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Healthy Separation & Individuation is Crucial in the Life of Every Individual

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Abstract

The whole idea of Separation-Individuation already begins from our childhood and keeps happening throughout our life in different stages. In the very early stage the child begins to discover that he or she is different from the mother and begins to separate and begins to assert its individuality. Once in school, the child begins to experience connecting with other individuals recognizing the differences in each other. In teenage years one begins to individuate further from the family ties while still retaining them in spite of conflicts in many cases. But because there has not been enough preparation and healthy learning in the process, we see that many adults face chaos and challenges in their lives and feel that they are incapable of coping with stresses and experience a certain level of helplessness and loneliness. All my clients in the case analyses presented in this paper manifest a deprivation of healthy individuation process and as a result the inability to build healthy relationships or make the right choices and bear responsibility for those choices. Although every client is unique in their own situation, all of them struggle to untie their emotional bond with their parents or caregivers either because of overprotection or through lack of secured attachment that led them to wander with an emotional breakdown. In Case 1 there is a struggle in the development of emotional autonomy. In Case 2 there is a struggle in the development of both cognitive and functional autonomy. In Case 3 there is a struggle in the development of emotional autonomy. In case 4 there is a struggle in the development of emotional and cognitive autonomy in the process of individuating.

Similar separation process happens even among friends when they have to leave each other due to situations of life or because of conflicts and negative experiences in their life. Further individuating takes place when couples decide to divorce and have to go through hard times of separating from long years of relationship. And it takes boldness and courage to move on in life finding separate ways to live and find meaning in their lives. In order to accomplish this, one needs to have a strong ego and inner self that possesses self-esteem and self-regulating mechanism.

Introduction

The process of Individuation seems to play a crucial role from the stage of infancy growing into adulthood in the life of every individual. In psychoanalysis various theorists like *Margaret Mahler, John Bowlby, Peter Blos, and Carl Jung* have shared their idea about the same process from their different researches and in this paper, I have attempted to highlight how Separation-Individuation is very important and much needed for every individual to succeed and bloom in their life. In the process of individuating, an individual also goes through a process of achieving autonomy which points towards developing unique individual facets of selfhood. Self-determination is a central element of autonomy. This is not achieved either naturally or automatically. A critical self-reflection on one's own self is necessary to achieve this autonomy which contains three components, namely cognitive, functional or behavioral, and emotional. We must know that autonomous development is an ongoing process. In this, cognitive refers to possessing the capacity to specify more alternative options relating to self-identity, moral development, political thinking, religious beliefs and social norms and customs. Functional or Behavioral refers to the capacity to develop strategies to promote self-identity. Emotional refers to the capacity to have confident and committed feelings about self-identity including choices, decisions and goals which is much needed for human growth and development.

In this process, an individual must learn to distinguish their own ideas from those of their parents and learn to regulate their own behavior and experiences and even govern their own actions without their parents' emotional support. On the other hand, autonomy need not entail an emotional detachment from parents. A balance of autonomy and connectedness is the best for the facilitation of self-regulation, self-determination and building self-confidence and competence. The supportive and positive relationship with parents helps very much for the development of social skills, identity and the psychological wellbeing.

Case Example-1

My client, Nancy 30, began therapy a couple of weeks ago, reporting difficulties with her long-term relationship with her boyfriend. She thinks that he is a wonderful person with a golden heart but recently as she wanted a commitment from him to go ahead and get engaged and then plan their wedding, she sensed that he was becoming nervous. She found that her boyfriend was not very certain if they should do that right now. The boyfriend was suggesting that she should move out of the apartment and live separately for some time before they can understand each other better and make a permanent commitment. But the client is confused and says that they have already lived together for 5 years. What is the problem now?

She finds it very odd and difficult to understand his mindset. She fears she will become trapped in a relationship where she cannot be herself, enjoy her freedom and focus on her business, etc. Now the fact that he is asking her to move out to her own apartment for a few months is worrying her. She is not sure what he is up to. She is very overwhelmed with anxiety.

Analysis

Some exploration was done about her past individuation both as a child and as an adolescent which will enhance her understanding of what is going on in her adult life. My patient has had a very difficult childhood with her parents divorcing when she was 8 years old. Already then she was very confused and felt that she was not good enough and that is why her parents divorced. She did not have a secure attachment with her mother or father. While the adolescent must disengage from the internalized representations of caregivers formed in early childhood and establish a sense of self, my patient had no



good internalized representations. She was experiencing a void. Her experience of her childhood was one of disorganized attachment with her parents.

Therapy is beginning to help my client to explore her difficulty in finding her voice, asserting her opinions, and becoming comfortable with her own needs and wishes. She is ready to develop a better sense of herself as a person who has connected to the world around her and still maintain a separate identity from others in life. She is learning to have healthy individuation and set healthy boundaries and develop coping skills that will help to communicate assertively and express her matured individuality and identity. This process is helping her to focus on self-esteem and boost her self-confidence.

Case Example-2

Stephen, my client a young man of 28 came into therapy because he was becoming overly anxious and felt dejected. He was becoming nervous even with regard to his career. He kind of feels ashamed that he is still living with his parents. But he has no other option as he has no money to move out and live in his own space. He chose to be an artist but due to the pandemic situation, he does not have much business to offer. He does not have a real income. He is trying to manage with money that he gets through unemployment.

In the meanwhile, my patient told me that he is in a relationship with a girl whom his parents are not very excited about. He feels that she is very domineering and does not know how to understand and deal with this type of relationship. He says that she very much loves him but now and then feels that she may turn out to be a nagging wife if he gets married to her. So he is in constant anxiety about it. He is also not sure how his parents will react to his choice and whether this would spoil his relationship with his parents once and for all.

Analysis

Being the only child, my patient was brought up by parents who were over-protective. Although he was loved by his parents he was constantly forced to fulfill the desires of his parents. His desires and choices were only secondary. He had to be satisfied with his own impoverished ego. In a normal course, the adolescent must separate and disengage from the parents and move towards individuation. But in my patient's case, he was very much attached to them. The parents have failed to provide the wings for this young man so he can fly and explore the world and even fly back to them. A healthy process of individuation has not taken place in his life. Although he has grown physically his psychological growth is stifled. The development of the individual personality has not taken place. This young man's inner world is not strong. His inner emotional structure has not been nurtured to be strong. His individuality remains obscure.

Peter Blos says, "Adolescence is the "second phase of separation-individuation". The adolescent must disengage from or transcend the internalized representations of caregivers formed in early childhood and establish a sense of self that is distinct and individuated, thereby reducing psychological dependence on parental introjects for approval, self-esteem, and standards of conduct. The adolescent must learn to take over for oneself the tasks of self-esteem regulation and self-definition. Unless this happens, the adolescent may not be prepared to face life with confidence and independence" [1].

Stephen has been in therapy for the past nine months and now he is able to identify his own individuality and has begun to manifest assertiveness and self-regulation. He is also able to focus on developing his own ego strength so that he can enjoy the freedom of his choice. He has finally arrived at a stage where he is ready to individuate himself from his parents with a sense of pride. He is prepared to have an adult conversation with his parents about his career and his life. Just recently he was able to get a good-paying job that has brought some financial freedom so he need not anymore depend on his parents. His psychological development has also made him decide to let go of his relationship with the girl. He did. My patient has come a long way. Still, there is a journey to undertake. But he is building up the skills needed to face crises in life and create a good future. It is all because he was able to individuate himself.

Case Example-3

Maggie is a 33-year-old heterosexual female who is an aspiring actress and looking to hit it off either on the TV screen or the movies. My client's diagnosis was "Adjustment disorder with mixed anxiety and depressed mood." The client came for therapy because she was devastated by a breakup with a man whom she was seeing casually. She had reported obsessive, ruminating thoughts, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, and shaking in the middle of the night. She said that she felt broken because she thought her love for him was real.

In the process, my client revealed that she has had several relationships with men. So far every one of them had failed. She could not understand why men move away from her. And every time she has spent sleepless nights, crying and being overwhelmed by these breakups.

Analysis

Discussing with the client about her family background it was clear she had a very difficult time growing up in a family where the father had left because of conflicts with the mother. Before my client realized what had happened a new man was in the house and the mother introduced him to the client as the step-father. On the one hand, my client was trying to figure out what happened to the father. On the other, she had to figure out who the step-father was. The client told me that she did not even have a great relationship with her own biological father because he was an alcoholic and would constantly yell at her and described him as an angry man. So the client had constantly been looking to be attached to a good object. She did not even have a good enough mother in her life. In the vision of John Bowlby, she lacked secure attachment [2].

The client has been in therapy for 15 weeks. The breakup has created a traumatic rupture and a disorganized self that needed to be supported. The reason why she was dating so many men was revealed because she was looking for someone with whom she could attach herself securely. She was getting frantic because she felt she was getting old. She wanted to marry and have children and a family.

We created a very good therapeutic alliance. She began to feel much supported in therapy. She always showed up on time and has made remarkable progress. The client has slowly and steadily moved away from disorganization to organization; from loss of energy to focused energy. She has improved in her self-care which has also helped her to be more attentive to her career. Still, she seems to be facing some bumps on the road to recovery.

But her self confidence has increased. She is beginning to appreciate her inner self and her individuality with a sense of pride. She is learning to let go of the past traumas and begin to individuate herself to face the world.

Case Example-4

Isabel, my client who is 38 years old sought therapy because it was overwhelming for her to deal with her daughter who is 15 and who got separated from the client as a child and grew up in a foster home. The client reported that the relationship between her and her daughter had been very conflictual for many years and now she did not want to live with my client. Because of lack of parental love she has ventured into the world on her own to find life and love. The client reported that her daughter's association with the boy has not been great and that she is living with a young man who sells drugs and came to know that she also uses drugs. Although my client wants to support her daughter, the daughter is not heading in that direction.

After several weeks of therapy, Isabel did speak about her own childhood which was very chaotic. She had always felt that she did not receive loving attention either from her mother or from her father.

Besides, they divorced already before the birth of Isabel. She said that she herself grew up with a lot of scars of trauma in her life. As she was turning to be an adult she thought she could navigate her own life and so got involved in a relationship which was short-lived once she had a baby. In a way, she was too young to care for the baby when the boyfriend deserted her. So the child was sent to a foster home.

Analysis

My client has been unraveling the layers of her past life which have been very traumatic. Her childhood has not been nourishing; her teenage years have been full of challenges; she did not have good objects in her life and so hardly received positive validation and support; she did not have enough emotional support to grow up with self-esteem and self-confidence. She did not have a healthy psychological rebirth as a child and as an adolescent did not have a healthy individuation process which is aimed at having a good psychological maturity and the development of individual personality.

Unfortunately, history has repeated itself in her own daughter's life. Her daughter too faced similar challenges. Because of lack of support and emotional attachment, she followed her own trail in life and has ended up on an unsteady path. She has dropped out of school, has been arrested for stealing, and is trying to make life with a drug dealer. Because of her anger towards the mother she does not want to live with her or even seek



her love anymore. Thus she has suffered a healthy individuation process in her own life.

In a nutshell, when we look at my four case examples it is very clear, all of them have been deprived of a healthy and proper Separation & Individuation process and achieving healthy autonomy. Every individual has to differentiate in order to achieve their greatest potential and only then they will learn to be independent and build healthy relationships with others. *Carl Jung* says, "To fulfill our greatest potential requires us to differentiate so that we can experience autonomy from others and intimacy with others. One key step to accomplish this is that we must individuate. The individuation process most commonly occurs when an adult child individuates from their parents, but it also occurs between romantic partners-and sometimes between friends. Each situation has its own complexity because we need to untie the emotional knots that bind us to these significant people in our lives [3]."

Individuation in Therapy

There is also an individuation process in therapy. Individuation is necessary for the process of self-analysis and discovery. When the process is delayed, mental health issues and difficulties in personal life may result. Family dynamics, untreated mental health concerns, and environmental factors might all negatively impact the individuation process. Therapy can help people who are attempting to successfully individuate by helping them work through these and other concerns while allowing for the expression of aspects of the self that may not be acknowledged in other settings. Unsuccessful individuation does not necessarily indicate the presence of a mental health condition but may be a contributing factor to the development of depression, anxiety, stress, or self-doubt. Characteristics of codependency may also develop when the individuation process is challenged. Unsuccessful individuation may also appear in the history of many individuals who are coping with borderline personality. People seeking help with individuation often find therapy a safe place to share their thoughts and feelings and express desires without worrying about judgment or societal acceptance. Mental health professionals can also help individuals explore potential reasons behind the disruption

of the individuation process and address any mental health issues if they are present. In addition, a therapist can provide support as people work toward being better able to set healthy boundaries, communicate assertively, and develop other skills that allow for the expression of personal identity [4].

Individuation at the End of Life

When we think about it, even at the end of life every individual must individuate from their family, environment, social contacts, material belongings, their life that had prominently placed them in the world and begin to transition to another world mostly unknown. It is at this time the individual needs to be strengthened in their ego and lean on support systems like family, community, religion, and caregivers who will be able to sow the seed of hope to take the leap and fly away leaving the entire past behind. It is an individuation process that must happen whether one likes it or not in relation to death. When it is prepared well, the individual will be ready to fuse into the collective unconscious or with the divine or with the creator whatever one believes in.

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