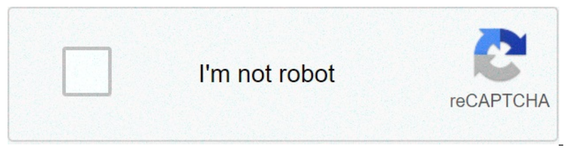

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Enmeshment in romantic relationships

I went to the doctor, I went to the mountains I looked to the children, I drank from the fountain There's more than one answer to these questions pointing me in a crooked line. As the Indigo Girls sing, there's more than one answer to the question of enmeshment. Or, there may be no clear answer, because a search pointed me in a very crooked line to screenfuls of definitions with the clarity of mud. One of the first top-page sites, which looks to be a pricey treatment center, has this to say: Those in enmeshed relationships are often the last to see it. (That's really helpful for people trying to find out if they qualify. We can't see it, so why bother looking. But apparently, everyone else saw it, so why didn't the mailman, handyman, and dry cleaner clue me in?) The inability to tell the difference between your own emotions and those of the person with whom you are enmeshed. (If you can't tell the difference, then how are you going to know that you CANNOT tell the difference?) The need to rescue someone from their emotions. (If a friend is feeling down and I invite her to lunch to cheer her up, is that a rescue operation or supportiveness?) If you feel like you need someone else to rescue you from your own emotions. If you and another person do not have any personal emotional time and space. (Finally, something straightforward.) For me, none of the above provided an intuitive understanding of enmeshment, so my next step was to look for good descriptions. Ross Rosenberg, M.Ed., LCPC, CADC, a national seminar trainer and psychotherapist, is perfectly capable of serving up vagueness. "People in enmeshed relationships are defined more by the relationship than by their individuality," says Rosenberg, also author of the book The Human Magnet Syndrome: Why We Love People Who Hurt Us. Luckily, for those like me in search of the concrete, he also provides examples. Consider the narcissistic mother and a codependent son, "the person who lives to give." The son gives in to the constant pressure from the mother to cater to her needs. Now we're getting somewhere. Oh, yes, that was me and my mother. Just substitute the word "daughter." Rosenberg's examples: You neglect other relationships because of a preoccupation or compulsion to be in the relationship. Your happiness and self-esteem are contingent on the relationship. When there's a conflict or disagreement in your relationship, you feel extreme anxiety or fear or a compulsion to fix the problem. When you're not around this person or can't talk to them, "a feeling of loneliness … will increase to the point of creating irrational desires to reconnect." There's a "symbiotic emotional connection." If they're angry, anxious or depressed, you're also angry, anxious or depressed. "You absorb those feelings and are drawn to remediate them." Nope, I don't relate. And yet, my personal life has been a shambles. I'll keep looking. There are the John Waynes of psychology, who define a healthy, unenmeshed person as someone who is able to handle life's problems without turning to one's partner for support. (Reality check: I got fired, the dog died, I'm in debt, our kids are doing drugs, but no…. I won't burden my spouse with these matters. Are you fucking kidding me?) One therapist, David Schnarch, went so far as to cite the example of a woman who specifically did NOT mention a serious problem at work to her husband and said withholding such information allowed her to reconnect with her husband. (WTF.) More searching, and then I heaved a sigh of relief: these rugged individualists are at odds with the "connection camp" theorists such as Stan Tatkin and Sue Johnson, who say that seeking a safe haven is not a sign of enmeshment and moreover, enmeshment theory confuses the concept of caring and coercion. Stan Tatkin has written several books, and they will be reviewed here, as will the work of Sue Johnson. And yet, some of the thinking from the individualistic, libertarian-style therapists, including Schnarch, made sense to me. Could it be blended with the best from the attachment proponents? Yet another school suggests that taking too little responsibility for oneself or too much responsibility for the other lies at the root of the problem. In fact, there are dozens of theories, and therapist Daniel Wile wrote this very good overview listing many of today's approaches to couples therapy for problems in which enmeshment may play a part. If I substitute the idea of control for the word enmeshment, my family lore backs up the idea that these patterns can be multigenerational. My mother often repeated the story of how her mother wouldn't let her go away to college, because then her father (my grandfather) would ask for a divorce. How awful to be used as a pawn, with one's identity sacrificed to someone else's manipulations. This is no different from the parent who intentionally breaks up a romance because the parent is afraid that the child will leave. An acquaintance of mine – let's call her M — discovered on her mother's deathbed that the mother had intercepted and destroyed letters to and from M's fiance decades earlier because she didn't want M to move away from home. M's mother behaved like this throughout M's life, and M feels her mother did much to destroy her. Other women have told me their parents wouldn't let them leave home or take certain jobs because their financial or organizational contributions to the household would have been lost. More specific examples: A relative answers a question that has been posed to another family member. (Perhaps you've seen this version: An outsider asks a child how old he/she is, and the parent answers on the child's behalf. This is acceptable in a pre-verbal child, but what about once a child is of school age, or an adult?) The forty- or fifty-year old child who continues to live with and be supported by his or her mother. The parent who pays her adult child's rent and bills while he or she claims to be looking for a job. Families where the members borrow one another's possessions without asking permission, because what's yours is mine and what's mine is yours. Families where no one marries unless the entire family approves. After looking at more examples, I accepted that I was "enmeshed." So how do we free ourselves? By setting boundaries, of course. Uh oh, another rabbit hole. What, exactly, are boundaries, and how do we define, recognize and set them? Like the Indigo Girls, I searched but came up empty-handed, until I found a book on boundaries from Christian psychologist/scholars. Now, my idea of religion means flying to France to visit Notre-Dame or Chartres, and I sneer when another scandal erupts from some red state corporate church. I'm an agnostic leaning heavily toward atheism. And yet, the best, the BEST, and in fact the ONLY book on setting boundaries that I've found to be worth two cents is Boundaries, by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. A full review will be published here, but the book's theme can be summed up by the metaphor of property: it is our responsibility to keep our house in order, to maintain good fences and to monitor ingress and egress via a well-oiled gate. I try to fix up almost every place I've ever lived, so I grokked it immediately. By the way, if it's a choice of fixing up property or men, do the property. It won't complain. (Payback for those jokes about why beer is better than a woman, especially the "punchline" that beer never argues.) According to the authors, God has clear words for what is allowed, and so should we. "No" is a confrontational word, but the Bible tells us we should use it, and often, especially to others' sinful treatment of us. Otherwise, we have lost control of our property and no longer enjoy the fruits of self-control. (The prudent man sees the evil and hides himself. Proverbs 22:3/27:12.) People who have been in abusive relationships should not go back until the other produces fruit in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:8). In other words, guard your heart until you see sustained change, and to help you with that challenge, Cloud and Townsend encourage the use of support groups. "The need for a relationship with others is our most basic need in life," they wrote, even though the book was published in 1992, long before "connection coaches" Tatkin, Johnson and the Gottmans were in the public consciousness. Twelve-step relationship programs were flourishing, however, and Cloud and Townsend recommend them because "we need new input and teaching, or else we will succumb to fear that that we will never find anyone else again." The book divides the boundary deficient into four groups. Compliants are those who say yes to the bad (unlike God!) because they were taught to do so as children. ("Children should be seen and not heard." "You have no right to an opinion." "Listen to your elders. We're the boss.") Not only does this keep us from refusing evil, it also keeps us from recognizing evil. (Horn-tooting moment: My "What To Avoid" checklist helps pinpoint a man's destructive traits early on — long before he gives them free rein, and long before you're hooked.) Avoidants, on the other hand, say no to the good. These are people who cannot let help and the good in. (Ladies, have you ever turned up your nose at a supportive, loving man who then went on to become an excellent husband to someone else?) Controllers are people who put the responsibility of their lives onto someone else. Examples include the aggressive and manipulative boss who gets others to do his or her work. Tom Sawyer tricked kids into doing his paint job, and Leona Helmsley got caught having her employees perform her community service sentence. Nonresponsives are another problem category. We are responsible to care about and help within certain limits others whom God places in our lives, write the authors. But "non-responsives" are so absorbed in their own desires that they exclude others. Don't confuse this with taking responsibility for one's own needs first, he warns, because God wants us to take care of ourselves so we can better help others. The authors issue a special warning about controlling non-responsives, who are on the lookout for someone to take care of them, and they gravitate toward someone with blurry boundaries who will naturally take on too many responsibilities. A joke from the book: Q: What happens when a rescuing enabling person meets a controlling insensitive person? A: They get married. (Yeah, I'm really yucking it up on that one.) Back to the title of this article, Is It Love or Enmeshment? Cloud and Townsend provide a simple test to determine the answer: If we know we are a giving, generous person, and yet if in certain situations the giving is not bringing us cheer, then we need to examine our motivation. By definition, love brings cheer. If it does not, then it is not love.

what is enmeshment in a relationship

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