

Are you Dependent, Independent or Autonomous?

By Mel Schwartz

There are times in which I see relationship struggles or successes through differing prisms. Changing my filter on occasion brings a sense of growth and dynamic quality to my work. To that end, I have recently begun to look at relationships through the framework of where the participants might be in terms of their relational dependence, independence or autonomy.

Let's begin with those who are inclined toward dependence. By dependent I'm referring to individuals whose sense of themselves is rather dependent upon their partners. This is at the core of what I refer to as other-esteem, which is quite contrary to self-esteem. These people often struggle with self-esteem issues and seek their fulfillment or gratification through the sense of completion that their relationship provides. At the risk of generalizing, for there is always a commission of error as such, dependent people may have a particular difficulty with their personal growth since their need to be accepted by their partner stymies their personal evolution. This invariably leads to an issue around the phenomenon of change. The neediness of dependence often rubs against the innate desire for growth. When two people come together to provide a sense of completion, there is ultimately a problem when one of the individuals pursues some form of growth, for their partner often views this in a threatening manner. The inherent dilemma in a dependent relationship is that there exists an enmeshment of a sort, whereby both parties are comfortable only in the absence of change. The term *my other half* speaks poignantly to this dilemma. If one half begins to emerge toward greater wholeness, the relationship may seem at risk.

There are times when a dependent person is in relationship with an independent person, which of course predicts another sort of difficulty. There is, in such circumstances, an imbalance, whereby the dependent person sees the other as aloof and unavailable and their partner in turn sees them as insecure and needy. In such relationships, there are often conflicts around control. The presenting problem often revolves around matters of emotional intimacy. The dependent person isn't getting enough and the independent person is feeling too much demand placed upon them. This is a prescription for drama and unhappiness, but there is a potential for relief. When we learn to come out of the drama and see one another from the larger framework of dependence and independence, the issues of fault and blame tend to recede. The method toward that end is to de-personalize what in fact feels so very personal.

Two independent people in relation with one another create a different flavor of relationship. By the term independent I'm describing people who are not inclined toward great levels of intimacy and tend to protect their territory with some measure of privacy. These individuals are not typically comfortable with vulnerability and protect against verbal and emotional penetration from others. Independently inclined people are better matched for one another than with dependent people and don't struggle with the issue of enmeshment. But they never quite thrive in the joys of an intimate relationship, for they've not fully made themselves emotionally available.

Thus far, we've encountered some of the problematic difficulties of relationship. However, we're about to embark upon the positive. The word autonomous evokes a person who is both self-sufficient and emotionally available. The autonomous individual devotes themselves to their personal evolution, which ultimately enables them to be more emotionally available for an intimate relationship. Under such conditions there is a larger, fuller person available to share in the joys of a relationship. While they may be fully committed to the external relationship, their devotion to their internal relationship with self is of equivalent importance. This actualizing evokes the picture of a person devoted to not only their own growth but the evolution of the relationship as well. This model of autonomy is well suited for a more mature and responsible level of relationship. The more evolved an individual is, the more evolved the relationship may be.

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