

Psyche & Soul 12

Balancing Autonomy and Dependence

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand with another edition of Psyche and Soul.

This weekend we shall look at one requisite for emotional wellbeing and success in life: Balancing Autonomy and Dependence.

Let me share two stories:

Anil is manager of a small manufacturing firm. There are about 30 employees who report directly to him and take orders from him. Most of them dislike him and many would prefer to work elsewhere if they had an option. The firm is doing pretty badly businesswise. Profits are down since the time Anil took over. One major reason is that Anil is a very “bossy” boss. He believes he knows what is best for the firm and makes all the decisions on his own and expects workers to follow strictly the strategy that he chalks out.

Sister Sushila is the newly appointed principal of a school run by a religious community. Soon after she reached her community, Sushila told Sr. Rose, the community leader. “Sister, I really need you to help me. I like you to tell me what I should do. You have so much experience.” Rose, an exceptionally non-controlling leader who wanted her members to take as much initiative as possible, told her. “It is good to ask my opinion if you really need to. I shall certainly help if needed.”

Very soon, Rose began to feel overburdened with Sushila’s frequent requests for advice and help. Sushila was reluctant to take even small decisions on her own, and needed constant reassurance from Rose. When teachers would come to her for some opinion or permission, Sushila would tell them, “I shall tell you later.” She needed to consult Rose.

Anil was excessively controlling, while Sushila was excessively dependent. Neither of them showed emotional maturity. Neither of them possessed the balance of autonomy and dependence, not having too much or too little of either, which is an important characteristics of an emotionally mature person.

Autonomy

According to psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci who specialise in the study of human wellbeing and happiness, one of the three basic psychological needs we all have is the need for autonomy—the other two being relatedness and competence. Autonomy refers to the freedom we need to make choices, to have a say on matters that affect us; to give direction to our own life. Autonomy is the capacity to think and act independently. Autonomy enables us to take initiatives and do things our own and in the way we want. It gives us a sense of control over our own lives.

Dependence

Dependence is reliance on others. When we are dependent we rely on the opinions and advice of others; we take their help. This dependence is also an important part of our daily lives.

We are social beings. We need each other. We cannot always get things done on our own. We need help of others. An emotionally mature person knows one's limits, knows what one can do and not do, and when to ask for help and when to act independently.

Excess

But sometimes we become over dependent. We want help from others even when can manage on our own, but believing that we can't do it by ourselves. This prevents us from taking initiatives. We look for assurance from others before we set out to do anything. We have an excessive dependence on others' opinions and decisions even though there is no basis for believing that others are superior or wiser.

On the other hand some of us are over-autonomous. We act independently even in situations where we need to and are expected to consult others and work together with others. We act as we please without consideration for others' opinions or needs. We avoid delegating tasks and responsibilities to others. We end up with lots of things to do. However, we prefer to exhaust ourselves rather than give up control.

This kind of over-autonomy leads to individualism – an egoistic tendency to act independently with little reference to others. Individualism has a very destructive impact on any group or community. Individualism evokes anger and resentment in other members of the group, vitiates the environment, lowers morale and commitment to task and leads to diminished group productivity.

Balance Rooted in Self-Confidence

To have balance between autonomy and dependence we need self-confidence. When we are confident, we have assurance about our standards and convictions without being a slave to the opinions of others. We engage in independent thought and action; we feel we have the right to have ideas, aspirations and wishes of our own. We have the confidence that we can get things done, that we can achieve things on our own.

When we have the right balance between autonomy and dependence, we are able to collaborate with others, as well as accept help from others. We give our opinions, express our wants without embarrassment or fear of rejection. We also know when collaboration may not be helpful and prefer to do things own our own.

Emotional Maturity

Ability to think for oneself, and make choices and decisions based on one's own internal convictions characterise an emotionally mature person. At the same time such a person is also capable of depending on and collaborating with others as necessitated by situations.

Such emotionally mature persons are able to relate well to others and also to be effective professionally.

For Reflection

We could now spend a few months reflecting on how autonomy and dependence play out in our live. What experiences related to these come into awareness. Here are three questions for us to say with.

- *What has been my experiences in regard to autonomy and dependence?*
- *Do I see myself as a person who has a helpful balance of autonomy and dependence? Why, why not? Do others see me that way? Why, why not?*
- *What is it I need to do for a better balance of autonomy and dependence?*

For Prayer

The greatest gift God has given us after life is freedom. God leaves us completely free to make whatever choices and decisions we want to make. However God has our welfare at heart and wishes that we use our freedom wisely. We could spend a few minutes talking to God about the way we have been using the gift of freedom and the way we would like to use it in future.

Have a pleasant weekend. Be healthy. Be happy. May the choices you make enhance your wellbeing and happiness.

Thank you for listening.

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