# Understanding And Recognizing Enmeshment

LaShelle Lowe-Charde

It's sometimes hard to know the difference between caring about another's experience and taking too much responsibility for their experience. Enmeshment refers to confusion about who is responsible for what. This lack of clear boundaries results in attempts to manage the other person's experience as a substitute for managing your own.

When you think you are trying to contribute to your another's well-being, but you are actually acting from enmeshment, there is tension and contraction. This might be as subtle as a forced smile or as obvious as telling the other person to be happy so that you can be happy.

With enmeshment, you notice the other person from a place of vigilance rather than attunement. That is, you watch for any sign of threat or disequilibrium. In contrast, with attunement you look for opportunities to offer caring. For example, if your relationship tends toward enmeshment, there's a good chance that you think you know, unconsciously or consciously, the meaning of the other person's every micro-expression. For every micro-expression that might indicate upset you think, "I have to fix that." You might then immediately take some action in an attempt to shift their mood or feeling. You might imagine that you would get a break from managing their experience when they are happy, but from the perspective of enmeshment, if the other person is happy, it's up to you to make sure you don't mess that up. When your actions fail to manage the other person’s experience in the way you want, reactivity in the form of anger, shame, blame, or shut down is usually the result.

Enmeshment is not typically one-sided. Both people in an enmeshed relationship dynamic are likely working hard to manage each other. This is a recipe for losing connection with yourself and building resentment toward the other person.

When you truly want to contribute to your another's well-being from the autonomous generosity of your heart, there is attunement, and a light expansive feeling. If your attempts to contribute fail, you might feel some sadness or disappointment, but you don't become reactive. You can remain present and connected to yourself and notice what's happening for the other person with care.

From a differentiated sense of caring, you can notice possible upset in another and remain centered in yourself. You have a choice about how you will respond. You can connect with your present needs. You trust and know that the other person is responsible for their own feelings and needs. You trust yourself to set a boundary if they attempt to blame you or make you responsible for their feelings.

Take a look at the list below of the most common signs of enmeshment.

1. You try to fix, advise, or tell someone what they should and shouldn’t do without being asked to do so.
2. When there’s a conflict or disagreement in your relationship, you feel anxiety, fear, a compulsion to fix the problem, or convince the other person to agree with you.
3. You imagine you need to rescue someone from their emotions.
4. You imagine you need someone else to rescue you from your own emotions.
5. You and the other person do everything together. It seems like betrayal or abandonment when one of you attempts to do something on your own.
6. You are defined more by the relationship than your own values. You make decisions based on what you think will please the other person.

7. You neglect yourself or other relationships because of a preoccupation or compulsion to be in the enmeshed relationship.
8. Your happiness or contentment relies on your relationship.
9. Your self-esteem is contingent upon this relationship.
10. You take responsibility for meeting the other's needs even when it is harmful to yourself.
11. You feel the other's feelings. If they feel angry, anxious or depressed, you also feel angry, anxious or depressed.
12. If the other person isn't happy, you think you can't feel happy.
13. You strategize about how to get the other person to feel certain feelings and not other feelings. This might show up as you having a sense that you are "walking on eggshells" or that you "have to" manage the other person's emotional state. For example, you try to cheer them up, explain why they shouldn't feel something, or tell them how to see things differently.
14. You say 'yes' and then resent it later.
15. You lose a sense of autonomy when with this person. You find it difficult to express your own preferences clearly.
16. You cannot not tell the difference between your own emotions and those of someone close to you.

# Practice

If some of these signs of enmeshment are present in one of your relationships, set the intention to watch for this the next time you are with that person. If you notice a sign of enmeshment, call a pause to connect with your needs.