

help wanted. ♦

Do you find it hard to trust people? Or do you feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness? It is possible to be too independent. Psychologist **Sonia Zadro** shows you how to get past false pride and reach out to others.

The number of Australians living alone is expected to double in the next 20 years, ballooning to an unprecedented high of 3.7 million, according to Phil Browning, a demographer with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This is partly due to the knock-on effects of an ageing population and increased divorce rate, but it's also due to the simple fact that, well, more and more people are choosing to remain independent and to therefore live alone.

Mistaken beliefs

A desire for independence is an important measure of maturity, but being overly independent – characterised by an inability to engage in full relationships, a fear of letting people into your



SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

Try these tips to strike a healthy balance between going it alone and being involved with others.

Know thyself Shakespeare's words are so well known as to have become a cliché, but a worthwhile one, nonetheless. Perhaps the single most important step in achieving emotional health and happiness is to understand yourself thoroughly. This means being scrupulously honest with yourself about any weaknesses and insecurities, as well as about your talents, achievements and hopes. It also means being conscious of any tendency to sit in judgement of yourself — being judgemental only results in more avoidance of a particular problem. Acknowledging that, as a fully functioning human being, there will be parts of you that are less than ideal, and even more parts that you may not be aware of but that you hope to understand in time, is critical to self-knowledge. Counselling can often provide a way forward because it is difficult to be objective about your own reality, and an outsider can provide useful and objective feedback. Allowing that person to witness your pain and insecurities is also a powerful first step towards accepting them and dealing with them yourself.

Reveal your feelings The quality of your relationships is what matters, not the quantity. Most relationships fall into three stages: one, the small talk stage; two, sharing intellectual ideas and views; and three, sharing deeper feelings about yourself and others. By consciously and deliberately revealing your opinions, you can take a relationship past these first two stages.

Be yourself Do you wear a mask in your relationships? Do you feel free to act naturally, or are you careful of what you do and say? Do you find yourself always playing a particular role, such as making another person laugh? The more real and authentic you can be, the more real and authentic your relationships will be, too.

Aim for emotional equality The way in which other people reveal themselves emotionally to you is just as important as how you reveal to them. Ask yourself this question: if a friend does share their feelings with you, how receptive are you? Do you happily bare your soul, but get bored when they want to talk about themselves? Or is it the other person around, with you doing all the listening and the other person being disinterested in you? Striking a balance between being receptive and active is critical to creating an emotionally safe and balanced relationship, one where both people feel equal and valued.

Set sensible boundaries Being emotionally open to other people does not mean ignoring boundaries about what is or is not appropriate. Learning when to express concern or to offer help is just as important as learning how to do it.

life and so threatening your identity, and a dislike of relinquishing control — can become a hungry monster. Take the story of Philip, for example. Philip was rich, successful and single, and he jealously prized his independence and freedom. He was also driven by a need for admiration: if a person flattered or complimented him, he had time for them; if they didn't, he ignored them.

By the same token, if a woman was attractive enough to enhance his image — and therefore the amount of admiration he received — he pursued her. He was so obsessed with his appearance and terrified of getting old that he lied about his age. When one girlfriend discovered he was 10 years older than he claimed to be, he actually argued that the date on his birth certificate was incorrect!



QUIZ: ARE YOU TOO INDEPENDENT?

Don't let these mental and emotional habits get in the way of engaging fully with all that life has to offer.



"I don't have close friends, just acquaintances"

Do you know lots of people, but not really have any intimate friends you can confide in? Do your friendships usually last one or perhaps two years at the most? The reason may be that your relationships are superficial. You don't get past swapping the odd joke or opinion to sharing something meaningful and personal about yourself.



"I don't have time for relationships right now"

What's most important in your life? If you say your career, money or success before you say family or friends, you're in dangerous territory. Any material success in life is robbed of meaning if you have no one you respect to share it with.



"I don't want to owe anyone"

Do you automatically think that people will want something in return if you ask them for help or want to share something of yourself with them?

Worse still, do you think they'll resent or not respect you for doing it? If you rarely cry or lose control of your emotions, and you refuse to admit your insecurities to yourself, let alone others, then you are unlikely to move beyond superficial relationships. You can't because they can never know who you really are. Being vulnerable is actually one of the most difficult and courageous things you can do – there's nothing weak about it. A stoic mask is sometimes necessary in life, but if it's always in place you'll lose sight of who's really behind it.



"I prefer to do it myself"

Don't let false pride get in the way. A person who is too independent not only thinks it's quicker and more efficient to do everything themselves, but that others are nowhere near as capable as they are. They can be defensive and thin-skinned, interpreting a helpful overture from a friend or colleague as being an implied criticism that they're not coping.



"I hate arguments"

Conflict is a normal part of life, and it can be constructive. Being able to discuss issues openly, listening carefully to what the other person has to say, and admitting you're wrong or clearly saying why you may disagree, are all critical to establishing and maintaining valid communication pathways. An overly independent person can react to potential conflict in two ways, either by refusing to engage and so keeping themselves separate from the issue and the other person, or by dominating any discussion and winning at all costs. Either way will damage – or even end – a relationship.

Philip's problem was not just maintaining his perfectly glamorous, successful and independent image to others; he also had to convince himself that his life-view and actions made him happy. As a result, he did not have a single true friend, because having a real friend means being open – and therefore vulnerable – as you depend on each other, and take turns to share confidences and experiences. Philip couldn't face up to the real facts about his life, let alone share them with someone else. He pooh-poohed the prospect of asking for help or seeing a counsellor as being plainly ridiculous: he was attractive, strong and independent; there was nothing wrong with him!

Black and white thinking

In fact, deep down Philip was terrified of facing himself and his imperfections. This is because people like him tend to believe, usually unconsciously, that if they're not one thing, they're the other extreme. In Philip's case, this meant that if he entertained the thought that he wasn't attractive, strong and independent, it would follow that he was therefore profoundly unattractive, weak and needy.

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls – it tolls for thee." JOHN DONNE

With this sort of 'black and white thinking', any physical, mental or spiritual imperfection becomes a massive flaw, which in turn equates to that person feeling completely worthless. The prospect of facing such pain is too much to bear, so the person tends to live in denial of any imperfections or mistakes. He or she may also – like Philip – overcompensate and go on to guard themselves against feelings of inadequacy or doubt by regarding themselves as being superior to others, and therefore not being dependent on the emotional connections that lesser, 'weaker' people have.

Philip's coolly controlled life meant he never had to face his own flaws or accept and own his whole life. Even when he became aware of an emptiness inside, he continued his pattern of lying to others and to himself, hanging on to his independent self-image at all costs; he died at 85: strong, capable, successful – but with a lonely, closed heart.

Asking for help

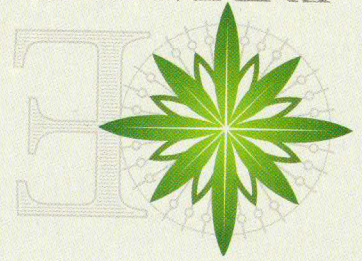
Philip's story underscores the dangers of being too independent, of confusing strength and stubbornness, and the fear of admitting we can't be all things to all

people. Yet being 'dependent' is not an attractive concept either, conjuring up notions like being clingy, helpless and a burden. This brings another of my patients to mind - Miriam. Being dependent on what others thought and did was the one constant in 26 year-old Miriam's life. If an employer gave her the slightest praise, she would fall over herself to work ever-longer hours, even to the detriment of her health. She found it impossible to delegate tasks at work, preferring to do everything herself; she was convinced that no one could do the work as well as she could - and she didn't want to let anyone else try, just in case they stole her chance to shine.

It was the same story in her personal life: as soon as a man she was attracted to showed her the slightest attention, Miriam instantly fell head over heels in love, and placed him on a pedestal where he could do no wrong. She would then proceed to obsessively call and visit him, book up all his spare time, discourage other friends and relationships, and fall into the depths of despair if he didn't respond. Her workdays and weekends were an emotional rollercoaster, with her moods completely dependent on the behaviour of her boss or her boyfriend. The outcome was always the same: the fellow would tire of being suffocated and attempt to end the relationship, which only spurred Miriam to be somehow 'better' and more worthy of his love. Eventually, with therapy, Miriam was able to give herself the love and self-worth she

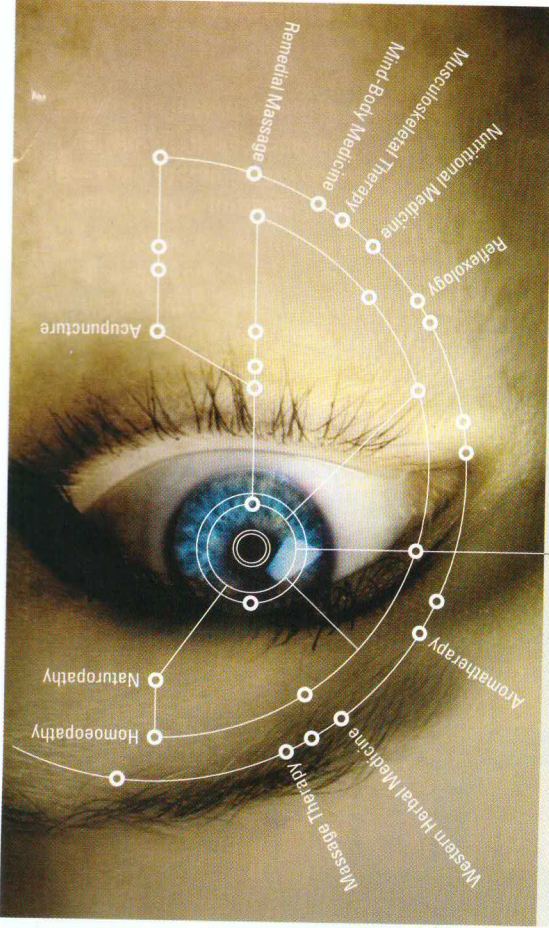
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craved, rather than depending on another person for it. Only then was she able to engage in a satisfactory, emotionally equal relationship.

So, who has it right - Phillip or Miriam? Should we aim to be strong, capable people who don't need others, or more dependent and vulnerable? The answer of course is that neither extreme is particularly healthy, and that the ideal lies between the two. You can be independent, yet not automatically resist assistance. You can offer help and emotional support and connection, provided you learn to accept it as well. The key question to keep in mind is probably not how you behave in the independence stakes, but why. If, for example, you suspect that a driving need for affection is behind a too-accommodating and dependent approach to a partner, then it would be valuable to address that need and see if it could be met in other ways that are less damaging to your self-esteem. Learning to know, accept and love all of yourself is the bottom line. nsh

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