

Identity Strain: A Persistent Pattern in High-Functioning Professional Lives

A descriptive overview of identity strain as a persistent, non-diagnostic pattern affecting mid- and senior-career professionals in high-responsibility roles.

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS, February 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A growing body of



In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”

Erik Erikson

research in organizational psychology, sociology, and expatriate studies is drawing attention to a persistent but often overlooked pattern affecting many high-functioning professionals: [identity strain](#).

Unlike identity crisis - which is typically acute, disruptive, and time-limited - identity strain refers to a chronic, low-to-moderate state of internal tension that accumulates over

time. Individuals experiencing identity strain often remain competent and reliable in their roles, yet report a gradual erosion of meaning, coherence, and personal agency.

Research across identity work, role theory, and expatriate adjustment has long examined the pressures created by sustained role demands and prolonged adaptation to external expectations. When professional, cultural, and personal identities drift out of alignment, individuals may continue to appear successful while experiencing internal fragmentation.

This pattern appears with particular frequency among:

- mid- and senior-career professionals
- expatriates and internationally mobile workers
- individuals in high-responsibility or high-reliability roles

In these populations, identity strain often precedes more visible outcomes such as disengagement, withdrawal from previously valued roles, or burnout. Importantly, identity strain is not a diagnosis and not a mental health disorder. It is a descriptive construct used to explain sustained identity-related tension within otherwise functional lives.

Practitioners working at the intersection of identity development and professional life increasingly observe that addressing surface-level stressors alone may be insufficient when deeper identity misalignment is present. Naming identity strain as a distinct phenomenon may support earlier recognition and clearer discussion before more visible outcomes emerge.

Balázs Ujlaki, a Europe-based practitioner whose work draws on research in adult identity, role demands, and professional coherence, characterizes identity strain as an upstream signal rather than a failure state.

“Many people assume that if they are still functioning, nothing is wrong,” said Ujlaki. “Identity strain explains why that assumption can be misleading.”

Further academic discussion related to identity strain appears across research on identity work, expatriate adjustment, and role-related stress. Educational resources outlining the concept and its distinguishing features are available at:

<https://balazsujlaki.coach/identity-strain>

About Balázs Ujlaki

Balázs Ujlaki is a Europe-based practitioner working in professional and cross-cultural contexts, focused on questions of adult identity, role demands, and coherence across life and work.

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