

Self-Differentiation, Emotional Cut-Off, & Fusion

Adult Formation: In Relationship
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Self-Differentiation

Self-differentiation describes the degree to which someone develops his or her sense of self. It is the ability to maintain relationships, or be in emotional contact, with others, yet still maintain one's autonomy and individual emotional functioning. Specifically, it looks at how we face a difficult, emotionally charged problem and how we do not feel compelled to preach about what others "should" do, rush in to "fix" the problem, or pretend to be detached by emotionally insulating ourselves.

Higher differentiation of self: recognizes realistic dependence on others, but can stay calm and clear headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotionality

Lower differentiation of self: more impact others have on functioning

See chart for more about High Levels of Differentiation vs. Low Levels of Differentiation

Two types of Self-Differentiation

Intrapsychic Differentiation: distinguishing our thoughts from our emotions (self-awareness) –in the video, "Differentiation between emotional and reasoning guidance systems"

Interpersonal Differentiation: distinguishing our experience from the experience of people we are connected to—in the video: "Differentiation from self and other people"

Two ways Low Self-Differentiation Is Displayed:

Emotional Cut-Off: When people attempt to manage their unresolved problems with family members by totally cutting off emotional contact. Relationships may look better, but the problems are not resolved. The problems will re-emerge over and over again in other relationships.

Fusion: When people's choices are set aside in service of achieving harmony in the system. Relationships may look abusive or unbalanced. Decisions depend on what others think and whether the decision will disturb the fusion of the existing relationships

Five Basic Types of Emotion

Every emotion we experience can be broken down into 5 basic emotions.

Anger: a feeling of frustration that occurs when one cannot reach their goals or feels that something they are experiencing is unfair and unjustified

Sadness: a feeling of sorrow; it can be mild and brief or long-lasting, particularly related to loss

Joy: a feeling of content and well-being, either through pleasure or the lack of problems in one's life

Fear: a feeling of being afraid of a specific object or event, or a more generalized feeling of dread or apprehension

Disgust: a feeling of being repelled by a certain object or idea

Higher Levels of Differentiation vs. Lower Levels of Differentiation

Higher Levels of Differentiation

- Less emotional reactivity
- The ability to calm their emotions
- Can make more thoughtful and intentional decisions
- Don't give in to pressure from others
- Are less vulnerable to stress
- Are independent
- Are less prone to triangulation
- Have the ability to extricate themselves from emotional entanglements
- Have fewer physical problems, emotional problems, and social problems
- Can have closeness with others without getting lost in the relationship
- Have more fulfilling relationships

Lower levels of Differentiation

- More emotional reactive
- Have difficulty engaging in thoughtful behavior
- Have difficulty saying no to people
- Are more critical and judgmental
- Are overly concerned about approval
- Are more dependent on others
- Are more prone to triangulation, enmeshment, disengagement, conflict, and cutoff
- Have difficulty making decisions
- Have greater physical problems, emotional problems, and social problems
- Have difficulty communicating directly
- Repeat problematic relationships rather than learning from their mistakes