

# POINTERS FOR DIFFERENTIATING

Leaving home emotionally can take a lifetime. Doing so is more about carving your own unique identity that simultaneously *differentiates* you from and links you to your family than about how far you live from home. The following pointers can help you begin the journey out of the nest:

- Log incidents in which you try to fuse or become one with others by controlling, yielding, or forming alliances.
- Assess how your family operates by diagramming relationships in your family of origin and your current family and observing interaction during discussions.
- Maintain separate, person-to-person relationships with all family members through discussions about philosophies of life, beliefs, and interests. When unresolved issues interfere with relationships, use empathy skills and express your feelings with statements that start with the word “I” to work through the impasse.
- Take a position on issues that surface during life cycles and crises by making statements that start with the word “I.” Express how your stance differs from others while appreciating their views. Make sure you are stating your concerns and intentions without attacking, defending, or trying to ally with others.
- Make casual comments that agree with, exaggerate, or reverse expected counterattacks (for taking a stand). If you have difficulty, role-play scenarios with a friend or therapist who is not involved in your family. Memorize possible responses.
- Dispel misperceptions that independence is the same as rejection: Show that you understand others’ points of view to further defuse counterattacks and to maintain contact while the family is absorbing an expression of individuality.
- Take the neutral stance when other family members are in conflict: Empathize with one person’s position without attacking or blaming others. State that you intend to understand the other party as well, and that you will not act as a go-between.
- Avoid alliances others try to form with you by exposing them: “. . . and I have been plotting how to help the family through this impasse.”
- Break confidences to disrupt gossip: Ask the third party why he or she is allowing other people to gossip about him or her. You can do this with or without warning the gossiper: “*If you continue to tell me things, I will inform. . .*”
- Deflect expressions of gratitude for your efforts to differentiate by denying the importance of what you’ve done. Any endeavors to differentiate must be made for yourself. Attempts to “help” others or gain approval, seek oneness, and promote alliances rather than individuation.
- Assess your level of differentiation by asking for feedback from people you trust on how well you do the above. Work on making needed changes.

## EXTRA HELP

*The Dance of Anger* by Harriet Goldhor Lerner (HarperCollins, 1997).

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