Signs of Healthy Differentiation With Empathy

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You would like to make empathy a regular part of your intimate relationship. But your attempts to ask for or give empathy are met with accusations of codependency. Your partner has had painful and confusing experiences regarding who is responsible for what in a given relationship and understandably doesn't want to repeat that. Your partner may be more clear about what they don't want than about what they do want. But, if they were in touch with their needs when they accuse you of being codependent, they are likely trying to express needs for independence, honesty, and respect.

You might feel lonely and frustrated wishing for trust and connection. In an attempt to meet your needs, you might try to educate your partner about empathy and convince them that it is different from codependency. This is likely not helpful. Attempting to convince someone of something or educating someone when they haven't asked for information is often perceived as a boundary violation and doesn't meet needs for respect and choice. In sum, it's not an example of the healthy differentiation your partner is looking for.

What's likely to be more helpful is your ability to embody healthy differentiation with regards to empathy. This is a gift for yourself regardless of how your partner responds. Let's look at three ways you might approach practicing healthy differentiation.

First, check in with your own relationship to empathy. Here are some things you would find if you make a request for empathy from a place of healthy differentiation:

- You understand that empathy is a valid need and as such could be met by anyone able and willing to give it. Wanting it from your partner is a preference, not a demand. As such, when your partner says "no" to your request, you may feel disappointed, but you don't feel resentful or keep a relationship scorecard.
- Standing in the validity of your need and clarity that it is a request and not a demand, you don't defend against your partner's accusation of codependency. You say in an even matter of fact way, "It really is a request for listening and understanding. I don't hold you responsible for my feelings and needs nor do I have some hidden agenda. I only want you to offer listening and understanding if you can do so from your own choice and desire."
- You have consistent and reliable ways to meet your need for empathy outside of your partnership.

Second, check in with your ability to offer empathy. Hopefully you notice signs of healthy differentiation when you offer empathy, such as:

- You can offer empathy when you disagree or when your partner is reactive. For example, you can access empathy for your partner when they accuse you of codependency.
- When you offer empathy it comes from a genuine desire to honor and connect with your partner's experience. It is not about hidden agendas, relationship scorecards, or modeling for your partner about how to do empathy "right".
- You learn to offer empathy in the way your partner can receive it rather than in the way you would like to receive it.
- You can offer empathy even when your partner's experience may seem to indicate the end of your relationship with them.
- When you offer empathy and your partner doesn’t feel better or shift in any way, you can accept that and let them have their own experience while you take care of yourself.

Lastly, you bring a graciousness, a profound respect for differences, and clear boundaries. This might include the following:

- Because you meet your needs for empathy regularly outside the relationship, you have the resource to express gratitude for the effort your partner does make rather than correcting them when attempts to offer empathy aren't quite what you hope for.
- Because of a respect for differences and a valuing of your own desires in the relationship, you can choose in or out of the relationship without trying to change your partner or make either of you wrong.
- You have directly communicated to your partner what the non-negotiables are for you in the relationship, and also that which you are willing to negotiate.

Practice

Where would you like to have more awareness and differentiation regarding empathy? Choose one of the bullet points above to practice with and reflect on each day.