

Unhealthy Bonding

Here are some key concepts from psychotherapy that often play out with our partner. The goal is to assess if you are standing alone or if you are bonded together in an unhealthy way.

Term: Fusion. This is the experience we have when we feel intensely, deeply connected to our partner. It looks like the Hollywood version of romantic love, where we can read each other's minds and don't even need to speak to get what we want and need.

Problem: We do not read minds. We are so deeply bonded that we lose ourselves. We give up our friends and our hobbies in the quest to feel close. We become dependent. We are no longer able to stand alone within ourselves and to experience life as we did prior to the relationship. We live vicariously through our partner. We look for validation from them (other-esteem, as Pia Mellody calls it, instead of self-esteem). We can't live without our partner.

Term: Enmeshment. This is related to codependency and fusion. A decent metaphor is to imagine your partner and you caught in a fishing net — in a “mesh.”

Problem: A newborn is enmeshed with its mother; it does not know where it ends, and its mother begins. If you are an adult in this situation, you are at the mercy of your partner's choices and feelings. When your partner feels sad, you feel sad. There is no differentiation between the two of you. If you always follow your partner's lead, then you cease to exist as an individual. You can't tolerate them experiencing discomfort, because, if they do, so do you.

Term: Differentiation. This is the opposite of fusion and enmeshment. It allows us to stand alone. It allows us to get support, but not **need** support – an especially important issue for many couples, because fusion plays out as smothering, clingy, or needy.

Problem: None. You can make decisions and act on impulses and have friends and do things separately from your partner and not feel anxious about your choices and your partner can do the same. Therapists call this “healthy.”

I explain these things to clients because I repeatedly see people lose themselves when they start a new relationship. It is healthy to remain an individual and be **in** a relationship, but not to **be** a relationship. Too many control issues surface when you are too deeply enmeshed like that. When the honeymoon phase wears off you end up dependent and clingy. If the relationship ends, you end up without the ability to act in your own best interest. Some people end up spiteful and angry at the end of a relationship as a one method of breaking the connection and of finding their individuality again.

If you are bonded in an unhealthy way with your partner you can begin to differentiate, to find your individuality again by getting your pre-relationship life back. I suggest that you go back to the friends and the hobbies and the individual things you used to do.

It feels delightful to be deeply connected, but you must also be willing and able to be separate and strong **and** an individual. If you do, you have a better chance of avoiding the pitfalls above. And, it is never to late...

Courtesy of:



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