

Family of Origin and Individuation

The family you grew up in influences you for the rest of your life. To truly become an individual in your own right, you need to separate from this system, evaluate it, take with you what is useful and of value, and release what is not serving you. Carl Jung, a famous personality theorist and psychiatrist who lived around the time of Freud, called this the process of individuation.

In family systems theory, one idea that affects the individuation process is the emotional boundary rules learned in the family. On one end of the continuum is the enmeshed family system, which has weak emotional boundaries. It is difficult to know where you stop and another family member begins. If one person is in pain the whole family is in pain, individuals do not learn to feel their own feelings. In the extreme, there is not much privacy, as everyone knows every detail of everyone else's problems and business. There is little autonomy or independence, even in adolescence and adulthood. On the other side of the continuum is the disengaged family system. Here, no one interacts much; it is difficult to reach another for comfort, problem solving, or care. This is a very isolating system, with strong boundaries where members are on their own. The first family system is overprotective, smothering at times, and encourages dependence, while the second is under-protective, neglectful at times, and encourages independence, many times at age inappropriate times. The healthy family system is in the middle, allowing such things as age appropriate boundaries, autonomy, and privacy, as well as love, age appropriate care, affection, and interest, and encouragement to grow and develop as an individual.

Answer the following in 10 minutes. Discuss in the large group. Continue at home.

1. Describe your family of origin on the enmeshed-disengaged continuum.
2. How much permission did you have to be autonomous, to make your own decisions, to be independent?
3. Did you receive age appropriate help and nurturing?
4. How are you repeating or reacting to these family patterns?
5. What did you learn about decision making and how does this affect you now?

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