

How to Differentiate in Your Relationships

Adapted from David Schnarch, Ph.D., *Passionate Marriage*

Differentiation, the way we hold on to ourselves while staying connected to our partner.

It refers to:

- living up to your values and integrity,
- calming yourself down,
- handling your reactivity,
- managing your anxiety so it does not manage you, and
- confronting yourself rather than trying to change your partner, a person who has tremendous emotional significance in your life.

1. Stop blaming your partner. It only makes you feel and sound like a helpless victim. When you eliminate blaming as a way of being, many new ones will open. You will start putting your attention on yourself where it will do the most good.

2. Stop taking your partner's reactions personally. He/she has a right to feelings, reactions, even judgments. Know that they are all filtered through his/her baggage. Always keep your own view of yourself as the most important. And, it is always true that listening to your partner can give you insights.

3. Ask yourself about your own happiness, not your partner. What isn't working for you? How can you take charge of your life?

4. How are the current relationship issues made worse by you, your attitude, your timing, your way of looking at it, your inability to ask for what you want vulnerably, your defensiveness, your impatience, your unexamined life.

5. Confront yourself, not your partner. This will change your life. Are you living your own integrity? Are you the person you want to be? Are you living up to being the best you?
6. Don't count on your partner to respond positively, or make it easy for you. Your partner grows in his/her own way. Their job is not to make it easy for you.
7. Learn to look at your defensiveness as negative thoughts about yourself that have gotten triggered. Learn to recognize when you are defensive and what is feeling bad inside of you. Stop attacking and confront yourself, instead. Defensive attacking only entrenches both of you in not changing.
8. There is always a kernel of truth in what your partner is saying. If you cannot find an avenue for growth, look honestly at what your partner is saying.
9. Get out of your partner's head. That is, no analyzing, unsolicited suggestions for improvement, or little jabs. They only entrench the other. Your differentiation will help your partner grow more than anything else you can do.
10. Stop making your relationship problems the cause of your unhappiness. Your life is the cause of your unhappiness, stress, symptoms or frustrations.
11. Turn every relationship issue into your own growth. It is about your timing, your manner of talking, your way of holding what is said, your defensiveness, your need to control, your lack of enjoyable pursuit, your panicky reactions, your anxiety, your fear of. . . .
12. For a solution to a conflict or difficulty, try doing something that is 180 degrees different than what you have tried. The new direction is often the exactly what is needed.
13. Learn to get your sense of yourself from yourself. This is called self validation and is the cornerstone of growing. Look to yourself to make you feel good about who you are. Your partner can only support that feeling; s/he cannot create it. You need to create your own well-being and high self esteem. Often this requires some action or behavior.
14. Choose only the important dissatisfactions to express and deal with those in a constructive way. Stay in charge of yourself. You need five positive interactions

to every negative one. Confrontations are negative. Use them sparingly when they are worth the price.

15. Your feelings are one part of you along with your thoughts, wishes and other parts, too. Don't become your feelings. You don't need to act on them until you have seen whether doing so will serve you well.

16. Notice the good things your partner is doing. Pay attention to your tone and attitude.

17. Own your projections. What you don't like in your partner is an opportunity for you to learn about yourself. Find out what that is and confront it in yourself.

18. Be who you are and how you want to be, and be the partner you would like to have. Differentiation is a work in progress. Have compassion with yourself and your partner.

19. We all know our deeper truths and the best parts of ourselves. Let that part out as often as possible. Feel good about yourself even when your partner doesn't value you or treat you the way you want to be treated.

20. If you cannot regulate your emotions, curb your behavior. Act the best you can.

21. Don't keep focusing on the downside. Don't "awfulize" things. Things are as they are. What is, is. Accept the reality and look for the changes you can make to improve your life.

22. Take constructive time out when your time together has become abusive or intolerable. Promise to come back and finish; follow through. Don't allow yourself to be in negative reactive, abusive arguments, and don't allow yourself to wallow in self pity by stonewalling and avoiding. Agree on how to take time outs so you both feel mature and caring.

23. When self soothing in a time out, enjoy your own space. A measure of how well you are differentiating in this manner, is how little you think of your partner's bad treatment of you rather than enjoying the walk, the reading, the making your own plans, your hobby, whatever.

24. Self soothing does not mean fleeing into substances to dull your feelings.

25. Keep trying to move higher ability levels of holding on to yourself while staying in loving contact with your partner. Even if you are not being how she or he wants you to be, care about her or his feelings and concerns, not by losing yourself, but by having empathy.

26. Think about your actions more than talking out feelings. Actions change things while talking and processing often are a way to blame others or avoid taking charge of yourself.

27. Learn to talk as friends to each other. One person talks about his/her own life while the other listens. Each takes a four or five minute turn with no responses other than empathy if empathy is desired. Blaming or fixing the other is out of bounds.

Call for help with staying connected to your partner while holding on to your separate self.