

Differentiation & Key Concepts for Couples

Based on the work of Dr David Schnarch

What is Differentiation?

Schnarch defines differentiation as “people’s ability to balance humankind’s two most fundamental drives: our desire for attachment and connection, on the one hand, and our desire to be an individual and direct the course of our own lives, on the other. The latter refers to the ability to hold on to yourself when important people in your life pressure you to conform. Differentiation yields emotional autonomy—the basis of healthy interdependence and the foundation for intimacy and stability in long-term relationships” (Schnarch, 2010).

Develop Your Four Points of Balance

- 1) Developing a solid and flexible sense of self which means knowing who you are without needing others to tell you; being able to confront yourself to become a better person; being authentically yourself in the face of pressure from others to be something you are not, and learning how to self-validate rather than rely on external validation to feel good (external validation includes things such as words of affirmation; physical touch; having things done for you; requiring things to change before you are willing to change; only giving of yourself once the other has given first etc.)
- 2) Quiet mind-calm heart which is the ability to self-regulate and self sooth your anxiety without expecting someone else to do that for you;
- 3) Grounded responding which means managing your reactivity neither over-reacting and getting defensive or blaming or emotionally distancing yourself (nagging, emotional explosions, stonewalling or paralysis); and
- 4) Meaningful endurance which involves increasing your tolerance of pain for growth by operating out of the best of yourself, owning your own stuff (rather than projecting your issues on others) and taking responsibility to change (Schnarch, 2010).

Other supporting concepts

Other -validated Intimacy- The expectation to be approved of and validated (stroked) by others; sexual boredom results from dependence on Other Validated Intimacy; is limiting because it leads to self- presentation rather than self-disclosure; involves the expectation of acceptance, empathy, validation or reciprocal disclosure from one’s partner, leads to inaccurate self-portrait.

Self-validated Intimacy- Self validated intimacy involves providing support for yourself while letting yourself be known; relies on a person maintaining his or her own sense of identity and self-worth when disclosing, without expectation of acceptance or reciprocity from the partner. One’s level of self validated intimacy is directly related to one’s level of differentiation; does not involve acceptance and validation from your partner. Nor does it require feeling secure enough to disclose. HARD but rewarding!

Self-soothing – being kind to pain, calming anger, softening shock, pacifying fears and comforting sorrow and disappointment for yourself. When people can’t regulate their own anxiety, this creates barriers to feeling while touching.

Reflected sense of self - Dependence upon your partner/others to reflect the image of yourself that you want to see to define who you are; the more you depend on a reflected sense of self the less you can handle being seen as less than perfect; feeling unimportant to your partner is just your reflected sense of self complaining; dependency on how I look to other people.

Emotional Fusion- togetherness (attachment) without separateness (autonomy); a persistent emotional link between people that allows anxiety to flow between them.; every move one makes upsets the other's emotional balance; empathy and acceptance is never free (I'll only do for you if you do for me).

Gridlock - Where each partner is pushing the other to meet and accommodate their needs and no one is budging; a place where neither partner can validate him or herself in the face of negative reactions from the other.

Constructing your Crucible - extracting your unresolved personal issues embedded in your gridlocked situation and confronting them as an act of integrity. Sometimes this involves owning your projections, even when your partner doesn't reciprocate. You focus on yourself instead of 'working on your relationship' or trying to change your partner.

Normal Marital Sadism - involves pleasure derived from inflicting psychological pain or abuse but stops short of physical domestic violence. It's a tormenting of those we love while feigning unawareness. The more you and your partner are emotionally fused, the more you depend on your partner for validation and anxiety regulation through accommodation – the more likely you and your partner engage in normal marital sadism. Examples include deliberately letting your partner down when they depend on you; overtly showing attraction to other people to irritate and hurt your partner; white-anting and undermining things that are important to your partner; ensuring others in your social circle are aware of your partner's inadequacies.

Other great lines and quotes:

Marriage takes your lowest, weakest, and darkest parts and stuffs them up your nose until you can't stand yourself as you are. That's a good thing because it often takes crises and pain for us to do something about it. The weaker your 4 points of balance, the more pain and crisis it takes to mobilize you.

Submit, dominate, withdraw or differentiate.

Couples need to become better balanced not more attached.

Your willingness to tolerate pain for growth determines whether things change or not.

Desire problems surface when your partner becomes more important to you than you are to yourself.

When your partner becomes more important to you than the strength of your four points of balance, you can start kissing sex goodbye. This is why desire fades in long-term relationships. Maintaining sexual desire requires continued growth.

You can't go forward berating and rejecting yourself.

When we expect our partner to shield and protect us from anxiety and insecurity, we are placing undue demand on the marital system. (Likewise for expecting empathy and validation.).

Works cited:

Dr David's Corner (2010). The Crucible four points of balance. Retrieved from:
<http://crucible4points.com/crucible-four-points-balance>

Schnarch, D. (2009). Intimacy and Desire
New York USA: Beaufort Books

Schnarch, D. (2009b). Passionate Marriage.
New York USA: WW Norton & Co