

# Enmeshment in Family Relationships: 1+1=1

Can't tell where you end and someone else begins? You're enmeshed. [SHARE](#)

Post published by [Randi Kreger](#) on Jan 06, 2013 in [Stop Walking on Eggshells](#)

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*Emily doesn't know what to. She wants to see a therapist to talk about her relationship with her husband Tom, but if she did Tom would demand to know what they talk about. And since she wants to talk about him, that won't work. He doesn't permit her to talk about their relationship to her friends, so they don't know what her life is really like. He's been disabled since an accident, and since they can't go out running together anymore she's learned from his snide comments that she shouldn't go by herself. She's taken to running on the treadmill downstairs when he's asleep. She still feels guilty (/basics/guilt) and thinks it's her only option.*

*Art has a different problem. His husband Bob says he wants to join a "radical gay group" that does things like organize boycotts against organizations that don't offer same sex (/basics/sex) benefits or oppose gay marriage (/basics/marriage). Bob wants to train for the Gay Games and run around in rainbow colored T-shirts. He and Bob agreed when they got together they would avoid this kind of thing. For his part, Bob feels guilty that he now wants something different. Now Art is barely speaking to him. Should he curtail his activism?*

## What is Enmeshment?

Both couples are heavily "enmeshed." Enmeshment can feel wonderful at first, but it is a "drug" with a downside. It begins with that rosy glow that seems to permeate everything when you find a new love (/basics/relationships). That's a fun and even necessary stage.

The trouble occurs when time passes and you stop becoming an individual with your own separate thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions, hobbies and so on. It's nearly universal in high conflict relationships, where one or both people can be enmeshed. It's not limited to partners; even whole families can be enmeshed. (<http://sunrisertc.com/blog/enmeshed-parents-and-teens/>)

In enmeshment, people feel like their well being is not complete unless they're meeting their partner's needs all the time. They worry that their relationship is not "close" if they're not their partner's shadow--"if we're not intertwined emotionally we're nothing." Both people feel like they need to constantly be involved in aspects of each others' lives, but then may resent that fact when they want some individual space.

In healthy relationships with a strong connection, however, each person can pay attention to the other without losing or compromising their sense of self. Neither changes who they are or what they think or feel to please the other person. They can be apart without falling apart and be together without losing their individuality. Love is about the freedom to be yourself and be loved just the way you are, even if it's different from your partner.

## Examples of enmeshment include:

- Family members feel threatened by the each other's growth and independent choices, both big and small.
- Someone uses [fear \(/basics/fear\)](#), obligation and guilt (emotional blackmail) to keep the others in line.

- Partners are supposed totally satisfy each other, so they spend all their time together and have few of their own friends.

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- Any type of privacy is seen to be "secretive," so family member have access to each other's personal papers, emails, correspondence and so on. Some demand to know the other's personal thoughts or the content of discussions with others.
- Being controlled, attached, and entangled in these ways is seen as "normal"—even loving.
- Difficulty differentiating one's emotions from those of their family member.

Andrew Holzman from Family Tree Counseling Associates in Indianapolis says that enmeshment is a loss of freedom, of voice, and of [self-worth \(/basics/self-esteem\)](#). It masquerades as caring, loving concern and a neediness that shames the partner who cannot fix things, make them happy,

or rescue them from their pain. Each believes the other is the key to their happiness (/basics/happiness).

## Why Enmeshment is Unhealthy

Enmeshment is bad for both people in the relationship and the relationship itself.

- It places a heavy burden on the other to meet all their needs, spoken or unspoken, which they cannot do. This inevitably leads to disappointment.
- Your high conflict partner's emotions may roller coaster from one place to the other. Tying your emotional life to theirs is asking for trouble, especially if you have children. One of you, at least, needs to be on an even keel.
- In enmeshed relationships, we're not experiencing our partner as they are, but as we want them to be. True connection and love grows when two individuals are authentic with each other, not when they demand the other to be a twin.
- When individuality is seen as disloyal or an attack, it hinders growth and strength in the individual and the relationship. They can become stunted, unhappy and clingy, which puts the relationship at risk. Enmeshment can also feed resentment and a feeling of being trapped on the part of either one of you. What people intend to keep them together instead drives them apart.
- Fused relationships lead to codependency, and codependency leads to fused relationships.
- Having your own life and interests makes you an interesting person and gives the two of you something to talk about. One person's growth can spur it in the other. Become aware of the richness that arises when you have different ideas, opinions, and viewpoints. Don't automatically discount them.

## What to Do About Enmeshment

Enmeshment is a complicated topic, and the gold standard is to speak with a clinician who can help you take the journey toward understanding (/basics/empathy) yourself, developing an identity (/basics/identity), and knowing when to act and when to leave well enough alone. I will make some generalities, but it's best to talk to a professional who can help you apply them to your own

situation.

In sum, the best advice I can give you—and this applies to most everything having to do with high conflict personalities—is to take responsibility for your own thoughts and behaviors and let your partner take responsibility for theirs. Recognize your over-involvement in your partner's life. Others may need to point this out, so be open to feedback.

Enmeshment, like so many things, is something that exists in your mind. Your attitude and beliefs will determine whether you are willing to permit enmeshment in your relationship or not. If you continue to think that enmeshment is normal and proof of love and part of your identity, you will continue to be in enmeshed relationships. So after you're aware of it, you need to be willing to change.

The next step is a critical one: you need to learn that you don't need anyone's permission to have your own thoughts and feelings. *Let's repeat that: you don't need anyone's permission to have your own thoughts and feelings.* Every person deserves privacy: their own private thoughts, opinions, spaces, and email addresses. Adults don't need permission to have a separate life of their own, including having innocent contact with opposite sex coworkers and friends. The best relationships are when people have healthy, fulfilling lives on their own and then share them with partners who cherish them for who they are.

Being in a relationship requires judgment and balance. Having a private emotional affair is one thing. Having a private relationship with your therapist is another. You don't need to disclose the content of your conversations with anyone, unless it violates something that is not yours to disclose, such as someone's school grades, work problems, quirky habits and so on.

If your partner wants you to keep secrets, ask yourself who benefits from this. Is this a demand to isolate you and keep you from fact-checking what's normal? You deserve—and desperately need—friends and family with whom you can be honest about your high conflict relationship. They're your touchtone to reality and a normal life.

David Prior, LMFT, the executive director at Sunrise RTC, adds these suggestions:

- Don't look at your partner's critical feedback as a failure on your part. If you've been reading this blog or any of my books, you should know enough about yourself and BPD/NPD to

recognize why this happens.

- Sit with your own emotions without blaming your partner if you choose to take them personally rather than recognize it as an aspect of their illness. This will take a lot of time and effort.
- Don't take on your partner's feelings or project your emotions onto them. This is a ticket on the Tilt-A-Whirl ride at the State Fair.
- Allow yourself and your partner to experience your own successes and failures, including the fallout of their behavior toward you. When they fail, be there to support them without taking responsibility for the fix. Don't allow them to confuse you and apologize when you haven't done anything wrong. Doing this just to soothe them is a short-term fix that makes things worse in the long run.

Once there is a bit more space between you, coming together will be much more fun.

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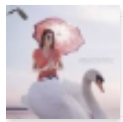
**Randi Kreger is the owner of BPDcentral.com and the Welcome to Oz online family community. You can find her books "The Essential Family Guide to [Borderline Personality Disorder](/conditions/borderline-personality-disorder/)," "The Stop Walking on Eggshells Workbook," "Stop Walking on Eggshells," and "Splitting: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing a Borderline or Narcissist," at her store at BPDcentral.com.**



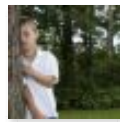
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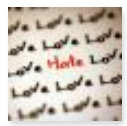
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