# Differentiation of Self

## Staying yourself when you're close to someone: a practice worksheet

*Companion to the articles "Do you lose yourself in relationships, or keep people at arm's length?" (psychevita.com/article/2159210) and "Why you do not know what you want" (psychevita.com/article/2138777)*

Differentiation of self is an idea from Murray Bowen's family systems theory. It describes how well you manage two balancing acts at the same time:

- feeling strongly and still thinking clearly, and
- being close to someone and still being yourself.

When it is lower, you might be swept away by feelings, take on other people's moods, need their approval, or keep your distance so you don't lose yourself. When it is higher, you can feel what you feel, hear what someone else thinks, and still make your own choices.

**The useful news is that it isn't fixed. It is a set of skills, and skills grow with practice.**

*In my own practice, clients' scores on a standard differentiation questionnaire have improved substantially over an average of around 18 sessions. The figures are in the article this worksheet accompanies.*

## Two balancing acts

Most of us lean towards one end of each line, especially with the people who matter most. The aim is the middle: not less feeling, and not less closeness.

### Inside you: feeling and thinking



Feelings take over. On the rollercoaster.

**I can feel it fully and still think it through**

Can't tell what I feel. Head only.

### Between you and others: together and separate



Fused. I lose myself in you, or in what you want.

**Close to you, and still me**

Cut off. I keep my distance to stay me.

*Both ends are ways of protecting yourself. Each made sense once. Neither is a character flaw.*

# Where are you now?

Think about your closest relationships: a partner, a parent, a close friend, a colleague you can't ignore. For each of the four areas below, mark where you are most of the time, from 0 to 10. There are no right answers. You are looking for your starting point, not a score.

### 1. Staying steady when feelings run high *(emotional reactivity)*

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

My feelings take over, or I soak up other people's — I feel things fully and use them as information

### 2. Holding my own view under pressure *(the "I" position)*

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

I lose track of what I think when someone pushes — I can hear you and still know where I stand

### 3. Staying in contact when it gets emotional *(emotional cut-off)*

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

I go quiet, pull away or leave to protect myself — I can tell the person how I feel, and stay

### 4. Being myself without needing approval *(fusion with others)*

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

I go along with others to keep the peace or be liked — I weigh up others' views and make my own decision

**Which of the four is lowest for you? That is the one to start with.**

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**In which relationship does it show up most?**

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*This is a way of noticing, not a test. In my practice I use a validated questionnaire for these four areas, and what it measures is the same territory you have just looked at.*

# When you feel the pull

Use this the next time someone close to you gets under your skin, or you notice yourself giving in, going quiet, or getting swept up. You can do it in the moment or afterwards. It gets quicker with practice.

**1** **Arrive in your body** *(Somatic Attunement, 8.2)*

Let your shoulders drop a little and breathe out more slowly than you breathe in. Notice what is happening in your body right now: tight chest, heavy stomach, heat in the face, a wish to leave.

*What I notice in my body:*

**2** **Notice which way you're being pulled** *(Secure Relational Boundaries, 4.4)*

Towards them: pleasing, agreeing, taking on their feeling? Away from them: going quiet, getting defensive, wanting out? Or swept up in your own feeling?

*What happened, with whom, and which way I was pulled:*

**3** **Name the feeling** *(Self-Regulation Under Stress, 1.1)*

Put it into a word or two. Hurt, scared, ashamed, angry, lonely, guilty. Naming a feeling helps it settle enough to think.

*The feeling is:*

**4** **Ask: now, or then?** *(Secure Relational Boundaries, 4.4)*

Is this about this person, today? Or does it feel older and familiar, like something you have felt many times before?

*It reminds me of:*

**5** **Find your own position** *(Clear, Cohesive, Evolving Sense of Self, 3.1)*

Complete three short sentences. You don't have to say them out loud. Knowing them is the skill.

I think ... _____

I feel ... _____

What I'd like is ... _____

**6** **Choose your move** *(Secure Relational Boundaries, 4.4)*

A clear yes. A soft no. A yes with conditions. A request. Or simply staying in the room and staying yourself.

*What I'll do:*

# This week

Pick one relationship and one moment. Go through the six steps once, either at the time or that evening. Then come back to these questions.

**What did I notice that I usually miss?**

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**Which step was hardest?**

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**What, if anything, was different afterwards?**

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## What this is not

**Not distance.**
Being differentiated isn't the same as being independent or not needing anyone. Cutting off is one of the ways people lose themselves.

**Not blame.**
These patterns were learned early, in the family you grew up in, mostly below conscious awareness. Nobody chose them, and nobody was asked.

**Not a test.**
The 0 to 10 marks are a starting point for noticing. They aren't a measurement.

**Not instant.**
Understanding the idea doesn't change the pattern. Practice does. There's nothing to remember except to practise.

## The skills named on this worksheet

*These are four of the forty-eight skills in the PsycheVita map. If you are a member, this is your list. If you are not, it gives a fair picture of how the rest of the map works.*

- **1.1** **Self-Regulation Under Stress** – settling yourself enough to think when feelings run high
- **3.1** **Clear, Cohesive, Evolving Sense of Self** – knowing what you think, feel and want
- **4.4** **Secure Relational Boundaries** – noticing the pull, telling now from then, and making a clear request
- **8.2** **Somatic Attunement** – noticing what your body is telling you, before words arrive

**Each time you notice the pull and stay yourself, even for a moment, you are building the skill.**

# Keep building the skill

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Transform Your Life: The Ultimate Guide to Self Mastery
→ **https://amzn.eu/d/eDeLeUd**

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**Symptoms are signals. You are not broken. You are adapting.**

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