About Dependence and Independence

There is much confusion about what actually constitutes independence or dependence. Do you have to be completely autonomous in order to be self reliant? Do you put yourself at risk every time you accept support from a colleague or borrow $20 from your best friend? Is there a certain line that beyond which you will suddenly becomes hopelessly dependent? Can you be financially independent and still become controlled by a loved one? Alternately, if you become financially reliant upon another individual, can you still hold onto your self worth?

The easiest way to think of dependence and independence is as a sliding continuum of different degrees or grades of self-reliance. At one end of this scale is complete reliance upon a spouse, family member, or caregiver in all aspects of life. The best example of this is a small child who requires parents or caregivers to provide a place to live, food, warmth, clothing, love, and hygiene. This infant even depends upon its parents to provide an identity in the form of a name, a place within the family unit, and a role in greater society.

At the other end of this spectrum is absolute independence that acts like a solid wall isolating the person completely from the rest of the world. I’m not sure if such an individual could exist, but this being would be completely autonomous. This would involve complete provision of food and shelter, learning purely from personal experience, and having absolutely no contact with anyone else.

Between these two extremes are a myriad of other choices. Some of these possibilities are examples of healthy independence and loving care. Other options illustrate instances where the line between help and harm has been blurred. Still other situations evolve into violence or abuse.

It may seem obvious that complete dependence is unhealthy. We all had experiences as a teenagers when we felt misunderstood and angry that we weren’t allowed to go where we wanted, where our parents decided on the
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rules, and when everyone else seemed to be in charge of our futures. Therefore, it is somewhat easy to image how frustrating it would feel for someone to have that kind of control over our lives permanently.

Unfortunately, the reality of such a situation is much worse. Dependency gradually eats away at self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-reliance. Eventually, even a strong-willed person becomes unable to make decisions, doubts his or her abilities, and loses the capacity to cope with the normal challenges that everyday life provides. Fear becomes paramount--fear of the world as well as the terrifying thought that the caregiver/individual controlling the situation will leave. This obsessive behavior can lead to self-denial, control issues, and even abuse.

The other end of the spectrum seems just as obviously unhealthy. We are brought into this world with the help of others and we are led out of this world with help as well. People are social creatures. We look to other human beings for love and companionship. Every time we buy a loaf of bread at the store, we depend upon a large quantity of people to plant and harvest the wheat, process the flour, gather the eggs, bake the bread, etc.

Thus, an extremely independent person would also be very isolated. This may lead to independence being used as an excuse to hide from the world. In this situation, the person may shy away from or completely cut off any relationships, activities, or other situations that may potentially cause anxiety (real or imagined). In this way, the individual simply continues to stay in a safe spot and stagnates.

Nonetheless, some situations do require extremes of reliance on others. At one time, we were all completely dependent upon our parents or caregivers. Not only was this situation healthy but it was important to our growth that someone did love and care for us until we were gradually able to do so for ourselves. Had our parents expected that we would be autonomous when we came out of the womb (feed ourselves, find our own diapers, and get a job), we would likely have died.

Some individuals must also face the change of extreme dependency in adulthood as well. Accidents, illness and aging are often the main culprits. The extent of healthy versus controlling care is often difficult to determine
in these situations. Each circumstance needs to be looked at on an individual basis.

Likewise, some situations do require extreme independence. As people are social beings and do require other human companionship to be healthy and happy, most of these instances are short-term survival situations that are thrust upon the individual. Probably the best examples of such events are accidents occurring in isolated areas where someone must become completely self-reliant just to survive. Though these cases may not be healthy in the long term, survival in the short term allows for the potential for healthier situations in the future.

There really isn’t a specific line between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Some financially secure women find themselves in controlling marriages that turn to violence and abuse. Some accident victims find themselves solely reliant on others for care and yet manage to live completely contented lives. What seems healthy to one couple might drive another set of individuals completely insane. Relationships, like individuals, are unique and come with their own set of rules and boundaries. This fact often causes confusion.

**Myths about Dependence and Independence**

For many people, the words “dependence” and “independence” have very negative connotations. Dependence may be associated with being controlled, weak-willed, or childlike. Conversely, independence may be associated with being alone, being self centered, or being a bitch. Sometimes, these notions hold some aspect of truth. Yes, excessive dependence can cause a person to become controlled or seemingly weak-willed. Similarly, sometimes excessive independence can isolate an individual or make them appear self-centered.

However, such circumstances do not necessarily have to be true. Reliance upon others does not always automatically lead to being controlled by another individual or the loss of personal worth. Aid from a friend, spouse, caregiver, or even a stranger allows these other people to share their resources, their love, and compassion toward us without any hidden agenda of control or manipulation. Thus, by being willing to accept this act, we
give their kindness validity and worth. In turn, they feel good about themselves and their abilities or talents.

Sometimes, we need to ask for help from someone because we can’t do a task alone, need support in undertaking a difficult challenge, or simply because we don’t have the skills or tools to do what is needed. We all need assistance from others at some time. In all but the direst situation, we would all need someone to set our arm if it were broken or to support us during childbirth. In less dramatic situations, such as accepting help with the dishes so that we can start supper or securing childcare so that we can get a better paying job, it might also be beneficial to gain aid from another individual. In these instances, allowing others to help in appropriate situations and circumstances may actually allow us to get tasks completed more easily and even help us move more quickly toward our goals.

Likewise, being independent does not necessarily equate to being alone, self-centered, arrogant, uncaring, or aggressive. We can be self-reliant and still be kind, loving, and caring toward our friends, family, and lovers while having that warmth reciprocated in kind. In fact, if we as individuals are unfettered by feelings of resentment or control, we can more fully enjoy these acts knowing that doing so takes nothing from our self-worth. Moreover, by practicing these skills, we serve as a resource for those around us who may need our help or may also need to increase independence.

Another common myth about dependence and independence is that they are all or nothing situations. Few people are either entirely reliant upon another individual for all of their life needs or entirely immune to needing help from others. Such extreme forms of dependence are very rare and tend to be related to temporary conditions such as being an infant and recovering from surgery. Likewise, severe cases of independence tend to be limited to dire emergences where self preservation is a matter of life or death.

The majority of people in any given situation are neither completely dependent nor absolutely independent. Usually, we will have some sort of mix of both qualities. We might feel quite confident in some situations but need help in other areas of our lives.
For instance, you may find a day of shopping to be relaxing and enjoyable but rely upon your spouse to provide the bulk of the money needed to pay for the transactions. Similarly, you might enjoy traveling but find it a hassle because you can’t drive a car or have problems walking long distances.

In some situations, the feeling of dependence or lack of self-reliance might just be a minor hassle. It might only irk you that you need to wait for the elevator rather than walking up the stairs. It might be irritating to explain to the mechanic that your car is making noises when you aren’t sure what exactly needs to be fixed. It may upset you a little when people stare at you when you eat out alone. For the most part, such experiences are temporary situations that you get through and never really think about again.

These small annoyances only become a real problem when they are repeated often enough to change the way you feel about your abilities, for instance, if taking the elevator becomes such a cause for embarrassment that you stop going shopping, if you become so fixated that the mechanic thinks you are stupid that you delegate all of the car repairs to your spouse, or if you are so worried about being alone that you’d rather eat with someone who belittles you than be seen alone in public.

These are the types of situations that can quickly become controlling, abusive, or violent. When we allow doubt to eat away at our self-esteem, we give others permission to take part of our self worth. Every time we give way to fear, letting it limit what we think we can do, our world becomes slightly smaller.

We send out signals that we need to be taken care of, that we can’t handle life, and that we need someone else to take care of us. Inch by inch, we give away our control to others. Eventually, as our self-esteem deteriorates, activities that once were easy to undertake or areas of our life that we once felt we managed quite well start to crumble as well. Depression, isolation, and resentment follow.

When you find yourself nearing such a situation, it is important to know that independence is not simply something that some people have and oth-
ers do not. If you struggle with these issues, it may seem that others are naturally more self-reliant or find it easier to ask for assistance when needed. You may believe that they never need to work on this aspect of their lives.

Yes, some people are more prone to being more self-sufficient than others. Some people have to work hard at asking for help or doing things on their own while others don’t give the concepts a second thought. Still others pretend that they naturally have everything under control, while they shake and shiver in their boots or act arrogant or aloof to cover up secret concerns in these areas.

Despite what it might look like from the outside, everyone has issues and problems. Having life challenges does not mean you are bad or inferior. Such instances merely point out areas where you might need help, where you may need extra resources, or they may simply be experiences that are going to teach you a little more about your genuine self. Often, the most difficult situations in our lives draw us toward some sort of understanding that allows us to serve as a resource for others in like circumstances or point us toward a destiny we could never have imagined for ourselves.

Think of independence as a skill. Being able to skate is a skill. Some people seem to be able to skate without effort while others have to practice just so that they don’t fall on their butt every two minutes.

In this way, seeking self-reliance is not a talent that you either have naturally or you are out of luck. Gaining independence is a skill that can be learnt. Asking and allowing someone to help you when you need assistance might be a new and difficult task, but with practice it gets easier. The most important part of this process isn’t about appearing effortless to impress others, but to gain the tools that we need in order to live a more joyful life.
Self-Reliance Explained

There is an important imaginary dividing line between loving support that is helpful to you, and well-meaning acts that eat away at your self-esteem. For instance, if your partner helps you cook supper because you both enjoy sharing the chore, your lover wants to share time with you, show caring, or he or she just wants to be thoughtful, then this act will make you feel happy, loved, content or proud. In this case, your self worth will stay intact. This kind of support may even deepen your relationship, so that you feel free to share other needs. Likely, you will also be much more willing to freely give support to your partner, as needed. It’s a win-win situation.

This exact same act may not always be received in such a kind light. If you believe that your partner is helping you cook supper because of a feeling that you need supervision, or that you can’t cook without aid, then your lover’s help may make you feel incompetent, child-like and controlled. Unlike in the previous situation, this act may make you feel stupid, and reduce your feelings of self worth. This situation is definitely not ideal and will likely add to hidden stresses already present in the relationship. In some cases, this one seemingly harmless act might be the incident that suddenly turns a bad situation violent.

It is so important to note that it may not have been your spouse’s intention to cause you grief and harm in these scenarios. In the first situation, you felt the loving support and accepted it as so. In the second instance, you clearly did not. Therefore, the only difference between the two acts was how each made you feel. Simply put, if the act made you feel negative toward yourself, it was not helpful.

Perhaps, more needs to be said about this complex issue. Sometimes, even people with the best of intentions unwittingly and unknowingly help eat away at our self worth. In their minds, they are just helping out in times of trouble or are supporting you because you are living in difficult circumstances. However, it is really easy to fall into the trap and continue relying on this help long after the need has passed, or to become wholly dependent upon this help. At this point, the acts become a form of control.
that directly or indirectly stops you from helping yourself. As previously noted, sometimes such situations can even turn into violence or abuse.

Therefore, the important dividing line between appropriate and inappropriate help is how an action makes you feel. If an act is pleasant or makes you feel better about yourself and the world around you, then it is positive support. If, however, a situation takes away from you as a person, then it is not beneficial, even if the intention of the person was to be helpful. In this way, the amount and type of help you are comfortable with as an individual will depend entirely on your personality and on the situation at hand.

The same concepts are just as valid when looking at degrees of independence. Although remaining self-reliant is important to your self-esteem, not accepting needed assistance can also be unhealthy. Once again, the way you view the act (or lack of action as the case may be) is the true guide to the appropriateness of the situation.

For instance, if your partner doesn’t help you make supper and you cook the meal alone you might feel happy or proud if you enjoy cooking, if the meal happened to be your favorite dish, if this was the first time you cooked a gourmet meal, or if the meal was an anniversary celebration. Thus, in this situation, your independent act was definitely a valuable experience. Not only will your self worth stay intact (or perhaps even increase) through this act but you just did something really nice for your spouse. Perhaps, the other person was grateful for a few minutes to spend with the kids, relax, recharge, or finish up other chores. You may have even made your partner feel special, or brought a smile to his or her face on a difficult day.

Under different circumstances, this same situation might leave you feeling unappreciated or overwhelmed. For instance, if your partner didn’t remember the anniversary, or makes rude comments while you cook, if you were rushed, or if you wished your partner would have helped with the task to reduce your stress and workload. Such instances would probably cause you to feel underappreciated, unworthy and trapped, even if that wasn’t your spouse’s intention. Moreover, this one tiny event may build up more anger and resentment between you and your loved one.
Thus, as with levels of dependence, the important dividing line between appropriate and inappropriate amounts of self-reliance is how an action makes you feel. If an act (or lack of action) is pleasant or makes you feel better about yourself and the world around you, then it is beneficial. However, if the action (or lack of action) takes away from you as a person, then it is not beneficial, even if the intention of the act was meant to be helpful. In this way, even the healthiness of your independent nature depends entirely on your personality and on the situation at hand.

Humans are creatures of habit. Often, we get into routines and don’t really think about how certain situations makes us feel. We undertake a task without even analyzing whether we should do something ourselves or whether we should ask for support. Sometimes, it’s difficult to determine whether such situations are optimal for everyone involved, or may become problems causing deeply hidden resentments.

For instance, in your house it might be an unwritten rule that cooking supper is your job. You might have made supper alone every night for so long that you don’t even question that your spouse might help. In such situations, the task is likely so mundane that you don’t even think about how you feel or if you need support. You likely just figure out what you are going to cook and do it.

The key in these cases is the value you put on these activities. If you feel that cooking supper is important, that your family benefits by getting a home cooked meal each night, and that eating together promotes strong relationships, then you realize that what you do is important and valuable. Even without consciously acknowledging this fact on a daily basis, you are helping to feed your self-esteem.

However, if you feel that you cook supper because it is a job too low, boring, or time consuming for anyone else, you are merely fooling yourself that everything is fine. Hidden within you is the realization that something is wrong and that you are feeling used and underappreciated. Moreover, the problem has already eaten away at your Self-Esteem so you think that you don’t deserve better. In this case, it is imperative that you get in touch with these hidden feelings and begin finding a more healthy balance.
It is important to remember that independence is not an all or nothing condition, nor is dependence an obstacle that can’t be overcome. As you progress through the exercises in this book and examine various parts or situations in your life, you will likely realize that in some circumstances you exude confidence and are quite self-reliant, while in other instances you might need a bit of work. You may even see areas of your life where you were once in control but a dependency issue and a gradual loss of self-esteem is eating away at your independence. You may also realize that in some cases you are not willing to receive support that could be extremely beneficial.