Self-differentiation · About 4 minutes

# A Limit Can Remain While the Delivery Needs Repair

Taking responsibility for conduct without automatically reversing an answer

Lou can’t drive tonight. By the time Ben hears that, he's also been told he always uses Lou.

The inability to drive and the accusation have arrived in the same sentence. Later, when Lou realizes the accusation was unfair, it may seem that apologizing requires reversing the whole answer. Perhaps you know that bind: either defend how you spoke or give in to prove you are sorry.

A more specific repair is possible.

In this fictional exchange, Ben reminds Lou of recent calls made simply to spend time together. Lou recognizes that “always” was inaccurate. Lou can correct that claim while continuing to be unavailable for the lift: “You do call because you want to see me. It was unfair to say you only use me. I still can't drive tonight.”

This leaves Ben free to be hurt. An apology does not purchase reassurance, forgiveness or an immediate return to ease. If accusations have become a pattern, changing the pattern will matter more than finding a good sentence once.

## What exactly needs repairing?

A limit names what you can or will do. Its delivery may add something else: contempt, a misleading explanation, a claim about the other person's motives. Taking responsibility means looking closely enough to separate these elements.

Bowen's account of differentiation includes maintaining a considered position while remaining responsive to relationship.[1] Other people's distress matters. So does the accuracy of what we say. Holding a boundary does not excuse deception or cruelty, and acknowledging harm does not automatically make the boundary itself wrong.

Lou might discover that some of the complaint is justified. Perhaps requests have become frequent and burdensome. That can be discussed through actual examples, without claiming that Ben never seeks company or always has selfish intentions. Specificity gives the concern a better chance of being heard.

There is another fact that would change this story: an earlier promise. If Lou had already agreed to drive and Ben relied on that agreement, being unavailable now would leave a practical responsibility to address. An honest update and whatever feasible assistance can be offered may be necessary. The language of boundaries cannot silently erase a commitment.

## Try separating the sentences

For the original scene, place “I cannot drive tonight” beside “My accusation was unfair.” Notice how much clearer the work becomes when neither sentence has to swallow the other. Lou can mean both.

If there was a prior transport agreement, add it. If the inability to drive has changed, that matters too. The point is to produce an account accurate enough to guide what happens next, not to protect a no regardless of the facts.

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You may decide to change your answer after such a conversation. Or the answer may remain while your way of expressing it changes. Ben may still need another ride, and the hurt may take longer to repair. Those unfinished matters can be acknowledged without turning the exchange into a verdict on whether either person deserves to have limits.

Lou can take responsibility for the accusation and still give Ben an accurate answer about the ride.

“I’m sorry I said you always use me. I still can’t drive tonight.” The lift remains unavailable. Ben has a different sentence to hear.

Companion reading · Close Enough to Love, Separate Enough to Be Yourself

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Self-differentiation (public introduction; full modules require access).

## Sources and further reading

[1] The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. (n.d.). Differentiation of self. Source.

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