Self-differentiation · About 4 minutes

Need Someone Without Handing Over the Decision

Receiving help while keeping a say in the life it supports

Iris needs someone who knows the organization from the inside. Noah has that knowledge. What she wants is help thinking about the job she would be doing.

Their fictional conversation has shifted without either of them naming the change. Iris wanted his knowledge. Noah is now steering a decision about her life.

This can happen in generous relationships. The helper gets excited, the recipient feels grateful, and disagreement begins to seem like a poor return for the help. Someone may accept advice that does not fit rather than appear unappreciative. Another may stop asking altogether to avoid the pressure.

Be clear about the contribution

Iris values her work, but the proposed schedule affects a care arrangement she shares with her sister. Noah's enthusiasm does not tell her whether those hours are workable. She still needs the information she came for.

“Your knowledge helps. I want to understand the hours before I decide whether this fits.”

The sentence gives Noah a route back to the requested task. Suppose he acknowledges that he got ahead of her and shows her where the shift requirements are listed. They can make progress without deciding that his offer was entirely helpful or entirely intrusive. Iris has learned something she can use.

She also has a conversation ahead with her sister. Keeping authority over her own choice does not give her authority to change their shared care arrangement alone. Others' commitments remain relevant to a decision she ultimately makes for herself.

Bowen's description of differentiation includes recognizing realistic dependence on other people.[1] Independence need not mean doing without knowledge, transport or practical care. Some people need extensive assistance to understand documents, communicate with services or weigh alternatives. The amount of assistance does not determine whether their preferences deserve a voice.

When help has conditions

Noah might respond differently. “I'll help only if you apply” would make his offer conditional. Iris can decide whether that is help she wants. If she relies on him for something essential, however, refusing may be costly. Money, disability and access to alternatives affect the choices available. A well-worded request cannot remove an unequal balance of power.

Helpers have limits too. Noah may have half an hour rather than an evening. He can say what he can contribute without requiring Iris to reach his preferred conclusion.

One way to clarify a confusing offer is to separate the help from the decision: “Explain the hours” and “Decide whether I should take the role” invite different forms of involvement. Iris asked for the first. If she later wants Noah's opinion, she can ask for it and still judge it for herself.

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Following his advice would not necessarily mean she had lost her voice. Rejecting it would not automatically prove she had kept it. What matters is whether she can consider the information in light of the life she actually has.

Iris's question lets us see what it looks like to rely on another person's knowledge while living out the decision yourself.

Once they have talked, Iris can imagine herself walking in on the first morning. It is her life she is picturing.

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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