

Separating “I” and “We”

By Christine Kniffen, LCSW

Separating “I” and “we” is perhaps one of the hardest *relationship skills* that must be developed and continuously fine-tuned. Enmeshment is a term used in family therapy to describe unclear or permeable boundaries between particular family members in a family system. Simply speaking, enmeshment refers to a lack of separation between “I” and “We”. It is not uncommon for individuals to lose their sense of identity while in a relationship. It has happened to some degree to all of us. We find ourselves becoming like the other person and doing many of the things that they like to do. Think back to the end of a particular relationship that you have had. Do you remember that feeling of not knowing how to fill your space and time? Do you remember that empty slate feeling in which you had to find yourself again? Do you remember wondering who you were and what you liked to do prior that relationship starting? It is not hard to empathize with the depths of loneliness that many of us have felt when having to go through that type of situation. A balanced life is the key to happiness. Likewise, a balanced relationship is optimal and must be reached in order to achieve longevity and provide a good sense of security. A relationship can be out of balance by either not enough separation between the individuals or too much separation between partners.

Relationships with a lack of *healthy separation* usually have some predictable patterns. Often, one of the partners is living their life and the other is simply going along with things, as being together becomes the main priority over meeting their own personal needs. This is *not* a totally conscious decision. Rather, it is a pattern that gets developed at the beginning of the relationship often through one partner focusing too much on the other. However, this pattern is hurtful to both partners. The partner who always goes along just to be near, almost invariably ends up resentful after years of personal neglect. This is the point at which the other partner learns that you never liked or enjoyed certain things that the two of you did together. This partner is now suddenly hurt and baffled to be told these things when he or she had no idea. Many couples have to work very hard to make a smooth transition from the blissful beginning stage to that of two separate adults each with their own lives. Differing personality types, fears of never finding a relationship and the desire not to have it leave once you have found it all work to contribute to the development of too little separation between “I” and “We”. Conversely, there can be too much separation between two people.

Too much separation can take place on either the physical level or on an emotional level. Someone who schedules most of their evenings with commitments to various organizations, meetings or sporting leagues really doesn't have the time to date you. Therefore, be honest with yourself and your needs. How much time do you need with someone in order to feel satisfied? Determine your answer prior to beginning dating. Also, as a general rule of thumb, the “out-of-town” relationship *usually* does not work (I did say usually). Equally important, is the need for emotional closeness. It is necessary for a relationship to develop intimacy through good levels of communication. Nothing

can make you feel lonelier than living with someone who does not open up and share his or her feelings. This equates to too much separation and is not the optimal arena for true intimacy to develop.

Think hard on the idea of separation. Do you have a healthy balance between “I” and “We” in your current relationship? Talk with your partner about this concept and decide what changes can be implemented to better balance things for the two of you. If you are just starting to date then keep this in mind as your relationship patterns begin to develop so you won’t have so much work to do later.

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