

Boundaries For Healthy Differentiation

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Saying yes to more than you can do, staying in relationships in which someone is often unkind, or hiding away for fear of being overwhelmed by connection may all be symptoms of a lack of healthy differentiation.

Healthy differentiation means you can access both autonomy and intimacy in your relationships. When you are not afraid of losing yourself or being controlled by another, you can allow yourself to feel deeply connected and affected, while standing strong in your own sense of self. Healthy differentiation also involves learning to tolerate disharmony, embrace differences, self-soothe, offer compassion, and set boundaries. Let's focus on this last skill, setting boundaries.

To understand what setting boundaries really means relative to healthy differentiation, it's helpful to understand what historical circumstances did not contribute to it. If you know you struggle to set and maintain boundaries to support healthy differentiation, then one or more of the following may be true about your history or current life:

1. As a child one or more of your caregivers put you in the role of being the "adult" by asking you to tend to their emotional or physical needs.
2. You grew up with a sense of having to be vigilant for conflict, violence, and boundary violations.
3. You were actively shamed for having feelings and needs or your feelings and needs were ignored or dismissed.
4. You were rewarded for being the "good child" and denying what was authentic for you in favor of what others wanted from you.
5. You were often left alone to care for yourself. There was no one to reflect back your experience of life and offer compassion and celebration.
6. You had an older sibling that you experienced as someone who attempted to establish power over you through criticism, demands, or physical intimidation/violence.

If your orientation to relationships has grown out of one or more of these experiences, you likely have a sense of distrust that mutuality is even possible and doubt that your authentic experience could really be welcomed by others. These beliefs along with needs for safety, belonging, and acceptance drive ways of relating to yourself and others that don't support healthy differentiation. Here are some examples of those unhelpful ways of relating:

1. You establish and maintain eye contact with people you don't know well.
2. You allow others to give you advice or information and take on the role of not knowing, when you actually do know.
3. More often than you would like, you ignore your own intuition or ideas in favor of hearing others.
4. When others have what you perceive as strong opinions or clarity about what they want, you back away from what you want.
5. You follow your attraction to others by allowing close emotional or physical contact before they have earned your trust.
6. You have some sense of giving yourself away through sex or helping others and then wonder if they have used you or will return help when you need it.
7. You assume you know what others need and offer it without checking in with them.
8. You've been told you share too much. You are not able to understand the difference between sharing authentically and adjusting your sharing to match the situation.

These habits of relating were likely rewarded in your family of origin. Thus, they were adaptive then, but no longer meet needs for you and others.

The healing and skills that help with healthy differentiation are subtle, numerous, and varied. For our purposes, let's look at three areas of boundary setting to consider and build skills and awareness:

1. Interrupt "Helping"

Notice your impulse to offer help, get involved, or give spontaneous counselling or advice. True help for others is a response to their needs and requests. In the case of a lack of healthy differentiation, helping others is often a response to your own needs for connection, belonging, acceptance, and inclusion. Helping that comes from this place is a sort of unconscious "give to get" that is not about true mutuality.

Next time you notice the impulse to help, give advice/counsel, or get involved, pause. Take a physical step back from the other person or group. Balance your weight over your center. Follow a full breath in and out. Invite yourself to calmly observe and notice if anyone is asking for your help or involvement and, if so, what exactly are they asking for? Respond to requests for help or involvement by saying that you will get back to them later. When you are not in that situation, connect with your needs and priorities and decide what is really true for you.

2. Monitor Eye Contact

You get to decide where your attention and energy flows. Love and compassion isn't about smiling at and connecting with everyone. Long uninterrupted eye contact invites intimacy before it has been earned. Take time to reflect on your choices about eye contact just before the next time you will be with a group of others. Reflect on who has earned your trust through kindness and respect. Identify those you may feel a pull towards, but have not earned such trust. Identify those who have behaved in ways that have not met your needs in the past. Make a decision, just for that event, about with whom you will allow extended, brief, or no eye contact.

3. Monitor Physical Interaction

Physical interaction is much more than touch. It also includes body posture, following someone, walking with someone, proximity, hand gestures, and facial expressions. When there is touch, notice the length, the frequency, the amount of body contact, stiff or relaxed body, and if the contact moves or is stationary. The presence or lack of these things define the boundary between you and the other person.

Choose two relationships in your life. One in which you have a sense of safety and predictability, but the relationship may or may not be intimate. Choose another in which you have some confusion about boundaries. You might have labelled touch in that relationship as "creepy" or you might find yourself wanting more touch while having a thought that you shouldn't want more.

Then reflect on each of these relationships using these points of reference:

1. What are the typical postures of you and the other person when you are together? Is there frequent mirroring or no mirroring?
2. As activities or topics shift in a given situation, do you tend to move from thing to thing together? Do they follow you? Do you follow them?

3. When walking, standing, or sitting how much distance is maintained? Is this distance consistent or inconsistent?
4. What type of hand gestures does this person use? Do they enter into your physical space with those gestures?
5. What are the most common facial expressions? Does their facial expression seem congruent with either the situation at hand or their words and body language?
6. When there is touch, notice all of its dimensions: length, frequency, amount of body contact, stiff or relaxed body, and stationary or moving contact.

Within these three categories of relating, there is a lot to notice and track. If you did not grow up with modelling and support of healthy differentiation, you will likely benefit from teaching yourself and learning from others these ways of relating in an explicit and detailed way.

Practice

Take a moment now to choose one of the suggested practices above to engage with in the coming week.