
Autonomy, Relatedness & Competence: *Three Basic Human Needs & How to Meet Them*

Humans possess an innate desire for connection, success, and security. Three critical psychological needs must first be satisfied to form a secure, healthy self:

- **Autonomy** – the ability to act in ways that are aligned with our values and beliefs;
- **Relatedness** – the capacity to establish and maintain a healthy connection with others; and
- **Competency** – the ability to be successful.

These three psychological needs are as necessary as physical needs like food and water, making them essential nutrients for optimal growth. Our parents often frustrate or deny these needs in our early environment by actively rejecting, invalidating, or verbally insulting us (all forms of emotional abuse). Such invalidating behavior is detrimental to a child's self-esteem because it directly threatens a child's developing self-worth.

When parents show love and acceptance only when the child behaves as the parents want, their needs for autonomy and relatedness are frustrated. Conditional love does not give the child the freedom to live authentically; instead, it interferes with the child's sense of self. The child's autonomy is pitted against their need for bonding and attachment. **The quality and consistency of loving care you experienced with your parents affect the kind of relationships you have as an adult and whether you have a positive or negative self-image.**

Competence refers to a child's perception of how effective they are in school, sports, and other extracurricular activities. The competence need is thwarted when the child does not receive enough guidance and support from caregivers. All children make mistakes and fail at new challenges; this is a crucial part of growing up! A parent that is insensitive to the child's normal feelings of embarrassment creates self-doubt in the child's mind. If a parent is not involved in the child's natural interests, the child begins feeling shame.

Here's the good news: **The emotional injuries of childhood neglect can be treated.** You can fulfill your own needs as an adult. Psychological interventions can satisfy your needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence so that you can feel secure, confident, and deserving of love.

1. **Personal growth requires self-acceptance and openness to change.** First, set a goal to develop knowledge of your attachment pattern so you can understand how your brain and heart are wired for connection. Do you have an anxious or avoidant attachment pattern? Resources to support your understanding include therapy, self-help books, meditation, mindfulness, therapy groups, and dream tending. Knowledge of your attachment pattern gives you power through self-understanding and awareness.
2. **Take an interest in how you relate to others and understand your role in perpetuating negative relationship dynamics.** Observe the emotions you consistently feel in your relationships. If you feel chronically frustrated, resentful, insecure, and bitter, you might be denying your genuine needs. Suppose you notice yourself complaining about your relationships; perhaps you are giving others too much of yourself to gain acceptance. Resentment and disappointment are signs that you are sacrificing yourself or your autonomy to connect with others.
3. **Connect with your core self.** The skill of self-referencing supports this process. Self-referencing is the ability to connect to your authentic feelings and needs. Notice that the bodily sensations caused by your emotions do not occur in your foot or elbow. Self-referencing involves focusing on your body's mid-line, from your throat and heart center to your gut and pelvis. We often say that we have a "heavy heart," a "gut feeling," or "butterflies in the stomach." Be present with the sensations from your midline so you can understand what your authentic self honestly feels and needs. When you practice self-referencing, you unquestionably know that your feelings and needs at the moment are okay because the body does not lie. Your body, not your ego, is where the TRUE SELF lives. Once you know your feelings, you can validate them and express to others what you need. Connect to your authentic self and tell it affirming narratives.
4. **Work on shrinking your inner critic.** The inner critic is the voice in your head that shames and catastrophizes. The inner critic internalizes your parents' critical, rigid, fearful, or judgmental messages. Develop an internal witness that can confront your inner critic's programmed thoughts. You can set a boundary with your inner critic by stopping it, getting angry with it, or replacing its negativity with positive affirmations. We have 64,000 thoughts

a day, so relieving your mind of your inner critic takes practice. De-throning, your inner critic promotes security and heals anxiety. Validating your uniqueness creates a positive, secure, confident self.

5. **Do you have a self-care menu that incorporates healthy behaviors?** Practicing regular self-care includes considering your body so you can measure your hunger and energy levels. Self-care commitments involve exercise, nutritious food, good sleep habits, and laughter. If you regularly put off self-care, you will feel shame and believe you are wrong and defective, which fosters insecurity. Shaming self-talk only feeds unworthiness and an attitude of "why bother?" The latest psychological research proves that self-talk rooted in self-compassion supports us in maintaining our self-care agreements. When you keep your self-care commitments, you feel competent.
6. **Healthy relationships require boundaries.** Defining a boundary is the process of determining what behavior you will accept from others and what you will not. Holding emotional boundaries involves not letting another person ridicule you, insult you, or be shaming toward you. Lying is a form of disrespect, and breaking commitments is a form of betrayal. Social domination is a way to control and intimidate in order to cross boundaries.
7. **Practice owning the courage to face your fears.** Commit to confronting challenges at work so you can consistently accomplish tasks that align with your professional goals. Possessing courage by voicing your truth, heals anxiety and develops true self-confidence. With self-assurance, you can live calmly and efficiently. Engage in behaviors that stretch you past your comfort zone. Overcoming fears inspires an internal trust that you can shape your future. Now, you believe in you!