

Identifying Unhelpful Parental Ties

It's natural to feel connected to parents and concerned about their opinions, but in many challenging families the bonds are especially restrictive. As adults, we are entitled to our own life - to privacy, to make our own choices about partners, friends, finances and careers and to have the freedom to spend our time as we wish. However, if our original family is functioning poorly, it can be difficult to establish these rights. Blurred boundaries, insecurities, enmeshment, rigid rules, power struggles, poor communication and control can prevail. Independence can be seen as a threat, a different opinion as betrayal, opposing choices as defiance.

Logically, we may imagine it would be easier to escape the constraints of a poorly functioning family than a healthier one. In fact, the opposite is true. Family 'rules' are strong. A demanding parent can make us feel guilty for even contemplating our own needs. We can stay bound to a challenging family through insecurity, longing or even anger. Excess control can undermine confidence. We can feel compelled to keep trying to win approval from a critical parent. Unconsciously, we can believe if we can get our family to see us for who we are, we will feel better about ourselves.

A needy or controlling parent can also keep us tied (often unconsciously) by having excessive expectations, making helpless pleas, blaming, playing on our sense of duty, assuming control over our life, offering bribes or doing 'pay-backs' if we don't give in to his or her demands. Difficulties like these can easily draw us into an ongoing, life-draining process of questioning, guilt and self-blame. We can try too hard to make things 'right' by being overly obliging at our own expense. This serves no one. The following checklist will help identify any ways you are reacting to your parent powerlessly.

In my relationship with my 'problematic' parent:

- _____ I feel very young and inadequate, when I'm around that parent.
- _____ I go overboard trying to please that parent.
- _____ I often feel guilty around my parent for no reason.
- _____ I'm extremely sensitive to criticism from my parent.
- _____ When I'm around that parent, I lose my ability to speak my mind.
- _____ I'm still trying to meet my parent's unrealistic expectations.
- _____ When my parent sulks, I automatically try to make up to them.
- _____ When I'm around my parent, I feel anxious and on-edge.
- _____ I'm unable to make a decision without checking with my 'problematic' parent.
- _____ I don't know how to say 'no' to my parent.
- _____ I'm willing to put up with bad behaviour, in order to have a relationship with my parent.

Becoming more emotionally independent begins with a belief we are entitled to be separate from our parents. This usually runs counter to the unspoken rules of a poorly functioning family. An emotional separation doesn't necessarily mean we see our parents any less or no longer seek their guidance. It means we become our own person, with different opinions from our parents, living an independent life.

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