Fear, Worry, and Living With Uncertainty · About 4 minutes

Care Without Owning the Other Person's Choice

Offering concern while keeping real responsibilities in view

There are two different conversations at this table. One concerns who will pay the rent. The other concerns whether someone should take a job.

The first describes a limit that belongs to the speaker. The second tries to make another adult's decision depend on the speaker's ability to feel comfortable with it. Both may arise in a loving relationship. Their effects are quite different.

Salma and Tom are fictional siblings. He is considering a temporary job in another town. She sends questions about the contract, follows up with more questions and then contacts an acquaintance there to investigate without asking him. She may be sincerely concerned. Tom now has to manage her involvement as well as decide about his work.

Salma could say, "I'm worried about the temporary contract. Would it help to read it together?" That offers her attention while leaving Tom a choice. If he declines, continuing the investigation would no longer be help he has agreed to receive.

Family-systems thinking describes differentiation as remaining in relationship while holding a considered position of one's own.[1] Salma can have a strong opinion and tell Tom what informs it. She need not become indifferent to show that she respects him. Hearing his answer, however, should be capable of changing what she does.

Wanted involvement can be extensive. If Tom asks her to examine the contract, she can bring all her care and skill to the task. Receiving that help would be a choice he is making, rather than proof that he cannot decide for himself.

Suppose they share rent and Tom has promised to contribute. His move would affect an agreement to which Salma is a party. She is entitled to ask how the rent will be paid and to make plans for her own finances. Respecting his choice does not require absorbing its costs without discussion.

A useful question is: what part of this decision is mine to make, and what agreement requires both of us? The answer may be complicated by shared money, parenting or other duties. Care for a dependent child, an adult needing agreed assistance or a person facing an emergency involves responsibilities that this ordinary sibling example cannot settle.

You can examine the two opening sentences against Salma's situation. Keep the financial limit; remove the assumption that her worry gives her authority over the job. What remains is still a serious conversation.

Tom might decide against the job. He might accept it and make a workable rent arrangement. He might break his promise, in which case Salma would have another problem to address. His gratitude is not the measure of whether she has respected his agency, and her anxiety is not proof that she should intervene again.

Salma may need support for the fear that remains after she stops investigating. That is a real need. She can seek it while leaving Tom's decision with him and keeping their shared obligations clearly in view.

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When worry is bound up with caring, somebody else's decision can feel like a danger we have to manage. The longer essay takes that fear seriously. This piece puts it beside the concrete matter of the rent.

The rent still needs a plan. Once the limits are clear, the decision about the job can stay with the person whose life it will change.

Companion reading · When Worry Becomes a Way of Caring

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Fear, Worry, and Living With Uncertainty (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. The eight concepts. Source.

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