

# What is shadow work, and what is holding you back?

I think shadow work is a natural part of many tarot readings, it's just that you may not fully realise what you are doing.

**We all have a shadow psyche.** Memories that are too painful, self-limiting beliefs that we have forgotten are there, cultural norms that we accepted to fit in, experiences that we rationalised to make sense of the world, trauma and stress that we have adjusted to and feel normal, relationships that are toxic yet feel every day to us.

Whenever you are struggling, feeling blocked, then a part of your shadow is probably trying to protect you- or is holding you back.

There are lots of ways to visualise the shadow self- I see it as a knight in armour, trying to protect me from perceived risk based on past experiences. I consciously see it like this because whatever I have hidden from myself **was helpful at one point, it's just that now it is holding me back**- and doesn't that description sound just like one Tarot card?

## The Tower

Your ego is your conscious sense of self, how you see yourself- but not your shadow self or the parts of yourself you reject, or project. Often in life we will do anything to preserve the ego- even if that is limiting our life opportunities, hurting us or loved ones.

In the Tower the ego is represented by the **crown**, the crowning belief, and that crown is knocked right off! This is a warning- working with the shadow can be disorientating, it can feel very disturbing, the ego may fight back trying to preserve the status quo.

*I remember a tarot reading with a very well-built man (recently entered "Mr Universe"). The crossing card on his reflection spread was the knight of wands, and after a couple of in-depth spreads I gently suggested he had "anger issues" that he would do well to address.*

*He stood up (rocking my little caravan) leant right over the table and roared in my face, "I DON'T HAVE ANGER ISSUES".*

*Then quickly sat down, apologised, and burst into tears. His Dad had been an aggressive man, and his natural anger (which is helpful and healthy) had all been repressed for fear of being like his Dad.*

The **lightening** is the “hand of God” suggesting this is a sudden enlightenment that has knocked the ego out of its position of always maintaining the status quo. This “dramatic realisation” can come in many ways.

- A loved one, trusted other, your cards may point something out in such a way that we finally realise it.
- New evidence may come to light.
- A book, movie, even a song, may help us to remember something different, or realise something important.

*I used to work fulltime as a nursery teacher- a very mainstream career. My enlightenment came when my first husband and I were planning an expensive holiday. I realised 2/5ths of my wage were going towards this holiday. It felt as if a lightbulb switched on. I told him I wasn't going to commit to the holiday- I'd rather go camping. But I was going to work part time. It sounds mad now, but my parent's work ethic was so ingrained in me I had never looked at whether I needed to work full time.*

The **people falling**- and notice **one still wears a crown**- even as one part of our ego is knocked to the side, there is still an ego- in a slightly different form- needing to protect itself. This is why newly converted people can become so evangelical.

Maybe you experienced this with your Tarot journey, a new diet or health supplement that worked, or on finding a new author whose books bring unexpected enjoyment (all very small moments of enlightenment & small shifts in our ego). We have to be especially careful when we have been through an ego-shifting Tower moment, because deep down we want this to be “it”.

We want everything now to be right, to fit- and we may find ourselves even more rigid.

Shadow work- like Tarot- is a lifelong journey, we are never quite done.

## Spreads

Rarely can shadow work be done in one spread- rather it is following a thread, seeing where it leads you with no expectation of the end result.

This is an example of the most usual flow of spreads I would do for shadow working, but there is no one size fits all!

If you feel drawn to add a relationship spread or change the spreads- then allow the conversation between you and the cards to unfold.

I do think journalling helps with this, otherwise you may forget your first intuitive flash as the shadow psyche rallies to protect you.

Think of an area of your life that is not as enjoyable or expansive as you would like it to be. This might be creativity, finances, healthy habits, speaking in public, charging for your Tarot readings...

I've shared below my readings as I run through this exercise. Have a go at interpreting my spreads- then explore a series for yourself.

***An exercise, “what is holding me back in...in love?”***

**Spread one- the Reflection spread.**

Before shuffling assign the card at the bottom of the pack to represent a shadow part of the issue and read this in combination with the card that is crossing, and the card in the unconscious. Together these can highlight a shadow in the psyche.

See what you make of *my* reflections spread, before reading my interpretation.



*Right now, I am open, “looking” for romance (knight cups) but perhaps the idea of love, rather than a relationship. I feel “single” (queen swords- divorced/widowed woman) and am stepping forward in my life in an empowered way (4 pents) but isolating myself and need to let my guard down. In the past I have been focused on my spiritual path (6 swords) and have felt quite adrift or isolated from others.*

*The three cards focused on shadow;*

*Block – world*

*Unconscious- emperor*

*Card at bottom- death*

*I mean they are a powerful trio! Emperor could reflect my father, the father of my children, and my internalising my relationship with men to rely on myself- probably a mix of all three. I link this with the 4 of pentacles- my boundaries are too high to allow any potential romance close.*

*World and Death- I am paused in the liminal space between endings and new starts- because it is rather safe.*

### **Spread two- a check in.**

Because shadow work can be triggering it is useful to do a check in, and ask very simply “what do I need to know about this journey?”

### **3 cards giving any potential heads up, the card at the bottom a link to the next step.**

Again- take a look at mine- what do you think? Each of the spreads in this journey add together to create a cohesive whole.



*Well the cards are being very clear- from the World & Death to the Magician & Fool- it feels as if I am in the middle of a giant shift- between endings and fresh starts- but edging towards fresh start.*

*I see no warning in the three cards- so I feel confident that this is the right time to ask this question- that this work will help me to trust the process and find love.*

If there is a heavy leaning in the three cards towards mental health/trauma/difficulties then I would still do the reading, but I would be more cautious.

Watch out for cards that talk of mental overwhelm, trauma, or current abusive relationships. Doing this work can make an abusive relationship more dangerous as you see the toxicity you are less likely to comply, which can be dangerous. (Never underestimate the danger of a domestic abuse situation- they are usually most dangerous at the ending).

My card at the bottom is the Tower. "Break through and Break down".

*It is hard to breakdown when you are solo-parenting 4 young adults and working fulltime running your own business. But somehow, I need to find the space to do this- to let my ego believe that love is possible, and safe.*

*The cards suggest that I have worked hard to create a solid base in life (3 wands) Now I need to step into this new life I have worked so hard to create and let go of the past (Magician/Fool) but I do need to let go of my trauma based survival habits- the key one being over work and people pleasing.*

**Spread three- looking deeply at shadow.**

Bottom row (1-3) How am I experiencing this shadow psyche in my life right now.

Middle row (4-6) What is the root cause I can work on or accept at this point.

Top row (7-9) Practical advice on how to follow through.

Card at the bottom of the pack- I need to know this.



Trust the process, this may be shining a light on areas of your psyche that you are not comfortable with. If needed take a photo and come back to the spread, or focus on a little self-care to calm your nervous system if you are feeling anxious.



**Bottom row (1-3) How am I experiencing this shadow psyche in my life right now.**

*I am dedicating my life to distractions (page wands) being super busy with lots on- even though these are good things I'm proud of (Devil) and whenever I reach a block or something that isn't working, I think I have no control over my life (Devil).*

*I over distract (which is mainly work) and believe I have no other choice but to over work (Devil).*

*That is a huge realisation- to consider I may be creating the need to over work as a powerful distraction.*

**Middle row (4-6) What is the root cause I can work on or accept at this point.**

*Interesting – the 2 of swords/4 pentacles reflect isolation, not feeling seen, heard or validated by others. “Neglect by omission” which I was reading about only yesterday and hugely resonates from my childhood and my marriage.*

*2 swords- I've always felt better to stay with the Devil you know than risk worse- which says a lot about the bottom row. The 2 of swords is the osculation between hope and fear- often leading to procrastination.*

**Top row (7-9) Practical advice on how to follow through.**

6 pentacles- take better control of my time, resources, and money. Make time for what it is I want to do.

7 Wands- Learn to feel comfortable in my own self, and to meet. My own needs before work/meeting others.

Page cups- Find the time to be playful, and creative.

**Card at the bottom of the pack- I need to know this.**

I often associate the knight of pentacles with healthy habits- he is the slow and steady of the knights. Now I'm great and big bold gestures- but this card reminds me to change my lifestyle one habit at a time.

**I often like to finish with a three card spread, with no specific focus-** just letting the cards say whatever they want to about this focus.



The card at the bottom of the pack is powerful. Even though I have no contact with my parents or ex-husband, the gaslight lighting continues because it is so much a part of my experience I have internalised it.

I think the answer is to try to step back and be more compassionate to myself in how I manage my time- which I think includes delegating more (king swords).

Trust my intuition (judgement) and try to increase my confidence (Chariot) in the life I have created for myself.