

Self-Reliance vs Self-Sufficiency: The Difference Is Critical To Your Happiness

The two best decisions I made in my life were decisions that were the opposite of what everyone told me to do. The first one was the decision to get married when I was 20 years old. I had taken a year off from college. My girlfriend who was 19 years old had likewise dropped out of college in her freshman year. We were now both college drop-outs.

We did know one thing. We knew we wanted to live together for the rest of our lives. I could support us through my profession as a teaching tennis pro, so we didn't need anyone's financial support to do what we wanted to do. We made the decision against our parent's advice to get married.

Nobody thought it was a good idea, and believed we had lost our minds. Fast forward many years, and history tells the story. We are approaching our 45th wedding anniversary this September. We have four grown children, all married and doing well in life. We have four adorable grandchildren and two more on the way. I think we could say that the decision was the right one for us.

The second good choice against other's advice was the decision to become a psychologist. My parents had wanted me to be a medical doctor. I majored in Pre-Med in college and completed all the courses to apply to medical school. Due to experiencing panic attacks at college, and enjoying teaching people to play tennis, I realized I was on the wrong path. Instead, I applied to graduate school in clinical psychology. I now got to be the doctor that I wanted, rather than the doctor others wanted me to be.

I tell these stories as a way to introduce what independence has meant to me in my life. Choices like these bring you face to face with complex and competing emotions. Do I do want my parents want or do what I want to do? Am I too young to trust myself? Am I being selfish and foolish? Will I regret the decision?

As I experienced, most people live in a continuous state of confusion about how to resolve their competing feelings. It is hard to know what reaction is based on your real self and to tell if your emotions come from the way you were raised or from your natural reactions.

For example, if you call yourself a perfectionist, are you that way because you have high ideals or because you were raised with a great deal of pressure to succeed? How do you tell the difference?

Thoughts are easier to decipher but are still confusing. Do you think the way you do because you have come to your own conclusions or are you influenced by the opinions of others and the need to conform for acceptance?

Can you stand alone against others, even when it is all your family who is against you?

How much of yourself do you have to surrender to gain acceptance, approval and human connection?

People are continuously faced with this psychological dilemma: you need others to survive but want to be independent. To gain acceptance, you can be excessively influenced by those same others and run the risk of losing your individuality. You can also do the opposite. You can ignore everyone else's opinions and end up alone.

Where do you draw the line?

Self-Sufficiency

People that are independent are thought to be self-sufficient. They are capable of taking care of themselves. They don't need anybody's help for anything and want to do everything for themselves.

Psychologists refer to this kind of behavior as counter-dependent. That means that the person is trying too hard to prove their independence. The fact that they are trying so hard means that they are still ruled by the anticipation of other's reactions and rejection, and are not truly being true to themselves. T

they act in anticipation of others without testing their assumptions and are therefore ruled by their predictions of other's behavior.

Self-sufficiency that excludes others from the equation cannot be healthy. The truth is that people are pack animals by instinct. They survive in a group better than they survive alone. Learning how to connect to others is as essential as learning to survive on your own.

Learning how to connect is difficult because we are born into dependency.

We depend on our parents and family for survival. While dependency is your default state, independence is your natural state. Unless parents promote independence, it is easy to be stuck in dependency because we are bred to be dependent. Parents and teachers reward compliant children. Religious training preaches obedience to parents. Children are given the mental health diagnosis, oppositional-defiant disorder when they cause too much trouble.

Challenging authority of any kind may be dismissed as childish behavior or defiance.

As a result of the pressure from authority figures to comply, people have an ambivalent relationship to independence. You want to follow your own reactions, but fear the disapproval, rejection and separation that you may have to face. In fact, it takes psychological work to become independent.

When you disagree with others, you run the risk of being shunned, ignored or outright abandoned. You can feel alone in a crowd, and the isolation can lead to self-doubt and shame.

To complicate matters, independence is not always the best option. Not all dependent relationships are child-like or co-dependent. Some healthy people choose to surrender their freedoms for a cause, like religious life or the military.

Work relationships all have some degree of dependency built in. You are dependent on your job for your income.

While you retain the right to leave your job, that option can put your livelihood at risk and is not an easy path to choose. There are relative degrees of interdependency in a work situation, the balance determining if the relationship is healthy or unhealthy.

Self-Reliance

Self-reliance is different than self-sufficiency and provides an alternative framework to pursue independence. Self-reliance does not exclude the need to connect to others. A famous American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote an essay in 1841 titled, "Self Reliance" that emphasized individualism. He believed that each individual should avoid conformity and follow their own instincts and ideas. He felt time alone was necessary to discover the truth within the person as the basis to build self-confidence.

Time spent with a group led to excessive influence from that group. His famous quote from that essay was: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."

Emerson's beliefs echoed the position that religious leaders had taken thousands of years before. Buddha was quoted as saying:

"Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who

has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees

with your own reason and your own common sense."

~Buddha (463-483 BC)

Years after Buddha, another religious leader, George Fox, who founded the Quaker religion in England in the 17th century had similar ideas. He once said:

“The Lord showed me, so that I did see clearly, that

he did not dwell in these temples which men had

commanded and set up, but in people’s hearts...

his people were his temple, and he dwelt in them.”

~George Fox (1694)

Thomas Jefferson was the leading proponent of these ideas in colonial America. If you recall from a prior article, Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence wrote:

“We know these truths to be self-evident...”

~Thomas Jefferson, 1776

Connecting to others

From Emerson to Jefferson, and Buddha to George Fox, poets, statesmen and religious leaders have acknowledged the importance of independent thinking and acting. Self-reliance is obviously an important element in one’s psychological health, but that can’t be the only measure of emotional well being. You can’t exclude others merely to be independent.

Pleasing yourself and pleasing others is a difficult balance to strike.

The following quotes emphasize the problems in finding the boundary between self and others:

“We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business;

we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

~ Gwendolyn Brooks

“The painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving

someone too much, and forgetting that you are special too.”

~Ernest Hemingway

So what is the purpose of building relationships, especially if you can lose yourself in the process? Relationships provide the medium to obtain reassurance, support and validation of your emotional reactions. Validation becomes a form of caring, as you help the person to buffer their history and support their independence. Since your emotional world is so confusing, you need help to make sense of your own reactions, push back against the guilt and shame of breaking other’s rules, and honoring your authentic self.

Consider these series of quotes:

“Sometimes, all a person wants is an empathic ear; all she

or he needs is to talk it out; first offering a listening ear

and an understanding heart for his or her suffering can be

a very big comfort.”

~Roy T. Bennett

“Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.”

~Joseph Fort Newton

“Try to understand men. If you understand each other you

will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads

to hate and almost always leads to love.”

~John Steinbeck

“I have a wonderful shelter which is my family. I have a

wonderful relationship with my brother and sister. This

makes me feel that I know always where I belong.”

~Jose Carreras

“If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science

of human relationships – the ability of all people, of all

kinds to live together, in the same world at peace.”

~Franklin Delano Roosevelt

It is clear from these quotes that relationships are critical to your survival. Whether it is family, friends, partners, lovers, or co-workers, you need others to help you manage your emotional world. These trusted individuals challenge you when you are kidding yourself or lying to yourself. They support you when you feel trampled by life. They share their material resources to help you survive.

Rather than view relationships as the antidote to freedom, they can be a source of support for your freedom. These same people can exert a powerful influence to assist you to stand up for yourself when you need to assert independent thoughts and ideas. Emotions are contagious and provide the glue to hold people together in interdependent relationships that can foster individuality and freedom.

Summary

Dependency is your default state, but independence is your natural state. A healthy balance between dependence and independence leads to interdependent relationships where mutual respect, validation and support are exchanged. The healthy person is one who can adapt to the demands of the situation, defer their needs if necessary, and stand up for themselves when necessary regardless of the temporary loss of the connection to significant others.