

# Why the Pursuit of Independence Undermines our Relationship Abilities

Vivian Dittmar, 19 June 2015 <http://viviandittmar.net>

Most relationship guides proclaim nonsense, stating that only those who are self-sufficient and independent can truly love. These authors maintain that independence is a prerequisite for a healthy partnership. Is independence really the key to happiness in matters of love? The speaker, seminar leader and author Vivian Dittmar speaks about the myth of independence.

Should true love let go of the partner? Are only self-sufficient people capable of loving? Does needing one another invariably lead to the hell of co-dependency?

Independence – sounds great, and fits perfectly with our current collective fixation on individualisation.

From an early age we are taught that each of us is responsible for his own happiness and that dependence on others is something for weaklings who prefer to remain in their own secure little nest. For many, dependence equals vulnerability. Dependence also means that others have power over you. Therefore, dependency is an absolute no-go.

This belief coincides beautifully with the objectives of capitalism. Whoever wants to be independent, will mainly focus on earning sufficient money to take care of themselves.

From this perspective, all too large investments in relationships with other people become a highly dubious matter and are therefore avoided.

## Consumerism cannot Satisfy the Desire for Relationship

We try to compensate the deficits that we inevitably develop as social beings based on this strategy by satisfaction in the form of consumerism. Advertising helps associate our yearning for relationship with the corresponding products: the deodorant, the car, the drink, the outfit, assure that our desire for togetherness and belonging is finally answered.

These substitute satisfactions frequently lead to addiction, requiring ever-higher doses in ever-shorter intervals to cause the desired effect. However, the primordial human desire for relationship, contact, and true togetherness is not fulfilled.

This 'real togetherness' can only happen if we allow ourselves to need each other. I say 'allow' because today, more than ever before, it has become our personal decision whether to be involved with someone or not.

## Isolation as a Symptom of Apparent Independence

People have always shaped and maintained relationships because they were dependent on each other. Today, to an almost frightening degree, we can choose only to need people we never see, without any personal relationship at all. I refer to the employees of the companies that manufacture all our products and try to fulfil all imaginable needs with their services. On one hand, this has great advantages: we can choose the relationships we maintain to an unprecedented degree. Wow, that's really fantastic! However, it also has serious drawbacks and brings a whole new set of challenges.

One is the question of how to create, maintain and grow relations when we are able to cope alone in all areas. Unlike in traditional cultures, relationships are no longer automatic side effects of daily life. In western nations, the trend towards increasing social isolation and loneliness in the midst of society is a symptom of this development.

## **We need one another!**

Another side effect is that the old rules that governed our ancestors' relationship structure over centuries or even millennia suddenly no longer apply. The clearest example of this development is the altered power imbalance between men and women. With increasing emancipation a growing number of women became aware of their independence, decided against classical roles and thus rejected this imbalance.

Today it is obvious for most couples to pursue a relationship between equals. Unfortunately, this does not mean that they know how this can be achieved. If things go badly, both strive to fulfil our cultural ideal of independence and only notice too late that this does not guarantee a successful relationship. In these situations, fighting for power or increasing alienation is inevitable, because neither party is honest and open with their true needs.

We lack the knowledge about and practise in dealing constructively with conflicting needs. We lack role models showing how togetherness on equal terms can succeed, without pretending a perfect world, in which we either always agree or slip into infighting.

A prerequisite for the development of these skills is to start from a clean slate and admit the simple fact: We need each other! Although I can meditate myself out of my human condition or buy all possible satisfaction with just a modest fortune; we humans are and remain social beings needing other people to be happy.

We need to stop avoiding facing this fact before we can begin developing a constructive approach to it. Only then can we completely bid farewell both to the power paradigm, in which all needs in a relationship always represent power potential, and to the consumerism paradigm, in which needs represent buying potential. Then we can move into a new relationship paradigm, in which needs have a completely different meaning.

They represent neither power nor consumerism, but relationship potential.

## **Mature Relationship: Balancing Autonomy and Dependence**

The idea that adulthood means not needing anyone else is a fundamental misconception of our culture.

In fact, it is the adolescent who dreams of giving the finger to the world and disappearing into the sunset on a motorbike. Real adulthood means being aware of my self-reliance as well as my dependence and having learned to maintain a healthy balance between them. Specifically, this means that a mature relationship always includes both: needing and not needing, dependence and autonomy.

Only this interplay enables respectful, dignified and thus also fulfilling togetherness. In this respect, there is some truth in the myth of independence as the key to happiness.

But, as so often, that is only half the story.

## **About the Author**

Vivian Dittmar is a speaker, seminar leader, author and mother working for a holistic development of people, society, economy and consciousness. She founded *Be the Change*, committed to social transformation, provides consulting to the *Terra Institute*, and is engaged in cultural sustainability.

Recommended reading: Vivian Dittmar, *beziehungsweise -- Beziehung kann man lernen*, Verlag VCS Dittmar, 1st edition, TB, 320 pages, ISBN 978-3-940773-77-7, also available as an e-book.

English translation by Jeremy Tammik.