

Differentiation: “responsible to” vs. “responsible for.”

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There are a couple of verses in Galatians 6 that seem to contradict. In v. 2 Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” And then in v. 5 Paul writes, “For each one shall bear his own load.” How do these verses reconcile?

The answer is found in the definitions of the words “burdens” and “load.” “Burdens” means “a heavy weight pulling someone down.” It refers to a weight that is overcoming the strength of the bearer. “Load” means “an individual’s weight to carry.” Jesus said, “For My yoke is easy, and My [load] is light.” (Matt. 11:30) Apparently, Paul was encouraging the Galatian Christians to help those carrying an overwhelmingly heavy burden while expecting everyone else to carry their own allotted portion. It is important that we know the difference.

Dependencies are formed when we treat others’ loads as burdens. When we do for others what they can and should be doing for themselves, it is called “overfunctioning” and overfunctioning typically tends to weaken the person we are “helping.” In the long run, carrying another’s “load” for them will do more harm than good.

Very often, when we are prone to overfunction, it is an indication that we are lowly differentiated. In this case, differentiation refers to “the psychological state in which someone can maintain the separate and unique sense of self even while emotionally and physically connecting with others.” If you get lost in another person’s emotions or problems, you are lowly differentiated. If you can be present in another person’s pains and concerns, while at the same time seeing yourself as having your own thoughts and emotions, you are more highly differentiated.

Another way to understand our differentiation and possible overfunctioning is to ask ourselves whether we believe we are “responsible for” another person or “responsible to” them. We need to know that while we may have a responsibility to someone else, we are not responsible for them (assuming they are able-bodied adults). For instance, I have a responsibility in love to be sensitive and empathetic to another person’s feelings, but I cannot assume responsibility for their feelings. The other person is responsible for their own feelings.

A lot of co-dependency is built on a misunderstanding of “to” and “for” in the area of responsibility. Keep an eye out for this...you’ll see it everywhere.