

Relationship Health

By Mary Disharoon, MA, LMFT

Question: What is one of the main things a couple can do to improve the health of their relationship?

Answer: I am convinced that the most important thing a couple can do to ensure the health of their relationship is for each partner to grow their ability to be independent and self-reliant, as well as grow their ability to be relational and connected with each other. This would create a flexibility within each partner to better cope with the ups and downs of their life. This growth would also give the couple's relationship a resiliency to deal with whatever situations or issues they might have to face together.

Question: Is there a name for this dual ability to be both independent and connected?

Answer: The name for this is differentiation. It refers to your ability to manage two opposite human drives – your drive for independence & autonomy (your need to be an “I”) and your drive for belonging and connection (your need to be a “We”).

Question: Why is it helpful for a relationship when each partner can be independent?

Answer: Because it gives each person a strength and balance within themselves to be able to recognize, accept, and work with the differences that inevitably come up in a relationship.

Question: Why is it helpful to be able to connect with and rely upon the other person?

Answer: By depending upon each other, the couple can enjoy the many healing and practical benefits of being energetically connected to each other.

Question: Why is differentiation so valuable?

Answer: Differentiation allows the relationship to grow beyond just depending upon each other. A differentiated couple can create a synergy of “functional interdependence” that will help the relationship be fresh and alive, dynamic and life enhancing.

Question: What are some of the benefits of differentiation for a relationship?

Answer: Partners can be in conflict with each other without completely breaking their connection. Partners can connect with each other without feeling like they are losing themselves. Partners can self-regulate their own anxiety and self-soothe their own hurt when the other person is not available to help. Partners can let go of being competitive with each other. Partners can attend to their own vulnerability without always needing the other person to do it for them. Partners can accept their differences without needing complete agreement. Partners can experience compassion for each other. Partners can feel safer to love more deeply.