

Personal Wholeness, Differentiation and God

Compiled by Laura M. Brotherson, LMFT, CST

[The Marital Intimacy Institute](http://TheMaritalIntimacyInstitute.com) & StrengtheningMarriage.com

(rev Feb 2025)



Clients often wonder about these concepts of “individuation” and “differentiation.” I often address this as something synonymous with developing a “solid sense of self,” “personal wholeness,” and “psychological health and wellness” necessary to create healthy (non-reactive) relationships and especially healthy marriages.

Differentiation is about un-enmeshing emotionally and psychologically from unhealthy others, which is key to detaching yourself from other’s feelings, needs, moods, and perspectives as separate from your own. Individuation, on the other hand, is about rebuilding your identity, your sense of self, your life, your boundaries, needs, wants, desires, and potential. It’s reclaiming anything that’s been lost or stolen. Simply stated, differentiation is about detaching *from others* while individuation is about *reattaching to self*. Both are important processes in becoming healthy and whole.

The following is a compilation of key points and insights about differentiation, individuation, and how God plays a vital role in the development of your personal wholeness and relational wellness. We’ll also discuss ways to apply these principles in your life for your development toward greater wholeness.

Key Concepts

- *Differentiation of Self*
- *Strong/Secure Sense of Self*
- *Strengthening the Self*
- *Personal Wholeness*
- *Internal Validation vs. External Validation*
- *Confronting/Challenging Self before Your Spouse*
- *Tolerating discomfort for growth*
- *Self-Regulation*

Are you Differentiated?

- Solid sense of self
- Ability to self-regulate emotion
- Self-validated - NOT other-validated
- Emotional self-reliance
- Emotional resilience (not being reactive to others)
- Standing on your own two feet
- Balances need for connection with need for autonomy

What is Differentiation?

- **Self-differentiation** involves being able to possess and identify your thoughts and feelings and distinguish them from others. It’s a process of not losing connection to the self while holding a deep connection to others, including those you love whose views may differ from yours.¹
- **Differentiation** is the ability to hold onto yourself while maintaining relationships with others. *Differentiation* is being in tune with your core sense of self especially in relation to others.
- **Differentiation** of self is a merging of emotional maturity with relational maturity.

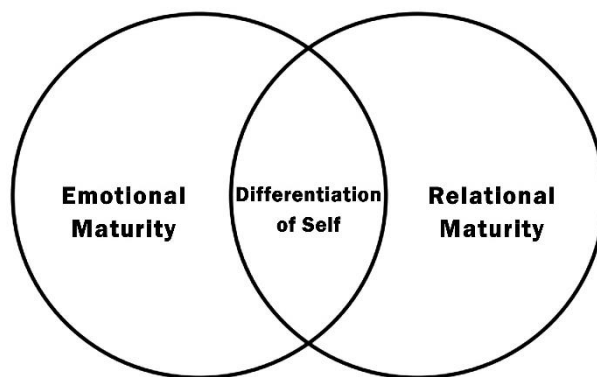


Figure 1 - The relationship of emotional and relational maturity to differentiation of self

- **Differentiation** is the phenomenon that applies to all living things, but in human beings, it is the ability to balance humankind's two fundamental drives for attachment and autonomy. Wanting to be in a relationship and wanting to be our own person are the two fundamental problems that couples have.
- **Differentiation** is the ability to be involved in a relationship and maintain your autonomy within that relationship. You might think of it as the opposite of codependency.
- **Differentiation** is emotional resilience, standing on your own two feet emotionally, not being infected by or reactive to another's anxieties, having a solid sense of self not a reflected or other-validated sense of self.
- **Differentiation** may be understood by a lack of differentiation, which may entail avoidance of self-confrontation, having unclear personal values, having a reflected sense of self (needing other's validation and acceptance) rather than a self-reflected or God-reflected self.
- Developing a strong, secure sense of self—a self-validated and God-validated self instead of an other-validated or reflected sense of self—is key to **differentiation**.

What are the **Crucible 4 Points of Balance**? (developed by renowned sex therapist Dr. David Schnarch)

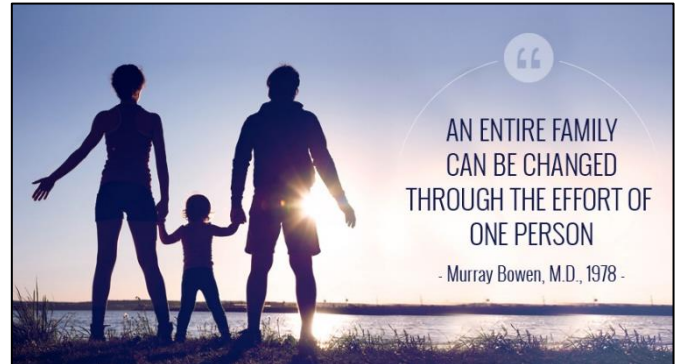
1. **Solid Flexible Self™**: Having a sense of your self-worth that perseveres through hard times. Maintaining personal stability, direction, and purpose guided by internalized values, principles, and goals especially when people and situations around you are out of emotional balance. People with a solid sense of self can change over time. They can change their values when it's appropriate, but they don't do it with pressure from the outside—they do it from within.
2. **Quiet Mind and Calm Heart™**: Self-regulation, containing your anxiety, calming yourself down, soothing your own emotions. A quiet mind and calm heart provide emotional autonomy, which creates relationship stability and flexibility.
3. **Grounded Responding™**: Making balanced, timely, appropriate responses to difficult people and situations. Not over-reacting to other people's over-reactions. Addressing things you'd prefer to avoid.
4. **Meaningful Endurance™**: Diligent effort in the face of frustration, failure, and disappointment. Tolerating discomfort for growth. Absorbing hardship, disappointment, and bouncing back after defeat. Human resilience.

DIFFERENTIATION, PERSONAL WHOLENESS & GOD

Work on YOU!!

- The only person you can change, fix, or grow is yourself.
- Differentiation is about developing a strong and secure sense of self. Having a strong sense of self allows you to be appropriately assertive as needed. Being assertive requires that you know the following about yourself:
 - *What do I think?*
 - *How do I feel?*
 - *What do I want?*
 - *What do I need?*
- Understanding your inner self better and developing differentiation allows you to then communicate the following: "I feel _____ when you _____ because I think _____. It would mean a lot to me if you would _____."
- You may need to actively do some [process writing](#) regarding these questions to know yourself well and develop the ability to assert yourself and set healthy boundaries that also respect your spouse's needs and opinions. Undifferentiated mothers, for instance, often know what their kids want or need or feel but don't always know what they themselves want or need.

- Identify where you fit on the “[80/20 Relationship Dynamic](#)” to determine who needs to do more accommodating and who needs to require more balance in whose needs are being met. “20%ers” that haven’t been sufficiently assertive enough to require equality in the relationship may have to really work at tolerating discomfort in themselves and making others feel some discomfort when needed to achieve better equality, balance, and wholeness in the marriage.
- As a relational system, changing yourself changes your relationship dynamics and the relational “system,” which creates new conditions that then inevitably create change in your spouse.
- A differentiated self strives to stay in their own stuff and not get into their spouse’s mental, emotional, or physical business. Differentiation for what I call a “20%er” personality, for instance, encourages them to hold personal boundaries out of respect for one’s self instead of letting people take advantage of them or walk all over them. This allows them to do things like 1) stand up, 2) speak up, 3) say “no,” and 4) require more/require respect from others who may not always naturally be respectful and considerate.
- This gets into my “[80/20 Relationship Dynamic](#)” where every couple is usually made up of a more dominant, driver, self-focused, “80%er” personality and a more passive, adaptable, other-oriented, “20%er” personality. Undifferentiated individuals will otherwise have a marriage relationship where one spouse does the “walking on” and the other is often “walked upon.”
- Differentiation for the 80%er would require more respect and consideration of others. For the 20%er, differentiation would induce them to stand up for themselves firmly and not allow others to treat them poorly. Couples need to recognize what their “80/20” relationship dynamics are in order to understand what direction each needs to go to move toward personal wholeness or “50%er-ness.” Personal development for a 20%er will require very different things than that required for an 80%er. Check out my “[80/20 Relationship Dynamic](#)” handout for more information.
- A differentiated or whole “self” is able to be more “immune” to other peoples’ toxicities. Since humans are human and will never perfectly meet your needs or respond exactly how you might like them to, it is liberating to not constantly be a victim of other people’s stuff. It is profoundly powerful to develop the ability to manage your own thoughts, emotions, and well-being enough to be okay even when things aren’t always okay.
 - Learning my “[Spiritual Surrender](#)” process and utilizing the “[Loving What Is](#)” mental skills are incredibly valuable in these efforts. Actively incorporating the insights in the “[How to Change Your Thinking](#)” resource will also be needed.



Challenge and Confront Yourself Before Confronting Your Spouse

- Focusing on changing, challenging, and confronting yourself **first** before trying to change, challenge, blame, or confront your spouse provides greater peace and freedom because you are putting your efforts where you have the greatest power to make things better.
- Doing difficult things for the benefit of your growth and development may exacerbate your fears, insecurities, and anxieties but valiantly invites you to challenge and confront yourself rather than taking the easy out of blaming something outside yourself.
- You don’t need to allow yourself to be a victim of your spouse’s behavior and issues. Instead, proactively and intentionally take charge of your life and change the things that you can change and make better. All of this work is very difficult—much easier said than done—but so worth the reward of more personal wholeness and strength. This brings you great freedom, strength, confidence, and compassion. It can literally make you feel unstoppable!

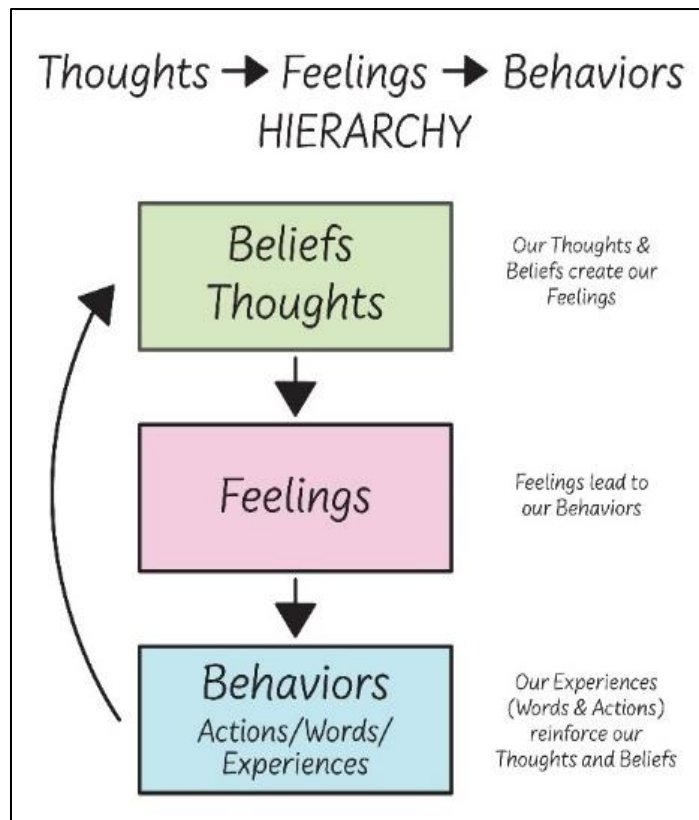
- Confronting your feelings, fears, and anxieties in the process of differentiation takes courage and strength often beyond your own which is where God's enabling power comes into play. You'll either end up uncomfortable in your anxieties and fears or you'll be uncomfortable in your courage as you challenge and confront yourself. I suggest going with the discomfort of challenging yourself instead of enabling your fears to control your life.
- God often gives us what I call a "gift of crisis" or two that sets us up to make changes we might not have otherwise sought out or made in ourselves. This is where you'll either have to tolerate the crisis or tolerate the discomfort of personal growth needed.

The Power of Thoughts

- Developing mental self-mastery is vital in the process of becoming more differentiated. Letting your thoughts run amok in your mind will keep you in a constant state of potential panic throughout the vicissitudes of life.
- Your behavior follows your emotions, and your emotions follow your thoughts and beliefs. When you understand these principles, you understand the incredible power of mastering your thoughts and developing greater mental mastery. (My handout on "[How to Change Your Thinking](#)" can help with developing mental self-mastery.)
- A differentiated self requires a change in your thinking especially when insecurities and feelings of "not enough-ness" are present.

Emotional Enmeshment & Self-Regulation

- Many couples struggle with emotional enmeshment (codependency). It shows up as needing something from your spouse (validation, affirmation, etc.) in order for you to feel okay. That neediness puts inadvertent pressure on the other to the point that they can no longer give freely or genuinely. It also puts you in a victim state dependent on your spouse for your emotional well-being. Self-regulation (managing your own emotions instead of your spouse having to manage or "babysit" your emotions) is vital for both differentiation and healthy intimate relationships.
- When you don't manage or control your own emotions and reactions, you inadvertently put pressure on your spouse to manage your emotions for you. They don't actually have the power to manage your emotions. But you may feel accumulating stress, resentment, and pressure when you blame them for your emotions and imply they are responsible for them. This especially messes with one's feeling of agency, which can significantly affect how your spouse interacts with you and especially how enthusiastic they might or might NOT be to be intimate with you. (See my "[Agency, Change & Sex](#)" handout for more insights.)
- When you develop self-mastery or have greater self-regulation/emotional regulation you are less likely to feel like "victim" of your circumstances and/or other peoples' idiosyncrasies. You choose your thoughts and feelings rather than them owning you. This is you developing a stronger "self."
- When you strive to manage your own emotions by using various coping skills and other tools such as 1) [process writing](#), 2) [EFT tapping](#), and 3) [Loving What Is "Inquiry"](#) to investigate your negative thoughts and beliefs you are much more able to show up with your spouse in a neutral, receptive, and respectful state.



Self-Regulation & Self-Mastery Require God's Help

- In order to manage ourselves well with all our built-in human weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, it takes developing a personal partnership with God and His enabling power where He is able to do for us what we are not fully capable of doing for ourselves. Without the atoning power of Jesus Christ, we are left to our own devices which consist merely of our self-discipline or willpower, which are often quite limited. Our true source of strength and personal wholeness is Christ.
- Having a personal relationship with God is required for us to be more than we could be on our own. A relationship with Christ requires submission to Him, humble daily repentance, and a constant desire to grow, change, and improve! (See my [“Keys to Develop a More Personal and Profound Relationship with God”](#) for more insights on how to draw closer to Him in your efforts toward personal wholeness.)
- The more differentiated and securely attached one is to God the more harmonious that person can be in a relationship and in their lives. There is less codependency (emotional enmeshment) and reactivity with each other when your sense of self is secure and dependent on God and His validation not on other people's opinions, thoughts, needs (or lack of meeting your needs). This would define a reflected sense of self.
- Differentiated people are able to live in a state of [spiritual surrender](#) because they've learned to be okay either way. They totally believe or have faith in their desired outcome. They just don't emotionally “attach” to it. They trust in God and His purposes and timing in their lives.
- Developing a strong sense of self—a “self-validated” and “God-validated” self instead of an “other-validated” or “reflected sense of self” is key to differentiation and personal wholeness.
- God will often use challenges and adversity (what I refer to as “gifts of crisis”) to bring about His divine purposes to help us move toward greater personal wholeness than we might otherwise seek out or do on our own.



Sexual Development Requires Self-Development

- Sexual wholeness and true intimacy are about self-development and psychological development (mentally, emotionally, and spiritually) to be at peace with yourself so that you can show up fully and authentically with your spouse in the very intimate and vulnerable sexual relationship.
- In the sexual dimension, even as a more other-oriented 20%er personality (stereotypically women), they can develop their personal and sexual wholeness by 1) learning to love and accept themselves, and 2) embracing and developing their own sexuality. This personal wholeness can be developed even to the point that she can “override” her husband's behavior, issues, and idiosyncrasies in the marriage as needed. She can become immune to his toxicities in case she wants wholeness and he's not yet ready for it. This gives any differentiated person the incredible power to overcome the effects of unhealthy people around them whether it's the husband or the wife.
- It is each of our responsibilities to heal and become whole despite how your spouse might act or be. Differentiation and personal wholeness (with God's enabling power) amazingly give you the ability to override your spouse's behavior, issues, and idiosyncrasies.
- The sexual development and self-development required in a healthy sexual relationship often require couples to figure out how to restore her sense of agency needed for a woman to fully choose in sexually. (See my [“Agency, Change & Sex”](#) handout for help with that.) This provides a way for her to get her personal power back when that often gets lost. It's like the client that recently said to me as we were working on assertiveness, “Sometimes I don't realize it's an option for me to stand up for myself.” Differentiation allows a woman to know herself and begin to assert herself in healthier more balanced ways so that she can say to her husband, “My wants and needs and opinions matter too.”
- As she continues to develop her “self” and becomes more differentiated, she will necessarily require more mutuality and balance in the marriage and especially the sexual relationship.

ACTION ITEMS – How to Develop a Stronger, More Secure, Differentiated Self

- Engage in ongoing [process writing](#) to know and familiarize yourself with your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs in order to differentiate and become more whole. Ask yourself: *What do I think? How do I feel? What do I want? What do I need?*
- Listen to the book [Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life](#) by Bryon Katie to train your brain to challenge your negative thoughts and beliefs.
- List out everything you like, love, appreciate, and admire about yourself.
- List out your weaknesses—everything you don't like about yourself.
- List out all your fears or worst-case scenarios and begin to make mental peace with them so they lose their negative power over you.
- Listen to the book [Self-Compassion](#) by Kristin Neff and practice self-compassion in your life. Work on developing greater mental self-mastery. (See [How to Change Your Thinking](#) handout).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Handout - [Marriage as a Collaborative Alliance](#) (thoughts from Dr. David Schnarch regarding differentiation and his Crucible approach and the effects on intimacy and sexual desire)
- Article - [What is Self-Differentiation and Why Is It So Important?](#) by Karen R. Koenig, LCSW, M.Ed.
- Article - [Differentiation and Intimacy](#) – by James Schor, MA
- Article - [Self-Validation](#) - Psychology Today
- Article - [Self-Differentiation and Why It Matters in Families and Relationships](#) – GoodTherapy.com
- Article - [A Woman's Perspective on Differentiation](#) – Relationship Resource Center
- Article - [The Differentiated Self: Creating Healthy Relationship](#) by Andrew Bauman
- Article - [Differentiation and Enmeshment in Relationships](#) by Justice Schanfarber Counselling
- Podcast - [Attachment vs. Differentiation Debate](#) with Nathan Hardy and Adam Fisher – The Couples Therapist Couch
- Podcast - [The Lower-Desire Wife \(and Differentiation\)](#) – Sexy Marriage Radio
- Podcast - [Developing Emotional Maturity](#) – Next Level Life (see also [Developing Emotional Maturity](#))
- Book - [Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships](#) by Dr. David Schnarch
- Book - [Intimacy & Desire: Awaken The Passion In Your Relationship](#) by Dr. David Schnarch
- Book - [The Assertiveness Guide for Women: How to Communicate Your Needs, Set Healthy Boundaries, and Transform Your Relationships](#) by Julie de Azevedo Hanks PhD, LCSW

ⁱ <https://www.karenrkoenig.com/blog/what-is-self-differentiation-and-why-is-it-so-important>