Concern

Healthy & Resilient **You**

Division vs. Divide

What can we do when a difference in values strains a relationship?



Someone in your world just said something you strongly disagree with. Maybe it's about politics. Maybe it's money, parenting, religion, health, or something happening at work. Maybe it's an opinion about the best *Pride and Prejudice* film adaptation.

Whatever the topic, those conversations can change quickly. Suddenly, you're not only hearing what the other person said. You're wondering what it says about *them*. What it says about *you*. Or whether you understand each other at all.

That scenario kind of feels increasingly familiar in our seemingly nonstop election cycle. A 2024 American Psychological Association survey found that nearly one-third of adults said the political climate had strained family relationships, while 85% said it was important to maintain relationships with people whose values differ from their own.

That leaves a question many of us eventually face: When is a value disagreement simply a difference of opinion—and when does it reveal a deeper divide?

A Position Isn't a Whole Person

When something matters deeply to us, it's easy to reactively fill in the blanks.

> *If you believe **that**, you must also believe **this**.*
>
> *If you disagree with me here, maybe we don't share the values I thought we did.*

Either could be right. But often, those reactions are less about what someone said and more about what we assumed they meant.

Investigating what sits underneath a position can help. What experience shaped it? What emotion is driving it? What does the person think they are protecting, solving, or standing up for?

Understanding someone's reasoning doesn't mean agreeing with it. It just gives us more information about what's motivating the disagreement. Sometimes that helps us close some distance. Other times, it helps us see when some distance is called for.

So. Is It a Division or a Divide?

Not every disagreement deserves the same weight. Some divisions are just different preferences or opinions. Some are different ways of trying to solve the same problem. And some involve important values that two people can make room for in the same relationship.

Others may touch on something more fundamental: trust, respect, safety, boundaries, or what each person needs from the relationship. So instead of asking only, *"How do we get past this?"* it can help to ask, *"What does this difference actually mean for us?"*

- Are we arguing about how to reach the same goal, or do we want very different things?
- Can we talk about the difference with basic respect?
- Can the relationship make room for the difference without either person feeling dismissed, diminished, or pressured to hide something important?

There's good news: Difference doesn't have to mean incompatibility. A study published in the *Journal of Personality* and *Social Psychology* found that although political differences were linked to somewhat lower romantic relationship quality, the effect was small. The research also indicated that appreciation and trying to understand the other person's point of view could help soften the strain.

In other words, people don't have to see everything the same way to have strong relationships. And how we treat each other as we navigate those differences matters.

How to See Differences More Clearly

When differences start creating divisions, a few small shifts can create enough room to understand what's really happening.

Check yourself – Strong feelings like anger, fear, frustration, or old resentment can arrive fast and hot. It's helpful to rate the intensity before reacting to it. Try thinking, "Is everything I'm feeling about what was just said? Or is something else getting pulled into this conversation too?" It doesn't mean your reaction is wrong. It simply helps separate what belongs to this moment from baggage you may already be carrying.

Find the meaning – Get curious about what sits underneath the other person's words. A question as simple as, "Can you help me understand what makes this important to you?" can help shift an argument into a constructive discussion. You still may not agree. But you'll have a clearer picture of where the disagreement is coming from.

Remember the whole person – One belief or value isn't a whole person. Remember the rest of the relationship. The way this person has shown up for you. Your shared values. Your history. Then try to understand how this difference fits into that bigger picture. Sometimes greater understanding brings people closer. Sometimes it leads to a boundary. Sometimes it means agreeing to give certain subjects less airtime. And sometimes it confirms when a division has become a divide.

PRO TIP:

Get Some Outside Perspective - It can be hard to sort out strong feelings while you're right in the middle of them. Concern offers counseling, coaching, and specialized relationship support services to help you communicate more clearly, manage strong emotions, understand recurring patterns, strengthen important relationships, or navigate emotional and practical changes when a relationship ends.

You Don't Have to Solve Every Difference

Healthy relationships don't require total agreement. Sometimes our differences can help us understand each other better, see a familiar person in a new way, and find new appreciation for what we bring to each other's lives.

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