Self-differentiation · About 4 minutes

Changing Your Mind Can Still Be Your Choice

Remaining yourself while letting new information matter

Must a boundary survive every new piece of information? Think of a time when you heard yourself say no and later found you had a real reason to reconsider.

It can begin to feel that way after you have worked hard to stop accommodating people. You say no, someone is disappointed, and reconsidering seems like a retreat. The first answer becomes something you must defend even when the situation turns out to be different from what you understood.

There is another way to think about strength here. A considered position can remain open to correction. Bowen's description of differentiation includes receptivity to others alongside the ability to act from one's own principles.[1] Being influenced is part of relationship. The important question is what happens to your own judgment as you listen.

A Sunday worth reconsidering

Anil and Rosa are fictional friends. Rosa asks to visit on Sunday. Anil declines because he wants a quiet day after a demanding week. Then Rosa explains that she is leaving on Monday for a long work placement. He had misunderstood the departure date.

Now he knows something different. He may still need rest, but the visit has a significance it did not have when he first answered. He could offer a shorter visit, keep the day free or decide to spend Sunday with Rosa. None of those answers alone reveals whether he has abandoned himself.

Suppose he chooses a short afternoon together and Rosa welcomes it. They have a plan that includes his need for rest and his wish to see her. He may still be tired. He may also be glad he reconsidered. An imperfect arrangement can be one he genuinely chooses.

Now change the situation. Rosa supplies no new information and threatens to punish him unless he agrees. That calls for attention to pressure, not a lesson in becoming more receptive. He can end an unwanted or unsafe exchange. Staying in it is not a test of independence.

What changed in the decision?

There is a useful difference between learning something and trying to make another person's displeasure stop. In real life the motives may be mixed. You can care about someone being upset and also decide that their request now makes sense. You do not need perfectly pure motives for an ordinary choice.

Three possible accounts of Anil's Sunday show why the process matters: he learned the departure date; he discovered that a brief visit suited him; or he felt he was no longer allowed to refuse. The outward answer might be yes in each case. Its meaning would differ.

Rather than asking whether your first answer won, ask what the revised answer includes. Does it still take your capacity seriously? Have you understood an obligation you missed? Are you choosing to give because the relationship matters to you? Is refusal actually permitted?

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You may see the answer only later. Sometimes you realize you agreed too quickly and need to clarify. Other times you recognize that generosity was exactly what you wanted. Neither discovery requires treating the earlier version of yourself with contempt.

Sometimes that influence gives you good reason to change an answer.

The answer may sound the same in the end. You will know more about whose answer it is.

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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