

Healthy Differentiation:

Learning To Be Your Authentic Self

LaShelle Lowe-Charde

Healthy differentiation is the 12th Relationship Competency of Mindful Compassionate Dialogue (MCD). It rests on the skills from the other 11 Relationship Competencies. When healthy differentiation is present, you are able to discern what is true for you and what you are and are not responsible for in a given interaction. It means being fully who you are in the presence of who they are. From an expansive perspective, I offer that we can think about being born into the human body as an ultimate form of differentiation from a larger consciousness. We differentiate into these bodies for the purpose of evolution and unique expression. If this resonates for you, then the importance of healthy differentiation is obvious relative to a sense of spiritual purpose. As you learn to value and share your own expression in the world, you evolve and contribute to the whole.

To understand healthy differentiation conceptually at the level of human relationships, let's briefly describe what it is *not*. Then identify practices for cultivation.

To gain a conceptual understanding of healthy differentiation, it helps to become familiar with the reactive patterns of enmeshment and disengagement which are its opposites. Enmeshment is a description of a particular set of habits, limiting beliefs, and perceptions that create confusion about who is responsible for what in a given relationship. This pattern often leads to tragic behaviors like blaming and making demands.

Disengagement is a relational strategy originally used to protect against intrusion and shame. It involves forms of emotional and physical distancing. It is not an expression of independence and autonomy, but rather a reactive compulsion to move away from intimacy.

Recognizing enmeshment and disengagement in yourself and others, without judgment, may enable you to open the door to healthy differentiation and start making different choices.

In daily life there are a number of ways you can become aware of and cultivate healthy differentiation. Let's touch on just two here: self-connection and autonomy.

First, self-connection is foundational to any relationship competency and perhaps most obvious with this competency. In this context, it means to notice and celebrate who you uniquely are. This doesn't mean stagnating in some definition or label of yourself, but rather noticing day by day what's true for you. Here are a few questions that are key for noticing and valuing yourself:

1. What do you delight in?
2. What are you able to offer that serves life? Or, put another way, what are your strengths?
3. What truly gives you a sense of aliveness and connectedness?
4. How are you living your sense of purpose?
5. For what do you naturally feel grateful?
6. What is tender for you?
7. What type of reactivity is paying you a visit right now?
8. What do you feel and need at this very moment?
9. With whom or what do you notice a sense of resonance or "Yes!" inside?
10. What are you drawn to create or learn?

11. How are you growing?

When you can make it a habit of regularly asking and answering these questions, you will start to notice a more coherent sense of self. This makes it much easier to discern what is true for you and what you are and are not responsible for in a given interaction.

Second, strengthening your relationship to autonomy is a lifelong process with layers and layers of subtlety. It's helpful to remember that many people have complex relationships with this particular need. For example, when you hear someone say something like: "I have a big need for autonomy" or "autonomy is really important to me," they are most likely saying that they have not had sufficient supportive experiences to maintain their own connection to choice within themselves. Thus, they spend significant energy defending their autonomy. They are someone who has not had the experience of being supported in knowing or choosing what is truly important or right for them. Of course, this is true for most of us at one level or another.

In the bigger picture, true autonomy is not supported in most social and economic systems in the world. Rather such systems perpetuate confusion, fear, shame, alienation, and distrust. For example, people of color all around the world, perhaps most obviously here in the United States, are systematically denied and punished for expressing or acting on their choice. In addition, within any family, there may be another layer of conditioning that pushes for harmony, performance, or toughness over respect for choice. All this is to say that your relationship to autonomy is likely fraught with complexity.

I recently read a short story in which the author attempted to convey what it would be like if each person's autonomy were respected within a fully interdependent and connected society. For me, by demonstrating ease and matter-of-factness with autonomy, the story highlighted the difficulty that most of us have simply stating what we are willing or not willing to do.

In this context, I'd like to offer you a few practices to strengthen your connection to autonomy:

1. Identify the needs you are saying "yes" to when you want to say "no" to someone's request of you.
2. If you are saying "yes" with tension, pause and ask yourself what you would do if you had total freedom.
3. Mindfully notice when others invite and honor your choice.
4. Visualize what "being free" would be like for you.
5. Experiment with giving short "yes" or "no" answers to requests, rather than telling stories, making excuses, or saying "yes" when you really don't want to.
6. Take the time you need to make decisions.
7. Remind yourself that the universal needs of every sentient being are equally important and that there is never a conflict of needs, only a conflict of strategies.

Applying these strategies in a consistent manner over time will help you make choices that honor your needs and are in integrity with your values and your true self, naturally diminishing discomfort and resentment in your relationships.

Healthy differentiation is key to our personal growth and learning as well as to thriving in our relationships. Self-connection and autonomy are two important building blocks to cultivate it. Connecting to your true self makes it easier to show up authentically and naturally

differentiate from others, while having more access to agency and autonomy empowers you to live a life that makes sense to you and feels true.

Practice

Mindfully choose one building block to focus on first: self-connection or autonomy, and then choose one of the above recommendations to practice with. Define a timeline for this practice (1 week, 1 month...) and reminder strategies (specific times of day, post-it notes, a flashcard in your back pocket, a practice buddy...) Take time at the end of each day to reflect on what you discovered. Remember that new awareness may be painful at first, so be gentle with yourself and don't hesitate to go to self-empathy or request empathy to support you during this process of self-discovery.