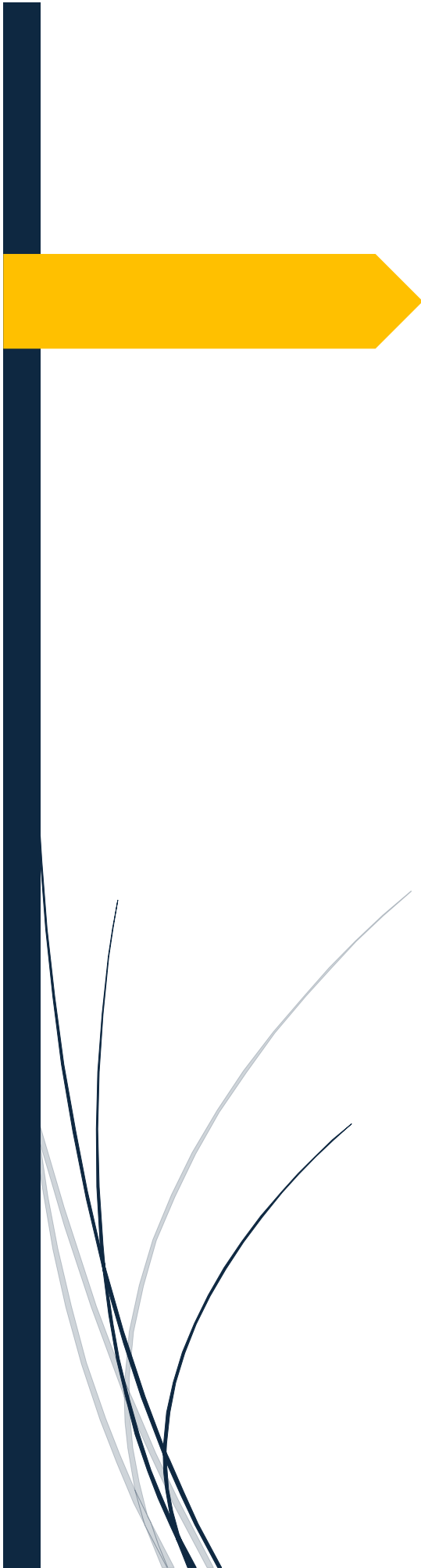




Differentiation

Staying ME While Connected
to YOU

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Relationships ask us to do something surprisingly difficult.

Be connected to another person without losing ourselves.

Healthy relationships involve closeness, support, empathy, compromise, shared experiences, and consideration for another person's needs.

They also involve differences.

- Different opinions.
- Different emotions.
- Different needs.
- Different preferences.
- Different values.
- Different reactions.
- Different ways of experiencing the same event.

Differentiation is our ability to remain connected to another person while maintaining a clear sense of **who we are, what we think, what we feel, and what belongs to us.**

It allows us to say: **“I can be connected to YOU without abandoning ME.”**

And equally: **“YOU can be different from ME without threatening US.”**

Connection Without Losing Yourself

Relationships naturally influence us.

- If someone we love is hurting, we may hurt.
- If someone is angry with us, we may become uncomfortable.
- If our partner is anxious, we may feel pulled toward reassurance.
- If someone is disappointed, we may want to fix it.
- If someone disagrees with us, we may want them to understand our position.
- Influence isn't the problem.

The question is: **Can I stay connected to you without automatically becoming responsible for what is happening inside you?**

Differentiation allows us to experience: **ME**

- **My thoughts**
- **My feelings**
- **My needs**
- **My values**
- **My choices**
- **My responsibilities**

While remaining curious about: **YOU**

- **Your thoughts**
- **Your feelings**
- **Your needs**
- **Your values**
- **Your choices**
- **Your responsibilities**

and then intentionally deciding: **US**

What do we want to create together?

ME ≠ YOU

Two people can experience the same situation very differently.

You can be disappointed... **and I can still believe I made the right decision.**

You can be anxious... **without me needing to eliminate your anxiety.**

You can disagree with me... **without one of us needing to be wrong.**

You can want closeness... **while I need some space.**

You can need space... **without me assuming the relationship is threatened.**

You can be frustrated... **without me becoming defensive.**

You can make a choice I wouldn't make... **without me needing to control your choice.**

Differentiation creates room for: **ME + YOU rather than ME vs. YOU**

Differentiation Is Not Independence

Differentiation can sometimes be confused with independence. They aren't the same thing.

Extreme independence can sound like:

- “I don't need anyone.”
- “I'll handle it myself.”
- “Your feelings aren't my problem.”
- “I shouldn't have to explain myself.”
- “I'll do what I want.”

Differentiation sounds different:

- “I can depend on you without becoming dependent on your approval.”
- “I can care about your experience without becoming responsible for managing it.”
- “I can ask for support while remaining capable of supporting myself.”
- “I can consider your needs without automatically abandoning mine.”

The goal isn't greater distance.

The goal is **greater flexibility between connection and autonomy.**

When Differentiation Gets Difficult

Our ability to remain differentiated often decreases when emotional intensity increases.

When things are calm, it may be easy to think: “We're allowed to disagree.”

During conflict, disagreement may suddenly feel like:

- “You don't understand me.”
- “You don't care.”
- “You're against me.”
- “I need you to see this my way.”
- “I need to get away from you.”

The issue may no longer be the disagreement itself.

The system may be trying to restore emotional stability.

- ⇓ **DIFFERENCE**
- ⇓ **DISCOMFORT**
- ⇓ **ANXIETY / ACTIVATION**
- ⇓ **PRESSURE TO REDUCE THE DIFFERENCE**
- ⇓ **CONTROL | PURSUE | FIX | PLEASE | WITHDRAW | DEFEND**

When difference begins to feel threatening, we may try to make the other person **more like us** or create enough distance that we no longer have to experience the difference.

Differentiation creates another option: **“Can I tolerate the discomfort of us being different while staying connected?”**

Where Do I End and You Begin?

One of the central tasks of differentiation is learning to recognize **what belongs to whom**.

Consider: **YOUR disappointment**

- Doesn't automatically require: **MY compliance**

Consider: **YOUR anxiety**

- Doesn't automatically require: **MY reassurance**

Consider: **YOUR anger**

- Doesn't automatically require: **MY defensiveness**

Consider: **YOUR sadness**

- Doesn't automatically require: **MY solution**

Consider: **YOUR preference**

- Doesn't automatically require: **MY agreement**

Consider: **YOUR boundary**

- Doesn't automatically mean: **MY rejection**

Consider: **YOUR need for space**

- Doesn't automatically mean: **OUR disconnection**

And the reverse is also true.

- My feelings do not automatically become your responsibility.
- My needs don't automatically become your obligations.
- My interpretation isn't automatically your intention.
- My discomfort doesn't automatically mean you have done something wrong.

Your experience matters without automatically becoming mine to manage.

Emotional Contagion

Humans influence one another emotionally.

- One person's anxiety can increase another person's anxiety.
- One person's anger can create defensiveness.
- One person's urgency can create withdrawal.
- One person's withdrawal can create greater urgency.

For example:

- **YOU** - Become anxious.
- **ME** - Notice your anxiety and become anxious about your anxiety.
- **ME** - Try to reassure, fix, control, or solve.
- **YOU** - Temporarily feel better.
- **ME** - Learn that managing your anxiety is my job.
- **YOU** - Learn that regulating anxiety requires my involvement.

A relationship can gradually organize itself around **managing one another's emotional states**.

Differentiation introduces a different possibility: **“I can be present with your emotion without automatically needing to change it.”**

Empathy Without Absorption

Differentiation doesn't mean becoming less empathetic.

It can actually allow us to become **more available** to another person because we aren't immediately consumed by their experience.

Instead of: “You're upset, so I need to make you feel better.”

- Try: **“You're upset. I want to understand what you're experiencing.”**

Instead of: “You're angry, so I must have done something wrong.”

- Try: **“You're angry. I can listen while also deciding what responsibility belongs to me.”**

Instead of: “You're anxious, so I need to reassure you.”

- Try: **“I can support you without becoming solely responsible for making the anxiety disappear.”**

EMPATHY = I can understand your experience.

ABSORPTION = Your experience becomes my emotional responsibility.

Differentiation helps us practice the first without automatically moving into the second.

Support vs. Rescue

Healthy relationships involve helping one another. The challenge is recognizing when **support becomes rescue**.

SUPPORT - “How can I help?”

- **RESCUE** - “I need to fix this for you.”

SUPPORT - Allows the other person to remain capable.

- **RESCUE** - May unintentionally communicate that they cannot manage without us.

SUPPORT - Can tolerate another person's discomfort.

- **RESCUE** - Needs the discomfort to stop.

SUPPORT - Shares responsibility appropriately.

- **RESCUE** - Takes responsibility away from someone else.

Before stepping in, ask: **“Am I helping because help is needed or because I am uncomfortable watching someone struggle?”**

Sometimes the differentiated response is to help. Sometimes it is to remain present.

Sometimes it is to let another capable person **do something for themselves**.

Overfunctioning and Underfunctioning

Relationships can develop patterns where one person increasingly takes responsibility while the other increasingly gives responsibility away.

- One partner remembers everything.
- Schedules everything.
- Solves everything.
- Initiates every difficult conversation.
- Manages the finances.
- Reminds everyone.
- Makes the decisions.
- Regulates the relationship.

Eventually:

⇓ **MORE I DO**
⇓ **LESS YOU HAVE TO DO**
⇓ **MORE RESPONSIBLE I FEEL**
⇓ **LESS CAPABLE YOU MAY APPEAR**
⇓ **MORE I DO**

This can create frustration on both sides.

- The overfunctioning person may think: “Why do I have to do everything?”
- The underfunctioning person may experience: “Why don't you trust me to do anything?”

Differentiation asks: “**What is actually mine to own?**” and: “**What might I need to give back?**”

Approval vs. Alignment

Sometimes maintaining connection becomes confused with maintaining approval.

We may think:

- If you're disappointed in me, I made the wrong choice.
- If you disagree with me, I need to explain myself better.
- If you're upset, I need to change my decision.
- If you don't understand me, I can't feel settled.

Differentiation allows another possibility: **“I want you to understand me but I don't always need you to agree with me.”**

You can ask:

- **Do I need their perspective?**
- **Do I need their input?**
- **Do I need their cooperation?**
- **Do I need their agreement?**
- **Or am I seeking their approval?**

These aren't the same thing.

Sometimes the work is learning: **“Someone can be disappointed in my decision and I can still remain connected to them.”**

Closeness and Autonomy

Some relationships begin treating closeness and independence as opposites.

MORE CLOSENESS = LESS FREEDOM or MORE INDEPENDENCE = LESS CONNECTION

Differentiation challenges that assumption.

A healthy relationship can make room for:

- Togetherness + Separateness
- Shared Interests + Individual Interests
- Couple Time + Individual Time
- Support + Self-Reliance
- Shared Decisions + Personal Choices
- Belonging + Autonomy
- US + ME

The question becomes: **“How do we create enough connection to support US while maintaining enough autonomy to support ME and YOU?”**

Holding Your Position Without Becoming Rigid

Differentiation isn't simply standing your ground.

There is a difference between being **grounded** and being **rigid**.

RIGID = “This is what I think and I'm not changing.”

- **DIFFERENTIATED** = “This is what I currently think, and I'm willing to hear additional information.”

RIGID = “Your feelings aren't my problem.”

- **DIFFERENTIATED** = “Your feelings matter to me, even though they don't automatically determine my decision.”

RIGID = “That's your issue.”

- **DIFFERENTIATED** = “I want to understand what belongs to you, what belongs to me, and what belongs to us.”

Differentiation involves having a **self** without closing yourself off to influence.

Grounded + Curious + Flexible

DO Therapy: What's Mine, Yours, and Ours?

Choose a current relationship challenge.

- **What is happening?**
- **What am I feeling?**
- **What do I need?**
- **What am I responsible for?**
- **What choices belong to me?**

Now consider the other person.

- **What might they be feeling?**
- **What might they need?**
- **What responsibility belongs to them?**
- **What choices belong to them?**

Finally:

- **What actually belongs to US?**
- **What requires collaboration?**
- **What can remain different?**

DO Therapy: Notice Your Pull

When another person becomes emotional, notice what you feel pulled to do.

Do you:

- **Fix?**
- **Reassure?**
- **Explain?**
- **Defend?**
- **Please?**
- **Control?**
- **Agree?**
- **Withdraw?**
- **Take responsibility?**
- **Make the emotion stop?**

Ask: **“What am I afraid will happen if I don't do this?”**

Then: **“What would happen if I stayed present without automatically taking over?”**

DO Therapy: Practice Tolerating Difference

Choose a small disagreement or difference. Instead of immediately resolving it, practice staying curious.

Try:

- **“We see this differently.”**
- **“I understand why that matters to you.”**
- **“I don't experience it the same way.”**
- **“Both of those things can be true.”**
- **“I want to understand your position without immediately defending mine.”**
- **“I care about how you feel, and I may still make a different choice.”**

Then notice what happens inside you.

- **What emotion appears?**
- **What does your body do?**
- **What are you tempted to do?**
- **What would staying differentiated look like?**

DO Therapy: Let Someone Be Capable

Consider someone you regularly help, remind, rescue, organize, soothe, or manage.

Ask:

- **Is this actually my responsibility?**
- **Did they ask for help?**
- **Are they capable of doing this themselves?**
- **What discomfort might I experience if I don't intervene?**
- **What might they learn if I allow them to manage it?**

Sometimes stepping back isn't abandonment.

It is communicating: **"I believe you are capable."**

Staying ME During Conflict

Conflict puts differentiation under pressure.

Before responding, try asking:

- **What am I feeling?**
- **What belongs to me?**
- **What am I assuming about YOU?**
- **What am I trying to get YOU to feel, think, or do?**
- **Am I trying to understand—or trying to reduce my own discomfort?**
- **What does this conversation actually require from me?**

Then choose your response.

- **PAUSE:** Slow the interaction.
- **REGULATE:** Notice what is happening inside you.
- **SEPARATE:** Distinguish your experience from theirs.
- **GET CURIOUS:** Gather information rather than assuming.
- **CHOOSE:** Respond intentionally rather than automatically.

Staying Connected Doesn't Require Becoming the Same

Strong relationships aren't necessarily relationships with fewer differences. They are often relationships that become **better at holding differences**.

- I can know who I am...**and remain curious about you.**
- I can have needs...**without making you responsible for all of them.**
- I can support you...**without taking over.**
- I can disagree...**without disconnecting.**
- I can hear your disappointment...**without automatically changing myself.**
- I can accept your influence...**without losing my own perspective.**
- I can establish a boundary...**without withdrawing love.**
- I can give you space...**without assuming we are no longer connected.**

I can be ME.

You can be YOU.

And together, we can intentionally decide what we want to create as **US**.

Building Differentiation

Differentiation isn't something we either have or don't have. It changes across relationships, situations, and levels of emotional intensity.

The goal isn't perfect independence.

The goal isn't perfect emotional regulation.

The goal isn't never needing reassurance, support, compromise, or connection.

The goal is to notice when another person's emotional experience begins pulling us away from ourselves—and create enough space to choose what happens next.

- **NOTICE:** What is happening inside me?
- **SEPARATE:** What belongs to ME? What belongs to YOU? What belongs to US?
- **REGULATE:** Can I tolerate the discomfort without immediately fixing, controlling, pleasing, defending, or withdrawing?
- **STAY CURIOUS:** Can I understand your experience without losing my own?
- **CHOOSE:** What response supports ME, respects YOU, and protects US?

The goal isn't: **ME or YOU**

It is learning how to hold: **ME + YOU → US**

Stay connected. Stay curious. Stay yourself.