

Differentiation in Relationships

In relationships, we can feel that something is not right, but we might not be sure about what it is. How do we manage this process? Sometimes, it has to do with one's level of differentiation. We can become enmeshed or fused with another person to the point that it is difficult to maintain a separate identity. We can also become so distant or disengaged that the relationship is no longer fulfilling for either person.

Differentiation

The ability to maintain one's sense of self when emotionally and/or physically close to others, especially as they become increasingly important to you.

Can you maintain your course when loved ones pressure you to agree or conform?

You can choose to:

conform

agree

disagree and not feel embittered or alienated

stay connected with those who disagree and still know who they are, and not need to leave the situation to hold onto your sense of self

If someone is less differentiated, he/she is emotionally fused and controlled by that connection. He/she becomes swept up into how others feel. There is only room for one position and opinion.

Fusion

Fusion is an invisible but tenacious emotional connection. A compelling connection is present. There is an emotional connection without individuality, which is not as fulfilling as we would like it to be. The overpowering need for togetherness can feel like a burden. The "tug" of fusion can lead to the desire for physical and/or emotional distance in order to feel better.

Aspects of Fusion

If a person has a reflected sense of self, he/she:

-needs continual contact

-requires validation

-needs consensus from others

-is unable to maintain a clear sense of who he/she is in shifting or uncertain circumstances

All of this means that the person is limited in his/her range of behaviour, and he/she may thwart other new experiences.

If we base our identity on our partner, there is *danger* because it limits the extent to which we can authentically experience life.

The idea that “we are our feelings” is a *myth*. If we believe this, we may believe that we need to live from crisis to crisis as many people do. We can become addicted to the drama that is created, never realizing that a more deeply fulfilling life is awaiting us. However, we can choose *not* to be on a rollercoaster with our partner. Instead, we can choose to deal with our feelings without this belief.

Jealousy is a form of emotional fusion. Some individuals cannot function separately, and their anxiety grows into jealousy. After the honeymoon period, it is important to evaluate any relationship for jealousy.

Borrowed Functioning

You can appear to be more, or even less, differentiated than you really are, depending on the state of your relationship. You may “borrow” from your partner the inner resources that you do not possess. You may compare yourself to your partner, or “charge your batteries” (i.e., replenish your positive energy) through your partner.

When we need to be needed and are not able to settle for being *wanted*, we tend to perpetuate poor functioning in our partner in order to maintain the borrowed functioning.

There is Another Option...

How about just relaxing and being who you are? It is not necessary for you to feel anxious all the time, and it is possible to exist more autonomously.

The need to be needed is based on the ego, and it relates to feelings of inadequacy. Such an individual needs feedback in order to feel wanted and feel good. This person may be “clingy”.

Of course, we all want to feel wanted and that we are “cool” to hang out with, but the ability to validate ourselves, and be centred, ultimately rests within ourselves.

Are we supposed to find someone who brings out the best in us?

How about doing it for yourself?

Other people are not reliable to satisfy your needs. We are brought up in society to believe that others can provide for our needs. As we grow older, we learn that we need to take care

of our own needs. This does not mean that we must emotionally cut-off from others. Sometimes we may say that we need "space", and emotionally cut off from others. When we do this, we are merely going to the other extreme.

Differentiation

Differentiation is the ability to maintain your sense of self when your partner is away or not available, or when you are not in a relationship.

Differentiation is different from individualism, autonomy, and independence. When you get close, you may want to "flee". Can you handle intimacy and not run?

A differentiated self is solid *and* permeable. A differentiated person can be vulnerable, and sure of it too. Differentiation does not involve a lack of feelings or emotions. It does not imply selfishness.

No one really wants to differentiate, but being a victim of feelings and needs who is dominated by guilt and loneliness is a very uncomfortable situation. Such a situation is what can mobilize us to change.

Intimacy - The Real Thing

Intimacy is not for the faint of heart. For intimacy to occur, it takes:

Trust
Acceptance by the other person
Empathy
Validation
Reciprocal disclosure

Self-awareness, self-reflection, and complex language (to be able to express oneself) are all basic elements of true intimacy. True intimacy is developed through conflict, self-validation, and having the opportunity to disclose to someone without getting information back.

Two Types of Intimacy

Other-Validated Intimacy: "Who you are comes from the outside"

One finds acceptance, empathy, validation, and reciprocal disclosure ("to be fair") from one's partner. We can become dependent on others' whims and less capable of true intimacy. This is inherently self-limiting because it leads to self-preservation over self-disclosure. It also allows one partner to manipulate the other's reality.

Self-Validated Intimacy: "Who you are comes from the inside"

One maintains his/her own sense of identity and self-worth with no expectation of acceptance or similar behaviour from the partner. Our ability to self-validate is directly related to our level of differentiation. It is a tangible product of one's relationship with oneself.

The Quest for True Intimacy

In order to love someone, we need to know him/her. It takes courage to be intimate. We must dare to dream, and we need our imaginations too. There can be no expectations. We must be open to the mystery of relationship. If two people are differentiated, they are on separate paths. Their capacity for intimacy is enriched and deepened because they are truly involved in life, and allowing the full expression of their identities.

Self-Validation

Our capacity to self-validate is directly related to our level of differentiation. When we can self-validate, we can soothe our own anxiety and resist being infected by other people's anxiety. Self-soothing means:

Assuaging pain
Mollifying anger
Softening shock
Pacifying fears
Comforting sorrow and disappointment

To be centred in oneself is to be able to settle oneself when one is anxious.

Adapted from a lecture given by John Cringan, Sessional Instructor at UBC (Family Studies) during the National Peer Support Conference of January 2004. Sources cited include Murray Bowen and David Schnarch.

In the Counselling Room

Ask yourself, what is it that is helping me to do a good job?

If we find ourselves jealous of a client, wanting to "fix" them, or wanting our clients to need us (borrowed functioning), this will give us insight into our level of differentiation. If we need our clients to like us, and become too heavily attached to our role as a helper, it may be because we are looking for a reflected sense of self. Our inability to self-validate may be the cause of a lot of problems. If we are based solely on other-validation, we may go up and down emotionally with our clients, keep them longer than necessary, and try to be the "Lone Ranger" (do all the work by ourselves).

Less differentiated persons might start problem-solving *for* their clients. They might share too much of their life, or do things *for* clients.

Self-validated individuals are able to calm themselves when working with clients. They can notice when they are anxious with a client, and take care of themselves. They are able to listen to themselves, and act upon what they learn. Self-validated individuals talk to a supervisor when it is needed, and are honest with themselves about what is going on inside them.

People with a Higher Level of Differentiation...

Help and encourage clients to generate their own solutions

Stay calm

Recognize their own emotions

Allow clients to be *who* they are and *where* they are

Do not have to work on their own - they seek help and assistance as it is needed

Differentiation is what can allow us to live truly free and fulfilling lives.

Adapted from a lecture given by John Cringan, Sessional Instructor at UBC (Family Studies) during the National Peer Support Conference of January 2004. Sources cited include Murray Bowen and David Schnarch.