

Transforming Relationships: From Ineffective Patterns to Healthy Dynamics

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

People who discover that they have been engaging in unhealthy relationship behavior and that those patterns work against their happiness can learn new skills and establish balanced and rewarding relationships. Reclamation from old, problematic relationship behavior is a developmental journey that unfolds over time. It is not a single event but an ongoing evolutionary process. People seeking to eliminate relationship interactions that are non-rewarding and full of conflict know the kinds of exchanges they want to purge. They may want a change in this part of their lives but may need clarification on healthy relationships and behaviors.

Relationships that are one-sided or involve an absence of genuine intimacy can be frustrating and self-sabotaging. People who choose emotionally unavailable partners may spend much of their energy trying to remake the other person into someone who can emotionally give them what they need. There are many reasons why people struggle with intimacy, including lack of models for healthy relationships or having an addiction or a chronic illness that separates them emotionally from others. People with insecure attachment issues will often pick people with intimacy challenges and seek their sense of identity, self-esteem, and purpose in those relationships. People often unknowingly pick others with the same level of intimacy availability and identify each other as the source of the problem.

"Codependency" as a term, though diffuse and applied broadly to any person with maladaptive relationship behavior, has also become synonymous with focusing on others to escape one's feelings or avoiding

responsibility for one's happiness. Those who identify with the term can often determine the origins of their patterns of unsatisfying relationships and the problematic behaviors they wish to eliminate. In the self-growth or recovery process, they gain some early skills in building a healthier sense of self and boundaries for more balanced relationships.

Many such people have lived much of their lives in extremes. Many people come from a family culture of imbalance and extremes. For example, families may swing between being enmeshed and disengaged, two sides of the same inability to be intimate or cooperatively problem-solve. For people thinking in extremes, it is only reasonable that the first solution to replacing your problematic behavior would be to do the opposite. In early recovery attempts, they move from one extreme to another, thinking the opposite of what they have been doing constitutes progress. In terms of relationship behavior, some move from extreme dependency to extreme independence seems appropriate. However, extreme independence or “counter-dependence” is not true independence but a defensive reaction to dependency needs.

A healthy reset from relationship imbalance and other dysfunctions lies somewhere in the middle of the dependency continuum. It involves being comfortable with “interdependency,” moving from inappropriate caretaking and enabling to respecting others' rights to solve their problems and jointly solve relationship issues. Conscious growth means shifting from martyred self-sacrificing to giving for the joy of it, from obsession with others' feelings and behaviors to self-awareness and conscious responsibility for your own emotions, responses and other behavior. This self-responsibility does not rule out sensitivity and consideration of others.

It involves moving away from trying to meet others' imagined expectations to honest communicational exchanges of wants and needs and thoughtful self-evaluation of one's needs and reasonable expectations. It does not mean ignoring others' needs or withholding affection and reassurance but showing respect and care for others without taking control or responsibility for them.

The focus shifts from inappropriate caretaking to taking responsibility for oneself, including one's health, wealth, and happiness. Personal growth is not a black-and-white, either/or proposition but involves balancing personal responsibilities while participating in mutual relationships.

Collaboration is not surrender. Solution-focused communication requires flexibility and appropriate boundaries while effectively problem-solving. Achieving growth and balance in relationships is not about doing the opposite of what you used to do but about seeking moderate reactions that look somewhat like middle ground. It involves being evaluative and knowing the difference between enabling and helping. Finding your own balance is not counter-dependent. It promotes an ability to engage in cooperative, mutually satisfying relationships where acts of giving are free from resentment and hidden expectations.

Being yourself while allowing others to be themselves is a hallmark of true intimacy. It means moving from building walls for protection to maintaining appropriate boundaries. Walls isolate and create loneliness, while boundaries empower both you and others.

Self-growth means recognizing, leveraging, and optimizing your healthy personal characteristics—your strengths, virtues, and resilient traits. It encourages the ability to take life's disappointments in stride without persistent self-pity or being overwhelmed by emotion or helplessness. Accurate self-assessment incorporates acknowledging a healthy self-worth, accepting shortcomings, and tolerating criticism without undue distress. Growth begets growth. In your evolution, you actively seek opportunities for growth and improvement.

Other characteristics of personal growth include the ability to laugh at yourself, tolerate others, and maintain a positive outlook on life. The anticipation that others will like you and you will like them replaces the fear of rejection. Self-development involves self-efficacy—the belief that you can meet life's demands and are competent to handle most situations. You can plan, set realistic goals, live in the present, and appreciate your own abilities.

Remember, personal growth is a process, not an end state. It is about continuously moving towards these characteristics, abilities, and frames of mind through relentless self-awareness, personal responsibility, and self-care over time. Ultimately, you can become the person you want to be. No one else can give that to you, and no one's personal journey will be completely smooth without setbacks.

