid state from which they can be rechanneled into purposeful action and reintegrated into a more coherent identity architecture.

Critically, this is philosophically distinct from three existing approaches to emotion:

- **Suppression and Elimination:** Treating emotion as a problem to be removed.
- **Acceptance and Mindfulness:** Treating emotion as a phenomenon to be witnessed without judgment.
- **Correction and Reappraisal:** Treating emotion as an evidence of distorted thinking requiring cognitive correction.

Emotional melting proposes a fourth stance: transformation. Negative affect is engaged as an information-carrying and energy-carrying phenomenon whose natural energy can be deliberately redirected toward authentic development.

The Four Stages: Philosophical Specification

Stage 1: Recognition

The first stage involves clear, non-judgmental identification of the emotional experience coupled with the interpretive move of understanding it as a signal rather than a symptom. Philosophically, this stage requires what Heidegger [18] called authentic confrontation with one's own being—a willingness to see oneself and one's experience clearly, without defensive denial or narrativization.

The specific phenomenological precision required in this stage—describing the actual texture, intensity, location, and quality of the emotion—performs what Husserl called reduction: it interrupts habitual, automatized perception and creates a reflective space from which more genuine understanding becomes possible. The interpretive move—understanding the emotion as a signal—is equally philosophical. It shifts one's relationship to the emotion from passive victimhood ("I am suffering") to active inquiry ("I am receiving information from my own depths about something that matters") (see Supplement A for a detailed philosophical and operational specification of each stage).

Stage 2: Reframing

The second stage involves systematic cognitive reappraisal—but reappraisal understood not as distorted-thinking correction, but as interpretive perspective-broadening grounded in authentic values. This stage requires what Gadamer called the fusion of horizons: bringing one's current understanding into conversation with alternative interpretations, allowing each to illuminate the other.

The reframing in emotional melting differs from standard cognitive reappraisal in three ways:

1. **Identity-oriented:** The goal is not merely to feel better but to understand the emotion as data about one's authentic values.
2. **Credibility-required:** Alternative interpretations must be genuinely plausible, not optimistic denial.
3. **Forward-opening:** Effective reframes generate new behavioral possibilities grounded in authentic identity.

Stage 3: Rechanneling

The third stage is the operational transformation of emotional energy—released and clarified through recognition and reframing—into specific, identity-aligned behavioral action. Philosophically, this stage enacts what Heidegger called authentic existence: the deliberate choosing and living of one's own possibilities in alignment with one's deepest understanding of self.

This stage is grounded in Frijda's [19] action-tendency theory: emotions are fundamentally oriented toward action. Each emotion carries a characteristic action readiness. Frustration prepares for obstacle removal, sadness prepares for withdrawal and integration, and loneliness prepares for connection seeking. Rechanneling involves the conscious redirection of these action tendencies from Blues-maintaining toward authentically aligned behavioral channels. The energy of the emotion is not suppressed or corrected, but deliberately channeled.

Stage 4: Reintegration

The fourth stage is the consolidation of new self-knowledge into a more coherent, resilient, authentically aligned identity structure. Philosophically, this stage enacts what Ricoeur [20] called narrative integration: the work of understanding one's own experience as a meaningful chapter in a larger life story oriented toward authentic development.

This is not "positive thinking" about suffering. It is the hard philosophical work of asking: "What does this experience teach me about who I authentically am? How does it change my understanding of my own depths? How does it contribute to my development?"

The S.E.E.K. Protocol: Theoretical Architecture

Overview and Philosophical Rationale

The S.E.E.K. Identity Protocol organizes around four theoretical components, each addressing a distinct dimension of identity development:

- **Sculpt:** Identity-based habit formation; becoming through repeated aligned choice.
- **Elevate:** Cognitive realignment and standard elevation; thinking like one's highest self.
- **Empower:** Agency restoration and self-efficacy infusion; claiming responsibility for development
- **Know:** Deep self-awareness and authentic alignment; integration of self-knowledge into identity.

These components are organized recursively—each 8-week cycle returns to all four components at progressively deeper levels of integration and authenticity. This recursive architecture reflects the developmental understanding that authentic identity growth is not linear problem-resolution but a continuously deepening spiral toward greater self-knowledge and self-alignment.

Sculpt Component: Becoming Through Identity-Based Habit

Theoretical Foundation: The Sculpt component integrates identity-based habit formation, neuroplasticity research, and implementation intentions within an explicitly identity-oriented framework.

The Core Insight

Sustainable behavioral change occurs not through willpower or outcome-focused motivation, but through the gradual reshaping of automatic responses as one practices being the kind of person whom one authentically aspires to become.

Protocol Elements:

- **Future Self Visualization:** The individual engages in detailed, process-oriented (not merely outcome-oriented) visualization of their highest self: not what they will have accomplished, but who they will be—their character, their relational style, their daily habits, their authentic self-expression.
- **Identity Statement Formation:** The individual articulates identity-anchored statements: "I am the kind of person who..."

Swann Jr.'s [21] research demonstrates that self-verification processes—the drive to confirm one's self-concept through action—is a powerful behavioral driver.

- **Micro-Choice Logging with Implementation Intentions:** The individual identifies specific daily choices (micro-habits) that express their authentic identity and encodes them in if-then structures: "If [situation], then I will [identity-aligned action] because I am the kind of person who..."
- **Environmental Design:** The individual systematically audits their physical and social environment, identifying what supports and what constrains identity-aligned behavior, and makes deliberate modifications.
- **Philosophical Claim:** Through repeated practice in aligned choice, the individual is not forcing themselves toward an external ideal but gradually actualizing the authentic self that already exists in their deepest values and understanding. They are becoming who they already, at some deep level, know themselves to be.

Elevate Component: Thinking Like One's Highest Self

Theoretical Foundation: The Elevate component integrates cognitive reappraisal, growth mindset theory, and standard elevation within an identity-oriented frame.

The Core Insight

Sustainable cognitive change occurs not through correction of distorted thinking, but through gradual adoption of the cognitive habits—the ways of interpreting experience—characteristic of one's highest self.

Protocol Elements: The core operational attributes of this component include the following:

- **The Blues Reframe:** The individual practices the fundamental cognitive shift of S.E.E.K.: from understanding Blues emotions as evidence of personal failure to understanding them as signals of identity misalignment carrying specific information about authentic values and developmental needs.
- **Standard Elevation:** The individual systematically examines personal standards across the self, relationships, and purpose—and deliberately elevates them to align with their highest self-concept. This addresses the characteristic Blues-state adaptation of progressively lowering standards as a form of self-protection against disappointment.
- **Reappraisal Practice:** The individual generates alternative, identity-consistent interpretations of emotional triggers and Blues experiences, maintaining credibility and authenticity while opening new perspectives.
- **Growth Evidence Review:** The individual systematically redirects attention toward genuine evidence of their own capacity, growth, and consistency, the characteristic selective abstraction of the Blues state toward failure evidence.

Philosophical Claim

Authentic thinking is not the correction of distorted thoughts but the adoption of more authentic perspectives—ways of seeing oneself and one's experience that honor one's deepest values and

most genuine understanding.

Empower Component: Claiming Responsibility for Development

Theoretical Foundation: The Empower component integrates self-efficacy theory, small-wins theory, psychological ownership, and what Frankl called the ultimate freedom: the freedom to choose one's attitude and response to circumstance.

The Core Insight: Agency is not something one passively possesses but something one actively claims and demonstrates through consistent action.

Protocol Elements

The core operational attributes of this component include the following:

- **Authority Statement:** The individual makes a formal, ritualized statement of self-authorization: "I grant myself full authority over my own development. I am responsible for who I become. I can choose differently". This performs a philosophical act of claiming agency.
- **Small Wins Protocol:** The individual identifies and pursues small, genuinely achievable, genuinely meaningful mastery experiences. Weick [22] demonstrates that meaningful large-scale change emerges from accumulated small successes, not from dramatic transformations.
- **Ownership Journaling:** The individual maintains a journal explicitly anchored to agency and personal causality: "What did I do today? What choices did I make? What does each choice say about who I'm becoming?" This trains attributional patterns toward an internal locus of control.
- **Efficacy Mapping:** The individual creates a visual, tangible record of mastery experiences, personal capacities, and moments of authentic agency—a portable resource accessible during periods of acute Blues when memory distortions favor the recall of failures.

Philosophical Claim

Authentic agency is not the absence of constraint but the claiming of responsibility and choice within constraint. It is what Frankl called the ultimate freedom: the freedom to choose one's attitude, interpretation, and response to circumstances.

Know Component: Integration of Self-Knowledge into Identity

Theoretical Foundation: The Know component integrates self-concept clarity research, reflective metacognition, expressive writing, narrative identity theory, strengths-based psychology, and self-compassion theory.

The Core Insight: Deeper, more honest self-knowledge is the foundation from which authentic self-expression becomes possible.

Protocol Elements

The core operational attributes of this component include the following:

- **Reflection-Rumination Distinction:** The Know component is explicitly structured to cultivate reflective (curious, growth-

oriented, and forward-looking) self-inquiry rather than ruminative (repetitive, negatively valenced, and self-critical) fixation. Every element includes structural features designed to redirect self-focused attention toward learning rather than self-punishment.

- **Strengths and Weaknesses Mapping** — The individual identifies genuine strengths and genuine developmental challenges with equal curiosity and nonjudgment. Importantly, both are examined through the lens of authentic development: How does each strength serve? And how does each challenge point toward needed growth?
- **Values Clarification** — The individual engages in systematic reflection on core values, explicitly examining the gap between consciously espoused values and behaviorally enacted values—often the clearest indicator of identity misalignment.
- **Reflective Journaling** — The individual engages in daily reflective writing with specific identity-oriented prompts such as, "What did I learn about myself today?" "What is my deepest desire beneath the surface emotion?" and "What is the one step my highest self would take tomorrow?"
- **Narrative Integration** — The individual constructs a coherent, growth-oriented biographical narrative of their Blues experience, explicitly cultivating the redemptive narrative quality associated with psychological well-being and resilience.
- **Self-Compassion Check-In** — The individual practices self-compassion—understood as the capacity to extend to oneself the same kindness, understanding, and recognition of common humanity one would extend to a beloved friend facing a similar struggle. This creates the emotional safety from which genuine self-inquiry becomes possible.

Philosophical Claim

Authentic self-knowledge is not narcissistic self-focus but rigorous self-honesty grounded in compassion. It is the philosophical work of understanding one's own depths—one's genuine strengths, genuine limitations, and genuine values—with the kind of careful, respectful attention one would bring to understanding another person one genuinely cares about.

Mechanistic Comparison with Existing Frameworks

Integration with and Divergence from Gross's Cognitive Reappraisal

Gross's [23] cognitive reappraisal paradigm—the reinterpretation of emotional stimuli to change the emotional response—shares common mechanisms with the reframing stage of emotional melting.

Integration Points

- Both paradigms involve the generation of alternative interpretations.
- Both processes operate pre-emotionally to influence emotional intensity.
- Both approaches require cognitive engagement with emotional experience.

- Meta-analytic evidence [24] supports the overall effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal.

Divergence Points

- The primary goal of cognitive reappraisal is *affect reduction*, whereas the primary goal of emotional melting is *identity alignment*.
- Reappraisal is often orthogonal to identity, whereas emotional melting is explicitly identity-centered.
- Reappraisal may operate as a single intervention, whereas emotional melting is embedded in a four-stage process.
- Reappraisal focuses predominantly on thought accuracy, whereas emotional melting focuses on authentic interpretation aligned with core values.

Theoretical Claim: Emotional melting incorporates reappraisal as a core mechanism but locates it within a larger identity-developmental framework that gives it a distinctly different meaning and purpose.

Integration with and Divergence from Greenberg's Emotion-Focused Therapy

Greenberg's [25] emotion-focused therapy proposes that emotional transformation occurs through accessing and working directly with emotional experience rather than through cognitive correction.

Integration Points

- Both frameworks honor emotional experience as potentially adaptive and information-carrying.
- Both models propose emotional transformation rather than elimination.
- Both approaches emphasize emotional authenticity over defensive avoidance.
- Both paradigms recognize that emotional pain may carry.

Divergence Points

1. Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) works with the emotion itself within the context of a therapeutic relationship, whereas emotional melting provides a self-directed protocol with specific, structured stages.
2. EFT emphasizes emotional experiencing, whereas emotional melting emphasizes information extraction and behavioral rechanneling.
3. EFT focuses on adaptive emotion transformation, whereas emotional melting focuses on identity-aligned action as the primary mechanism of transformation.
4. EFT is emotion-centered, whereas emotional melting is identity-centered, using emotion as the primary vehicle.

Theoretical Claim

Emotional melting extends the foundational insight of EFT that emotional transformation is possible, while specifying a particular pathway through which that transformation occurs: recognition → reframing → rechanneling → reintegration, all organized around identity misalignment as the diagnostic construct.

Integration with and Divergence from Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory

Fredrickson's [26] broaden-and-build theory proposes that positive emotions broaden momentary thought–action repertoires and build enduring personal resources.

Integration Points

- Both theories recognize that emotional states create distinct cognitive and behavioral possibilities.
- Both models propose that repeated experiences can build resilience and capacity.
- Both perspectives emphasize resource-accumulation over symptom-reduction.

Divergence Points

- The broaden-and-build focuses primarily on positive emotions, whereas emotional melting focuses specifically on the transformation of negative affect.
- The explanatory mechanism of the broaden-and-build theory is hedonic, whereas the emotional melting mechanism is explicitly identity- and purpose-aligned.
- The broaden-and-build framework predicts well-being through the accumulation of positive emotion, whereas emotional melting predicts well-being through authentic action.

Theoretical Claim

Emotional melting proposes an alternative pathway to the same endpoint that Fredrickson identifies: broadened perspective, accumulated capacity, resilience. Rather than through positive emotion cultivation, this pathway progresses through identity-aligned action grounded in honest engagement with authentic values and developmental needs. This is theoretically distinct but may produce phenomenologically similar outcomes.

Philosophical and Theoretical Implications

Reframing Suffering: From Pathology to Signal

The Blues framework proposes a fundamental philosophical reframing of subclinical emotional distress.

Dominant Medical-Psychiatric Paradigm: Suffering is understood as malfunction—a disruption in normal emotional regulation requiring correction through symptom reduction. The implicit philosophical position within this paradigm is that emotional suffering is antithetical to well-being and should be either eliminated or minimized.

Blues-Existential Paradigm: Suffering is understood as a signal—a communication from one's own depths about misalignment between lived experience and authentic values. The philosophical position here is that emotional suffering, while genuinely painful, may be psychologically appropriate and developmentally necessary. Consequently, the goal is not symptom elimination but deepened understanding and transformation.

Philosophical Implications

This reframing has profound implications for how psychological

science conceptualizes human suffering and development:

- **Authenticity and Pain are Connected:** This perspective offers the philosophical insight that greater authenticity sometimes requires greater willingness to feel pain—to notice and acknowledge the gap between how one is living and how one authentically wants to live.
- **Development Through Discomfort:** The Blues framework aligns with existential, humanistic, and developmental psychological understandings, positing that psychological growth often involves moving through discomfort rather than avoiding it.
- **Suffering as Teacher:** The framework locates emotional suffering not as a meaningless affliction but as a potentially meaningful communication—as one's own wisdom insisting on being heard.
- **Dignity in Honest Struggle:** Grounded in the blues tradition, the framework recognizes dignity and even beauty in the honest engagement with suffering, specifically in the creative transformation of pain into meaning and connection.

Identity as Ethical Project

The Blues framework proposes that identity is not merely a psychological construct but an ethical project.

The Ethical Claim

Each individual bears responsibility for the alignment between their lived life and their authentic values. The Blues state—the emotional signal of misalignment—is an ethical call to take that responsibility seriously.

This stance is distinct from traditional therapeutic or psychological framing. It is a philosophical claim about human responsibility and freedom. Sartre [27] called this "radical responsibility", which demands the recognition that an individual is fundamentally responsible for the choices they make and the self they become.

Philosophical Implication

The Blues framework locates therapy not merely as a standard psychological intervention but as an ethical support for the difficult work of authentic self-creation and value-aligned living.

The Transformative Potential of Suffering: Blues Wisdom

The blues musical tradition contains philosophical wisdom about the transformative potential of suffering that contemporary psychology has largely failed to integrate. As Davis [4] documents, blues artists did not create music to eliminate suffering or to escape it, but rather to *engage it honestly and creatively*, thereby transforming individual pain into communal connection and meaning. This represents a philosophical stance toward suffering that is distinct from the following three paradigm positions:

- **Denial**, which operates by pretending the suffering does not exist.
- **Resignation**, which involves accepting suffering as inevitable and unchangeable.
- **Elimination**, which continually attempts to remove all suffering.

Rather than adopting these views, the framework represents what we might call creative engagement: the philosophical commitment to honest encounter with suffering and the transformation of that suffering into something that connects rather than isolates, that dignifies rather than diminishes, that contributes to meaning rather than negating it.

Philosophical Claim

This blues wisdom—that suffering, when honestly engaged, can become the material for authentic growth and meaningful connection—deserves recognition as a legitimate philosophical and psychological insight, rather than being treated as a cultural artifact or historical curiosity. For an extended analysis of the philosophical constructs of authenticity, existential bad faith, and radical responsibility within this model, see Supplement B.

Critical Limitations and Philosophical Caveats

Construct Boundary and Empirical Validation Required

The Blues Emotional Constellation, as proposed here, overlaps substantially with subthreshold depression as defined in the epidemiological literature. We explicitly acknowledge that the construct boundaries between the Blues and subthreshold depression remain unresolved at the empirical level.

As a critical limitation, the theoretical distinctiveness claimed here is not empirical independence but conceptual productivity. Whether the Blues framework ultimately proves more effective than the subthreshold depression framework in generating useful research and intervention is an open empirical question. Consequently, future empirical work must address the following goals:

- Psychometric validation of the Blues construct.
- Establishment of discriminant validity relative to subthreshold depression measures.
- Phenomenological investigation of whether blues-experiencing individuals recognize themselves in this construct.
- Determination of whether Blues-targeted interventions produce different outcomes than depression-targeted interventions.

Western, Individualistic Cultural Assumptions

The S.E.E.K. framework is grounded in predominantly Western, individualistic psychological traditions. The emphasis on individual identity, autonomous self-determination, personal agency, and the prioritization of authentic individual self-expression reflects cultural assumptions that are not universal.

This creates a critical limitation: for individuals with interdependent self-construals—common in East Asian, South Asian, African, Latin American, and many other cultural contexts—the core constructs of identity, agency, and authenticity may require substantial reconceptualization. In interdependent frameworks, several concepts shift significantly:

- The highest self may be understood as the most fully realized expression of relational roles and communal responsibilities, not individual authenticity.

- The identity architecture may be built through relational consistency and communal contribution rather than individual self-actualization.
- Self-efficacy may be collective rather than individually oriented.

Philosophical Acknowledgment

The present framework is culturally embedded. Future development must include genuine co-design with cultural communities whose self-construal frameworks differ substantially from individualistic assumptions. A broader exploration of these cross-cultural boundary challenges and ethical parameters is outlined in Supplement C.

Population-Specific Contraindications

The Blues framework and S.E.E.K. protocol, in their current formulation, are not appropriate for all populations. Specifically, the protocol is contraindicated for the following groups:

Individuals with Unaddressed Relational Trauma

The Know component's emphasis on deepened self-awareness and reflective journaling may activate attachment-related distress or traumatic memories. These individuals require trauma-informed treatment before engaging in identity-developmental work.

Individuals with Severe Anhedonia or Negative Symptom Predominance

The Blues framework assumes a preserved capacity for meaning-making, values articulation, and a healthy response to identity-congruent motivation. Severe anhedonia (defined as the complete loss of pleasure or interest) or negative symptoms may indicate the need for a thorough medical evaluation and alternative intervention modalities.

Individuals in Acute Crisis or Poverty

The Blues framework necessarily assumes baseline environmental stability and resource security. Individuals experiencing housing instability, food insecurity, or other immediate survival crises require concrete support services before psychological identity work is appropriate.

Individuals with Active Suicidal Ideation

If at any point suicidal ideation emerges, the Blues framework must be suspended immediately, and professional mental health intervention sought. Crisis resources include the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by calling or texting 988 within the United States.

Philosophical Implication

Ethical implementation of the Blues framework requires an honest assessment of when it is and is not appropriate. This is not a weakness of the framework but a fundamental requirement of responsible practice.

The Empirical Burden: What Remains Unknown

This manuscript presents no original empirical data; therefore,

all theoretical claims remain theoretical in status. The ultimate validity of the model relies on several critical questions requiring empirical investigation:

Critical Questions Requiring Empirical Investigation:

- Is the Blues construct phenomenologically recognized by individuals experiencing subclinical emotional distress?
- Does the Blues construct have adequate discriminant validity relative to subthreshold depression?
- Do the theoretical mechanisms of emotional melting (recognition → reframing → rechanneling → reintegration) operate as theorized?
- Does the S.E.E.K. protocol, as specified, produce meaningful change in Blues symptoms and identity alignment?
- Are outcomes from S.E.E.K. meaningfully different from outcomes derived from standard depression-focused interventions or other evidence-based protocols?
- What aspects of S.E.E.K. are most impactful? (This requires dismantling studies)
- For which populations is S.E.E.K. most effective? Which populations require modifications?
- How does S.E.E.K. function across cultural contexts?

The Honest Acknowledgment: This manuscript is Stage 1 theory development. It proposes a framework and specifies mechanisms. It does not prove that the framework works, nor that the mechanisms operate as theorized. Rigorous empirical investigation is required before clinical recommendations can be made.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Directions

Primary Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes five primary theoretical contributions to philosophy of psychology, positive psychology, and clinical psychology:

1. **The Blues as Philosophical-Phenomenological Construct:** We introduce the Blues Emotional Constellation as a theoretically coherent emotional state grounded in both a phenomenological specification and philosophical understanding derived from the blues' cultural-musical tradition. This moves beyond the purely diagnostic-administrative framing of "subthreshold depression" to a framework that honors the potential meaning and transformative power of emotional suffering.
2. **Identity Misalignment as Primary Generative Mechanism:** We propose that persistent subclinical emotional distress is fundamentally rooted in misalignment between one's lived life and their authentic values and identity. This reframes the therapeutic target from symptoms to identity work, generating different research questions and intervention strategies than those generated by deficit-focused frameworks.
3. **Emotional Melting as Transformative Mechanism:** We introduce and theoretically specify emotional melting—a four-stage process through which negative affect is metabolized (rather than merely managed) into purposeful identity-aligned action and deepened self-knowledge. This represents a theoretical position distinct from suppression, acceptance,

or correction, offering what we term "transformative engagement" with the emotional experience.

4. **The S.E.E.K. Protocol as Integrated Framework:** We propose an integrated four-component recursive protocol (Sculpt, Elevate, Empower, and Know) that organizes identity-developmental work around theoretically grounded mechanisms drawn from self-determination theory, habit science, cognitive-behavioral research, existential philosophy, and narrative identity theory.
5. **Philosophy of Suffering and Development:** We articulate and defend a philosophical position, grounded in the blues tradition, that suffering, when honestly engaged, contains transformative potential; that psychological development sometimes requires moving through discomfort rather than avoiding it; and that dignity and meaning can be found in authentic struggle with existential conditions.

Directions for Empirical Development

The theoretical framework proposed here requires rigorous empirical investigation. We propose the following research agenda:

Phase 1: Construct Validation (6–9 months)

- An expert content validity review of the Blues construct definition.
- A qualitative phenomenological investigation of the Blues experience consisting of 20 to 30 interviews.
- The development and psychometric evaluation of the Blues Emotional Constellation Scale (BECS; N = 300–400).
- The development and validation of the Emotional Melting Process Scale (EMPS).
- The execution of discriminant validity testing relative to subthreshold depression measures.

Phase 2: Feasibility and Acceptability (4–6 months)

- A qualitative feasibility study involving 12 to 15 individuals completing the full 8-week S.E.E.K. protocol.
- The administration of semi-structured interviews at Weeks 4, 8, and 12, examining feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary subjective efficacy.
- A thematic analysis identifying protocol refinements needed before a randomized controlled trial (RCT).

Phase 3: Pilot RCT (6–12 months)

- A two-arm pilot RCT comparing S.E.E.K. ($n = 30$) with a waitlist control condition ($n = 30$).
- The assessment of the Blues Emotional Constellation Scale (BECS) as the primary outcome.
- The assessment of secondary outcomes, including self-concept clarity, general self-efficacy, identity alignment, psychological well-being, and the 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9).
- The tracking of process outcomes via weekly administrations of the EMPS and BECS to test emotional melting as a temporal mediator.
- A mechanistic analysis testing theoretical predictions about the individual emotional melting stages.

Phase 4: Definitive RCT and Dismantling Studies (12–18 months)

- A fully powered RCT ($N = 400$) comparing S.E.E.K. with an active comparison condition, such as a structured positive psychology self-help program.
- The execution of dismantling studies examining individual components and combinations of the protocol.
- A moderator and mediator analysis examining for whom and through what mechanisms S.E.E.K. works.
- The implementation of Cross-cultural adaptations and validation with diverse populations.

Phase 5: Implementation and Dissemination (Ongoing)

- The development of facilitator training protocols.
- An investigation of different delivery formats, including self-administered, individual therapy, group, and digital modalities.
- A long-term follow-up examining sustained outcomes and relapse patterns.
- The co-design of the framework with African American and other culturally diverse communities.

Philosophical and Conceptual Extensions

Beyond empirical investigation, the Blues framework suggests several philosophical and conceptual extensions worth exploring:

1. **Philosophical Psychology:** How does the blues tradition's understanding of suffering and transformation contribute to the contemporary philosophy of psychology? Additionally, what philosophical insights does the blues wisdom offer regarding authenticity, agency, and meaning-making?
2. **Cultural Psychology:** How do different cultural traditions understand and engage with emotional suffering? Furthermore, what can be learned from cross-cultural wisdom about the transformation of pain into meaning?
3. **Narrative Psychology:** How does the redemptive narrative construction process work? What specific narrative structures best support the integration of suffering into meaningful life stories?
4. **Existential Psychology:** How does a confrontation with existential concerns (such as isolation, freedom, meaninglessness, and death) manifest in subclinical emotional distress? In turn, how can psychological work honor existential

reality while supporting authentic development?

5. **Identity Development Across Lifespan:** How does identity-developmental work differ across age groups, developmental stages, and life transitions? Finally, what are the age-specific applications of the Blues framework? Suggestions and concrete pathways for cross-disciplinary engagement across fields such as cognitive neuroscience and contemplative studies are detailed in Supplement D.

Conclusion: Toward a Philosophy of Transformation

The Blues Emotional Constellation and the emotional melting mechanism represent not merely a clinical framework or an intervention protocol, but a philosophical position about human suffering, development, and the possibility of authentic transformation. We live in a culture that has largely medicalized emotional suffering—treating it as a malfunction to be corrected through symptom reduction. This medicalization has genuine value: it has reduced unnecessary shame, enabled access to treatment, and generated empirically validated interventions. But it has also obscured something important: the potential meaning, wisdom, and transformative power contained within emotional suffering when that suffering is engaged honestly and creatively.

The blues musical tradition, created by African American artists responding to suffering that included systemic oppression, loss, and heartbreak, understood something that contemporary psychology has largely forgotten: that suffering, when honestly inhabited and creatively expressed, can become the material for genuine connection, authentic meaning-making, and resilient selfhood. The theoretical framework proposed in this paper attempts to translate that cultural wisdom into a psychological and philosophical language with which contemporary psychology can constructively engage. Specifically, the framework proposes the following four tenets:

- The Blues state is not merely a symptomatic disorder but a signal—communication from one's own depths about authenticity gaps that require attention.
- The emotional pain of the Blues, while genuinely difficult, may be psychologically and existentially appropriate—evidence of integrity rather than evidence of pathology.
- Transformation is possible not through the elimination of suffering but through its honest engagement and creative rechanneling.
- Identity development is both a psychological and an ethical project—the work of becoming more authentically, more courageously, more consciously aligned with one's deepest values.

This is not to romanticize suffering or to suggest that emotional pain should be sought or glorified. Rather, it is to propose that suffering, when it comes (as it inevitably does), need not be merely endured but can be engaged as an invitation to deeper authenticity, more conscious freedom, and more meaningful living.

The S.E.E.K. Identity Protocol, with its four recursive components—Sculpt, Elevate, Empower, and Know—provides a

structured pathway for this engagement. The emotional melting mechanism specifies how the transformation from confusion to clarity, from constraint to agency, and from isolation to authentic connection becomes possible.

Whether this theoretical framework ultimately proves empirically effective remains to be determined. But what we hope has been demonstrated in this paper is that the model is theoretically coherent, philosophically grounded, empirically informed, and practically specified. Furthermore, the framework generates testable hypotheses. It addresses a genuine theoretical gap. It honors both psychological science and cultural wisdom.

The invitation the Blues framework extends is not to eliminate emotional suffering or to treat all emotional pain as requiring clinical intervention. Rather, it is to read emotional suffering carefully, to listen to what one's own depths are trying to communicate, and to allow that communication to guide one toward more authentic, more purposeful, more conscious living.

In the words of Nina Simone—herself a blues artist who understood the transformative power of honest emotional expression—"I'm not singing for fun. I'm singing because I have something to say". The emotional suffering of the Blues, properly understood, is similarly not pathology, but the state of having something important to say. The work of transformation begins in listening—truly listening—to that voice.

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