

# DIFFERENTIATING IN MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

To become your own independent person it is necessary to define how you are different from the people who raised you while maintaining your connection with them. However, when conflict or dissatisfaction with your marriage is too great, it may be necessary to focus on that problem first. The most common mistake people make in their efforts to improve their relationships is trying to make the other person change. Any real steps toward expressing individuality are replaced by complaining and criticizing one's partner. This is a blatant attempt to fuse and become one person:

- If my husband were more understanding he would [be in my mind and] know what I want.
- My wife should [be like me and] not need so much attention.

## THREE STAGES OF DIFFERENTIATION IN MARRIAGE

### 1. The I-Position and Empathy

Compliant people, who tend to give in, begin to stand up for their requests, make statements that start with the word "I," and express limits. Rigid people, who need to dominate, start to understand how their efforts ultimately hurt themselves. Each spouse becomes more flexible and communication is improved. After years of complaining it requires a conscious effort to turn resentments into requests:

- I've been missing affection from you lately. Would you kiss me good-bye in the morning?
- It seems like I can never give enough. Would you let me have 20 minutes to myself when I get home from work?

At the same time, spouses begin to show understanding for their partners' feelings and wants. It is necessary to stop trying to be one to understand emotions and needs that may be entirely different from your own:

- A little thing like a kiss good-by would go a long way to remind you that I care.
- It makes sense that you would need time alone to unwind when you get home from work.

### 2. Alternating steps

Through the I-position and the use of empathy, spouses start to learn about themselves and begin to differentiate. This happens in alternating steps. As individuality surfaces in one spouse, the other feels threatened and pleads for oneness. When the individuating spouse stays on track without defending, attacking, or withdrawing, the second spouse discovers the relationship can survive and he or she begins to differentiate. Now the other spouse may plead for togetherness.

### 3. True closeness

With each gain in individuality, the need for fusion becomes less intense. The couple begins to experience the true closeness of two people making contact instead of acting like one. When problems occur, each person is less reactive and able to own responsibility for his or her part without self-blame. Each person is now free to start differentiating from his or her family of origin. When spouses are able to have close relationships with their extended family on their own terms, the couple is further strengthened.

## INDIVIDUATING AS A PARENT

Parenthood will especially challenge any unresolved issues about being unique, independent, and separate. Parents need to be able to lead the family and take a stand on issues. Domineering parents are trying to make their children an extension of themselves. Weak parents may give in due to fears of losing their “oneness” with their children. Even lecturing, nagging, and explaining are attempts to win agreement and avoid any risk of rejection involved in taking action. A parent who is well on his or her way to differentiating is able to:

- Consider differing viewpoints without agreeing or disagreeing.
- Make final decisions (after considering other ideas) on parent-child issues.
- Be comfortable with childrens’ anger and listen to attacks without emotionally reacting.
- Back up rules with consequences.
- Remain neutral but involved when children have conflicts.
- Develop one-on-one relationships with each child.
- Take turns functioning as the family leader in two-parent families without feeling intimidated.

Having one-on-one relationships, taking a stand, and remaining neutral but involved in family conflicts helps shed the adhesive skin of the false self that was necessary for your survival when you were young. As more of your self-governing, solid-self becomes exposed, you will be able to walk the tangled web your family weaves without getting caught and discover a lifeline that offers both connection and freedom:

The common house spider spins a loosely woven tangled web of dry silk.  
Wherever a spider goes, it is constantly spinning a silk thread called a dragline  
or a *lifeline* which it uses to escape from and return to its web.