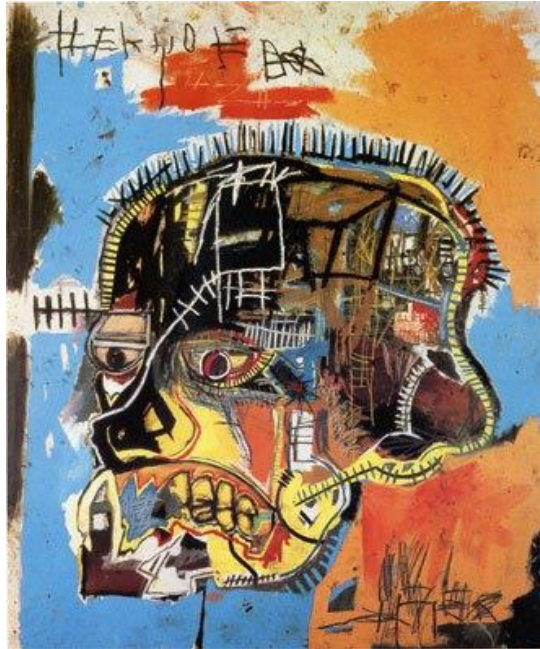


## Character flaws: The seven chief features of ego



Untitled, by Jean-Michel Basquiat (1984)

Every one of us has a fundamental flaw, an immaturity of character, a dark side or negative tendency. This character flaw, also known as a ‘Chief Feature’, tends to take control whenever we feel stressed, anxious or uncertain. To the extent that you can identify and handle yours, you are doing well in your personal growth.

### **What is a Chief Feature?**

Generally speaking, all personality traits (or [overleaves](#)) are neutral. They can be *applied* positively or negatively, but in themselves they are neither positive nor negative. Personality traits are merely different ways of being.

A **chief feature** [1] is different. A chief feature is negative by nature.

A chief feature is a **dominant negative attitude** — a defensive and potentially destructive pattern of thinking, feeling and acting. We could also call it a constraining factor or personal stumbling block.

We all have at least one. It comes and goes in childhood, solidifies during adolescence, and then surrounds us like a protective shell in adulthood. It seems like a good thing to have at first but, as I will explain, it is based on a false premise and so serves no real purpose. Throughout adulthood it just interferes with our lives by blocking aspects of our true nature and stifling our true character, usually without us even knowing.

Your chief feature is your primary ego defence and your main stumbling block in life.

This article describes how the chief feature comes to have such a stranglehold on our personality. First, though, a general description of the seven possible chief features.

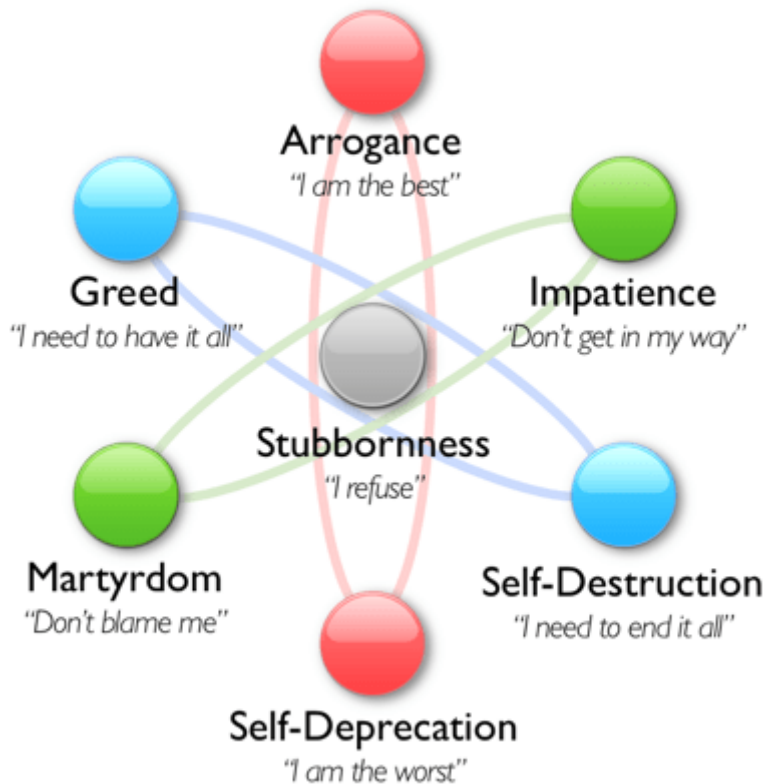
### **The seven chief features**

In [the Michael teachings](#) there are seven types of chief feature (character flaw / constraint / personal defect / stumbling block, whatever you prefer).

Here they are listed from the most introverted to the most extroverted:

1. **Self-Deprecation** (belittling/diminishing/undervaluing oneself)
2. **Self-Destruction** (sabotaging/punishing/harming oneself)
3. **Martyrdom** (denying responsibility for oneself)
4. **Stubbornness** (resisting change in one's life)
5. **Greed** (selfish overindulgence, over-consumption)
6. **Arrogance** (inflating/exalting/overvaluing oneself)
7. **Impatience** (intolerance of frustration/obstruction/delay)

Note how they can be arranged in pairs (plus one in the middle):



**Impatience and martyrdom** are both about our actions. It is as if there is a battle of wills going on between ourselves and others, or life, or even ourselves.

- With **impatience**, we hate it whenever anything interferes with our will or slows us down. "Why do people always stop me from doing what I need to do? Everybody should just get out of my way." Frustration is intolerable.
- With **martyrdom**, we feel a constant need to blame others for our own actions, as though we have no will of our own, or no other choice. "Don't blame me for what I do. It's all your fault." Responsibility always lies elsewhere.

**Greed and self-destruction** are both about our personal existence and relationship to life. In both cases, there is a mindset that prevents us from ever feeling OK in life.

- With **greed**, we feel a need to grasp and hoard, as though there were an intolerable lack of some vital substance: "Life will never be OK until I *have it all*." But the sense of lack is a bottomless pit.
- With **self-destruction**, our very existence is increasingly intolerable: "Life will never be OK until I *end it all*." There is a constant inner turmoil that makes us want to get away from ourselves.

**Arrogance and self-deprecation** are both about controlling how we are perceived, or at least how we *imagine* we are perceived. The thought behind them is something like, “Who I really am will never be satisfactory in the eyes of others. So no-one must ever see the real me.”

- With **arrogance**, we feel a need to be seen as better than others because being ordinary is intolerable. “I must never come across as merely average; I must always seem better than the next guy.” It’s a superiority complex.
- With **self-deprecation**, we feel a need to be seen as little as possible because we believe ourselves to be miserably inadequate. “If anyone takes a close look at me, they will see how pathetic I really am.” This is an inferiority complex.

**Stubbornness** is simply about change in any form.

- With **stubbornness**, we feel a need to keep all things just as they are and resist any outside influence, even positive ones: “No, no, no! You can’t make me. I won’t have it. Leave well alone!”

We all have, within us, elements of all seven of these negative patterns. It goes with the human condition. And we can be influenced by any of them from time to time. But whichever one of these patterns is always subconsciously pulling your strings, *that* is your chief feature, your primary obstacle, your Achille’s heel.

In terms of our psychological well-being, personal growth and spiritual development in later life, our chief feature presents a challenge. To overcome it, we have to become more conscious. But if we utterly succumb to it, the result can be a grotesque character flaw.

## **Anatomy of a Character Flaw**

Understanding the personality is like playing with Russian dolls — removing one layer reveals another layer underneath.

If we were to open up a chief feature, what would we find? Here is my understanding as a psychologist of the structure of the chief feature.

## **Persona**

First of all, the outermost layer is what psychologists call the **persona**.



This layer is a mask, a pose, an act. It's how we as adults want others to see us ... a false image designed to hide the “truth” about us.

(This layer is particularly dense for those with arrogance or self-deprecation.)

For example, someone might be in the habit of acting like they are perfect and superior in every way. Their *mask of superiority* is what their chief feature wants the world to see instead of the terrible truth within — an ordinary, flawed human being. This would be part of the chief feature of arrogance.

The persona layer of the chief features is a cover story, a decoy, a fabrication. And it is specifically crafted to hide what lies underneath ...

### **Shadow**

There is within each of us a hidden layer of negativity and denial, known in psychology as the **shadow**.

The shadow includes all the childish ways we would act out our negative feelings, were we to allow it. Such negativity may be directed either against the world outside or specific others or against the self — but it is single-minded and desperate, being driven by our worst fears, our inner demons.



The “demons” within us represent our personality at its most selfish, destructive and immature. These childish aspects of ourselves are obsessed with getting their own way, and terrified of getting it wrong.

We wear the persona as a mask to hide these ugly tendencies from public view. The outer image of ourselves portrayed by the persona is usually the exact opposite of the inner image we hold of our own shadow. If my suppressed urge (shadow) is to be nasty, for example, my public image (persona) may come across as unusually nice.

## Fear

Finally, if we lift away this negative reactive layer (the shadow), we find the emotional core of the chief feature. This is a core of fear — personified as the helpless young child within us who fears to repeat some sort of painful experience.



At the core of personality we have our emotional memory banks from early childhood, even from birth. There will also be emotional resonances with traumas from past lives. Here is where all experiences of loss, deprivation, abandonment, neglect, abuse and mistreatment have left their mark.

The tremendous fear of repeating such experiences is the emotional engine of our negative and destructive tendencies, and the driving force of the entire chief feature.

## How we create our own stumbling-block

Every child is born with a list of needs and desires.

- Infants need nurturing, caring, attention, affection—in a word, *love*—in order to feel safe and secure.
- Toddlers need to assert themselves and discover their capabilities and limitations as independent physical beings.
- Schoolchildren need to form relationships and be accepted by their peers.

But life is never perfect. In some cases, there is deliberate abuse. Parents can be emotionally immature or insensitive, or too wrapped up in their own problems to care for the needs of a child. Even the best parents are

imperfect in their love. Some are physically unable to give the child the optimum type or amount of love required. Sometimes, parents just die or disappear from life.

It isn't all about the parents, of course. Siblings can also have a devastating effect on the child, as can friends, neighbours and schoolteachers. Some research shows that parental influence on a child's development is prominent only up to age five, after which peer groups become the greater influence.

Inevitably, a child carries his or her own version of suffering. There is always some degree, however small, of *loss, deprivation, frustration, trauma, abandonment, neglect, abuse or mistreatment.*

## **Fear**

**All chief features are based in fear, and fear is the driving force behind all the negative poles of the overleaves, and the cosmos for that matter.**

MICHAEL

Having undergone negative experiences, the child now has a constant fear of the negative experiences recurring. "If life is out to get me, it could get me at any moment. I never know how it might get me next."

The fear may be a terror of some specific bad experience happening again, or it could be more of a dread of some awful thing which is always threatening to get worse. Either way, it becomes the adult personality's deeply held sense of insecurity.

**The chief feature is a character structure designed to avoid or handle a particular kind of fear.**

**Chief features are all built around a basic fear, which is another way of saying a block. However, it is not the fear that is the cause of the chief feature. The chief feature operates because of the protection believed necessary from that fear. It is, in essence, the fear of fear; the belief that you cannot survive if you surrender and experience the fear and what is underlying the fear. The structure is built upon that foundation.**

MICHAEL

There are, of course, [seven](#) fundamental fears: [2]

### The Seven Chief Features

Chief Feature	Fear
1. <b>Self-Deprecation</b>	Inadequacy
2. <b>Self-Destruction</b>	Loss of control
3. <b>Martyrdom</b>	Worthlessness
4. <b>Stubbornness</b>	Change, new situations
5. <b>Greed</b>	Lack, not having enough
6. <b>Arrogance</b>	Vulnerability
7. <b>Impatience</b>	Missed / lost opportunities

### Misconceptions

The soul still “remembers” what perfect love and freedom and security feel like, so the harsh realities of incarnation can come as a shock.

Because of the negative experiences of childhood, especially if such experiences are repeated or if they are particularly traumatic, a child begins to construct a somewhat distorted worldview. In other words, the child puts together false beliefs or negative ideas about the self, about others or about life in general.

The nature of the child’s misconceptions depend upon the type and strength of the specific painful experiences. For example, if the child is regularly punished for no apparent reason, the child might conclude that “life is out to get me.”

Children tend to over-generalise, so this misconception becomes all-encompassing. It becomes a personal myth.



## Negative behaviour

Driven by a deeply-held fear, and steered by a distorted worldview, the emerging chief feature springs into action. The child thinks for instance, “I will stop life from hurting by taking control of my pain. I will hurt myself more than anybody else can.”

The child’s chosen survival strategy involves some sort of conflict, a war against self, against others or against life.

It is a defensive behaviour pattern which looks irrational from the outside but from the child’s perspective is perfectly rational. It is this way of acting which make up the negativity of the emerging chief feature in childhood.

**Chief feature is a survival device, and one of its strongest hooks into the personality is the instilled conviction that you cannot survive without it. The lure of the chief feature is that when there is much stress and the circumstances are difficult, it will in fact get you through.**

MICHAEL

## Distortion of the life goal

Your life’s goal is one of the [overleaves](#) chosen by your soul before incarnating. There are seven possible goals (**Dominance, Growth, Acceptance, Surrender, Submission, Rejection** and **Retardation**).

For the soul, the goal it chooses is a way to evolve through physical life. While we are incarnate, pursuing our goal offers a path to joy and fulfillment.

But for the chief feature, however, the urging of the goal is a threat to the personality’s survival strategy.

The life goal tends to seek greater love, truth and freedom, while the chief feature is like a parasite that feeds on fear, falsehood and self-limitation. Happiness itself is “part of the problem”— something to be feared and avoided as far as possible.

And so the chief feature, in its mindless, terrified way, convinces us that negativity is the only safe option. Higher principles such as truth, joy, freedom and love are incomprehensible to the chief feature and therefore not to be trusted.

The chief feature distorts the functioning of the goal as we make life choices. It mixes up our pure desire with our primitive fears. It interprets positive options as threats to our survival. It blinds us to the possibilities and makes our chances of fulfillment virtually impossible.

**In attaching expectations and conditions to the goal, the chief feature “colors” it so that it cannot be recognized or it becomes acceptable only under certain very limited circumstances, often circumstances that are impractical at best, such as a young woman with genuine back problems who feels that the only way she can be worth anything in life is if she becomes a ballet dancer.**

MICHAEL

In this way, the chief feature turns us away from the positive pole of our goal and towards its negative pole. For example:

- If your goal is **dominance**, your soul may be desiring to show great leadership (the positive pole of dominance) but your chief feature manifests as *dictatorship*.
- If your goal is **acceptance**, your soul’s desire is to learn how to accept others unconditionally but the effect of your chief feature will be *ingratiation*—begging to be accepted by others.
- If your goal is **growth**, your soul’s desire is to have the sort of contrasting experiences that lead to great insight and comprehension, but the influence of your chief feature will merely lead you into *confusion*.

### **Image management**

Coming of age—the transition from adolescent to adult—is a major turning point in anyone’s life. The prospect of leaving the family home and operating as a free agent in adult society is, in some ways, like starting life all over again.

Emerging adults need to feel safe and secure, just like infants. They need to assert themselves and discover their limits, just like toddlers. They need to be accepted by their peers, just like schoolchildren.

All of this can trigger a terrible fear, buried deep in their psyche, of repeating the same sort of painful experiences that happened in the first few years of life. The defensive strategy is designed to prevent this from happening.

However, the emerging adult faces a dilemma: *I want to be an adult, and be seen as an adult. But my normal survival strategy is socially unacceptable — it makes me look like a child. I have to protect myself, but I also have to manage how others see me.*

The solution is to develop a “spilt personality” — the childish fears, attitudes and negativity become locked away inside (to become the *shadow*), while a carefully managed public image is presented to the world (the *persona*).

One final final step, which happens more often than not, is when the young adult actually *identifies* with their own image or persona. In other words, they believe their own lie. Now the chief feature is a closed system, an almost inescapable cycle.

### A Vicious Circle



**Like the symbolic serpent eating its own tail, the chief feature is a vicious circle that feeds on fear, illusion and falsehood.**

I find it fascinating the way the chief feature works. Not only does it interfere with natural self-expression and self-fulfilment, *it also attracts the very thing which the personality fears*—and then uses this to justify its own existence!

For example, consider a young woman with a chief feature of arrogance.

Her innermost fear says to her, “My secret imperfections leave me vulnerable to unbearable criticism.” She fears exposing this vulnerability. Any such exposure is a no-no. So her behaviour becomes a message to the world: “I’m magnificent, folks. I am already complete. My life is as perfect as it can get. Don’t even bother looking for imperfections.”

Needless to say, however, going around acting all high and superior like this inevitably attracts criticism, the very thing she is seeking to avoid.

But when this happens, her chief feature simply notes the criticism, decides that her mask of perfect invulnerability needs to be reinforced, and ups its game! Instead of acting overtly superior and self-important, she may now do

it more subtly by highlighting weaknesses in others, becoming very critical of others' failings. This draws attention away from her own vulnerabilities and, by implication, gives the impression of her not having those same weaknesses. She might also learn subtle ways to invite praise from others, thereby keeping them focused on her better aspects and oblivious to her failings.

The chief feature is like a black hole in the personality. Not only does it suck the joy out of life but it is also invisible, a psychological blind spot. People generally do not know what their greatest flaw is because they cannot see it.

It's also a self-fulfilling prophecy: "The thing I fear the most just keeps happening to me." The chief feature is oblivious to its own causal role in the process.

Getting rid of a chief feature therefore is a very difficult task precisely because it has such a seductive grip on the entire personality. Even if we become aware of it, we are not sure if we can survive without it. We can, however, become more conscious of it. We can feel it when it is trying to take over. And once we are aware of its ways of working, we have more choice. We can choose to ignore the fear that normally bosses us around, or at least accommodate it in a non-destructive way.

### **Positive and negative poles**

Like all [overleaves](#), each type of chief feature has its positive pole and its negative pole.

- The negative pole of a chief feature represents the state in which false beliefs and maladaptive behaviours are in total control of the personality. You are acting unconsciously, reacting to situations out of fear.
- The positive pole of a chief feature represents the state in which the grip of fear has loosened—the chief feature is no longer in control, though it is still making its presence felt. You are able to act more consciously from a position of power and choice. There is still some unnecessary influence, however.

The positive and negative poles of the chief features are shown below. For a more detailed explanation, see the individual pages on each type of chief feature.

## The Seven Chief Features

Chief Feature	Polarities
1. <b>Self-Deprecation</b>	+ Humility – Self-Abasement
2. <b>Self-Destruction</b>	+ Self-Sacrifice – Suicide/Immolation
3. <b>Martyrdom</b>	+ Selflessness – Mortification/Victimisation
4. <b>Stubbornness</b>	+ Wilfulness/Determination – Obstinacy
5. <b>Greed</b>	+ Egoism/Desire – Voracity/Gluttony
6. <b>Arrogance</b>	+ Pride – Vanity
7. <b>Impatience</b>	+ Audacity – Intolerance

### Primary and Secondary

I have been talking about *the* chief feature, or *the* character flaw, but in fact people usually have two of them distorting their personality—a *primary* and a *secondary*.

The primary is the one that distorts one's [life goal](#). The secondary, however, distorts one's life [attitude](#) (how the personality perceives life). So while the effect of the primary flaw is outward, affecting overt behaviour, the effect of the secondary is inward, affecting how we think and feel.

In my case, for example, my primary obstacle is **impatience** — a tendency to rush and push, driven by a fear of missing out. This interferes with my life goal, which happens to be **growth** (the desire for intense and varied experiences). So having impatience as my chief feature means that I am frequently anxious about missing out on opportunities to experience life. I tend to rush from one activity to the next like a bull in a china shop, afraid that if I slow down I will miss out on some important experience.

My secondary obstacle is **self-deprecation** — a tendency to diminish oneself out of a fear of having one’s basic inadequacy exposed to the world. This distorts my life attitude, which happens to be **idealism** (focusing on positive possibilities, how life *can* be). So having self-deprecation interfering with my attitude means that I tend to think about how much better my life would be ideally, if it wasn’t for me and my inadequacies.

### Does “chief feature” mean the same as “ego”?

Spiritual teachers often say that our main problem in life, the thing that leads to unhappiness and hampers our spiritual growth, is our own ego. So is “chief feature” just another name for ego, and vice versa?

Well, we have to be very careful with the word “ego”, as it has completely different meanings in different contexts.

To the general public, the word ego refers to that part of us which loves praise, fame, success, victory. It is the selfish part of us that wants to win the game of life, the big-headed part of us that likes to believe “I am the best”, the infantile part that wants us to have it all, now.

However, many psychiatrists since Freud have used the word “ego” to refer to what they regard as the most advanced function of the mind — namely, the ability to be rational, to make decisions, to resolve problems. They also regard this rational “ego” as synonymous with the “self”. (In other words, there is no spirit or soul; there is only the ego, which is a function of the human mind.)

So to the lay person, the ego represents all that is bad in human nature, while to the psychiatrist the ego is important and valuable — the basis of rational choice.

Spiritual teachings tend to combine both views. They regard the ego as both rational and self-serving. Being rational, it cannot grasp the ultimate unity of reality. Being self-serving, it blocks our spiritual nature and so prevents us from experiencing love, joy and fulfilment. And so spiritual teachers urge us to *transcend the ego* in order to become whole, to connect with all of life, and to discover our real meaning, value and purpose.

At the same time, most spiritual teachings also make a definite distinction between the ego and the real self. In the spiritual framework, the ego is a false or lower self, while the Self is our inner being, our true nature. The ego is simply a structure in the mind which claims to be one’s self but isn’t.

It is in this sense that the chief feature may be identified with the ego. More exactly, *the chief feature is the ego's primary means for self-preservation.*

Most people would readily identify the traits of arrogance, impatience and greed as obvious ego traits. Less obvious, though, are the more introverted chief features: self-deprecation, self-destruction, martyrdom, stubbornness. This is because of the general view of the ego as being outwardly selfish, big-headed and infantile. But if we regard the ego simply as a false self then we soon find all these traits at work.

## Read on

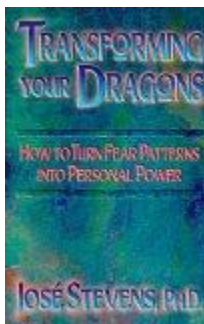
Ok, that's the background on the seven chief features. Now click on the links below to learn about each one in detail and see if you can spot your own. But be warned: your chief feature is a blind spot! Many people cannot see their own biggest flaw.

[Self-Deprecation](#) | [Self-Destruction](#) | [Martyrdom](#)

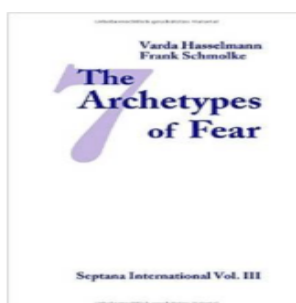
| [Stubbornness](#) |

[Greed](#) | [Arrogance](#) | [Impatience](#)

## Books



For an excellent book about the various negative patterns and how to handle them, see [Transforming Your Dragons](#) by José Stevens.



Another great and insightful book about the seven character flaws, including three common variants of each type: [The Seven Archetypes of Fear](#), by Varda Hasselmann and Frank Schmolke.

## Notes

[1] The name “chief feature” was originally coined by the spiritual teachers Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. They wanted to indicate how most people are psychologically dominated by something negative in their own personality structure. It is possible that their source of inspiration was the entity known here as Michael. Many of those involved in the original Michael channelling group also had a background in this teaching, so the term carried over.

[2] I have noticed that some online writers have the fears slightly differently: they have worthlessness as the underlying fear of **self-destruction** and loss of control as the underlying fear of **martyrdom**, rather than vice-versa. The list shown here is consistent with all of the channelled material I have seen in the various Michael books and elsewhere.

<http://personalityspirituality.net/articles/the-michael-teachings/chief-features/>