Power, Fairness, and Shared Responsibility · About 4 minutes

When a Request Feels Like Losing Your Say

Taking the feeling seriously while looking at the actual arrangement

There is a bicycle across the entrance. From Laleh's wheelchair, the request to move it is a question of getting through the door.

His anger is real. So is the blocked entrance.

This fictional example shows a distinction that can be difficult in relationships. A request may feel like a loss of freedom even when it addresses a responsibility you need to take seriously. The feeling deserves attention, but it cannot decide whether the request is controlling.

Laleh's access is not merely one preference competing with Ben's preference for convenient bicycle storage. Their home needs a clear route. Ben can participate in choosing a solution without being entitled to keep the obstruction in place.

Agreement can be an expression of agency

Family-systems thinking about differentiation distinguishes holding your own position from simply reacting against someone else's.[1] Refusal is not the only way to have a say. You can consider a request, decide it is reasonable and change your conduct because that is the position you want to take.

Ben might suggest a wall rack or a different room. Cost and available space matter. Laleh can say whether a proposed location preserves access. They may need more information before choosing, but her mobility does not become optional while they consider the possibilities.

Ben might still dislike being asked. He can examine that reaction without making Laleh responsible for removing it before he moves the bicycle. Nor does he need a complete explanation from childhood to respond responsibly in the present.

Check the actual power, too

There is an opposite danger: explaining real coercion as someone's sensitivity to being controlled. Restricting access to money, information, movement or necessary support has consequences beyond the feelings of either partner. Warm words do not make those restrictions harmless.

Feminist family-therapy writing emphasizes social and gendered power rather than assuming everyone in a relationship has equal influence.[2] Useful questions include whether both can raise concerns, what happens when someone disagrees, and who bears the cost of refusing.

If threats, monitoring or punishment are present, a person does not have to remain in the interaction to test a better response. Seeking support or leaving an unsafe exchange does not require first demonstrating calmness or proving harmful intent.

In Ben's situation, two sentences can stand beside each other: "I feel as though I have no say," and "Laleh has asked me to keep an accessible entrance clear." The second helps him examine the first. He may discover that he has considerable choice about how to meet a genuine obligation.

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In this doorway, one person's feeling of lost freedom and the other's access are both present, and the bicycle still has to move.

The doorway has to be usable. Ben can make it so and still find a place, afterward, to understand why being asked brought up so much anger.

Companion reading · A Fair Relationship With Room for Both of Us

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Power, Fairness, and Shared Responsibility (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.

[2] Goldner, V. (1985). Feminism and family therapy. Family Process, 24(1), 31–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1985.00031.x Source.

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