

## Systems Thinking – Rebecca Debow

The basic unit of emotional functioning is not the individual but the family. Emotions are not contained within an individual but flow endlessly from person to person. The emotions travel in all directions. If one person in the group is disturbed, everyone experiences some of that energy, kind of like a mobile. Emotions move in observable patterns, such as distancing, conflict, over-functioning/under-functioning and triangulation. The self lives in an emotional relationship system.

There are two basic and opposing life forces:

- Togetherness--emotional closeness, attachment, affiliation, approval
- Separateness—growth toward individuality, developing separate beliefs, reasoning out choices, working toward goals

We experience these forces in our lives, negotiating a path through them, as we work to become individual selves with our own beliefs, goals and boundaries. “The central dilemma in managing the individuality/togetherness force for each person is how to keep the focus on one’s own life and life direction but still stay in open, clear communication with the other significant people in that life.” *Extraordinary Relationships*, p.17.

Basic self is “differentiated,” or separated, from the emotional system of the family very early in life and to different degrees. We have reached our level of differentiation by the time we leave home. We tend to marry people at our same level of differentiation.

Basic self is solid, non-negotiable, decision-making rationality based on thought out principles. The higher our differentiation, the more basic self there is to work from with less tendency to attach to others and “borrow” emotionally. The self is surrounded to a greater or lesser degree by “pseudo self” with a permeable boundary. The higher the level of differentiation, the less permeable the boundary. When anxiety is low, people may appear to be well-differentiated. But when anxiety is high, the pseudo self gives up self and takes on self from others in the emotional system. Beliefs are adopted from the system rather than thought out for oneself.

We have two inner guidance systems. One is automatic, emotional and reactive, the other is thoughtful, reasoning and responsive. Higher differentiation means there’s more basic self from which to function.

Fusion happens at lower levels of maturity, automatically, and at higher levels of maturity when anxiety is high. If basic self is only partially formed, there is more of the pseudo self that looks to others to complete us, fusing us in relationships, causing us to act automatically without thinking.

At higher levels of differentiation we have:

- More choices between thinking and feeling, emotional and intellectual functioning
- Better decision-making
- Good relationships

- Less concern for approval and love
- Fewer life problems
- Better life management
- Cooperation as conscious choice rather than automatic accommodation/compliance

At lower level we have

- Constant search to complete self through another
- Worry about approval or rebellion against it
- Anxiety increases due to poor decisions
- More symptoms
- Repetition of patterns
- More intense reactivity to the emotional environment

We cannot change our level of differentiation to a large degree, but even very small changes make a radical difference in functioning.

Systems thinking recommends developing self in our own family systems whenever possible by relating to our families of origin in a way that is defining of self, while staying in touch with the rest of the system. This work goes much faster when done in our original family. Improved functioning in this personal area has profound effects on our other relationships and work life.

Continuing the work of self-differentiating:

- Do the work of defining self, think carefully about beliefs.
- Care for self, learn what nourishes and relieves anxiety.
- Be playful.
- Stay in touch with significant others
- Cultivate an “observer status,” trying not to change others (stress comes from trying to convert while resisting their efforts to change you). Focus on the functioning of self, rather than others.
- Get a coach to help discern and make conscious choices.
- When emotions threaten to take over, look for principles to show a way out. Look for choices in responding to anxiety. Suspend criticism and challenge of others and attempt manage only self.
- Stay calm and stay in touch.
- Cultivate the following:
  - o Knowing what I would die for
  - o Knowing where I begin and others end
  - o Having integrity (self) in close relationships
  - o Having horizons not limited to what I see
  - o Staying on course in the midst of sabotage (being non-reactive to the reactivity of others)