

If every relationship adds up to 100%, a healthy relationship stance is when you practise 100% of your 50%—no more and no less. When you practise more, you are overfunctioning; when you practise less, you are underfunctioning. This applies both to the nuts-and-bolts concrete tasks of a home or workplace and to the psychological and emotional life of any relationship. A client in a relationship with an overfunctioner once described this dynamic beautifully: “It is like we are playing tennis,” he said, “and she hits the ball to me, then runs to my side of the net and hits it back to herself!”

You are overfunctioning when you psychically occupy another person’s being and probe for what they are thinking or feeling in an effort to be “helpful.” You are doing for them what they can do, or must learn to do, for themselves.

Overfunctioning is often applauded because it can appear to be a loving act. Overfunctioners give (and give and give). But if we take a closer look, we can see that this isn’t actually true. Doing more than your 50% requires someone else to be doing less than theirs: someone must leave a gap for the overfunctioner to fill.

Overfunctioning tends to be a strategy learned by someone trying to make up for a fear of not being good enough (in the basement). If I am afraid at an emotional level that I am not good enough, I will overdo to prove my worth and my value. I will need to be needed. I will set up my world to make sure that I am needed.

The cry of the overfunctioner is this: “How come no one ever considers me?”

The answer is, because you train them not to. You have set up contracts in your relationship web that state you will do more than your 50%, and the people in your life adjust to doing less in response. This isn’t a lack of appreciation; this is how the

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relationship system has to adjust to what you have put into it. If they tried to do their 50%, they would literally have to push you (at 80%) out of the way.

Overfunctioners end up not being considered, which reinforces their suspicion that they aren't good enough or worthy of being considered. If the overfunctioner isn't able to consider self or love self, the sad reality is that no one else can either. How can another consider you if you do not? How can someone love you where you don't? There would be nowhere for that consideration or love from another to be filed, at best, or even noticed, at worst.

Sarah was the oldest of three siblings. Sarah had a close relationship with her mother, who was an attentive caregiver, until Sarah reached the age of four. At that point, she had one younger brother. When Sarah was four, her parents' marriage hit a crisis point when Mom discovered Dad had cheated on her multiple times. Mom packed up the kids and moved back in with her parents for a little over two years.

During that year, not only was Mom's (and Dad's) attention diverted from their children because of the crisis in their marriage, Mom also had to return to work full time to support herself and the children. The two children saw their father but lived with Mom and her parents. Dad and Mom frequently fought.

The dynamic in Mom's family of origin was difficult, as her father was a patriarchal tyrant who ruled the household with an iron fist. Sarah was cared for physically by her grandmother but frequently found herself stepping in to protect her young brother from her critical, controlling grandfather. Sarah felt the loss of her mother profoundly at this young age, and as children do, held that this was somehow all her fault and that she was not good enough in some way.

Mom and Dad eventually got back together, but that didn't

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have a happy ending for Sarah. They very quickly had a new child, a daughter, and Sarah felt replaced by this younger and cuter girl. She continued to feel on the outside, and the strategy she employed to find her way in was to become a deputy parent. She learned to overfunction. Her overfunctioning served her well career-wise, as she became a well-respected director of services for various care facilities.

Sarah sought counselling at the age of forty because she wanted help to know “what to do” about her relationship with her mother. She was by now married with two children of her own, and was upset at the apparent lack of care her mother had for her. Her mother would frequently cancel lunch dates or change childcare arrangements at the last minute. She would talk to Sarah about her grandchildren but not ask about Sarah herself. Once again, Sarah felt on the outside.

Sarah had decided that her mother was unreliable, and so had for the most part stopped making plans with her that didn't have flexibility. Sarah's mother did call her for advice and help with family issues, which Sarah provided. Sarah continued in the role she had learned at the age of five: even though she might complain when Mom had to cancel on her, she continued to act as deputy parent.

Sarah came to the session armed with notes, notebook, and pen. She didn't want to forget any of the directives that might be provided to her. She was upset because she felt she had tried many different things with her mother, most of which involved informing Mom of what she needed as a daughter, and none had worked to date.

Like all overfunctioners, Sarah's busyness had a hidden agenda: it allowed her to focus on “what to do” and avoid what she was feeling. Sarah had a tremendous amount of pain and vulnerability that she was unwilling to acknowledge and certainly didn't know how to communicate. Instead of allowing herself to feel her

sadness, which is an important therapeutic first step, she spent her time coming up with solutions to fix the problem. Her strategy of providing Mom with directives only served to increase the distance between them rather than invite connection.

“The caretaker and the wounded bird” is a variation on the over- and underfunctioner relationship dynamic. The caretaker, despite cheerleading the wounded bird’s recovery, will unconsciously train the wounded bird not to mend his or her wounds. This is mostly due to the wounded one never being left alone long enough to take care of self or have an opportunity to learn how. There is a difference between caretaking and caring for, which we will get to later. This is a difference the caretaker is ignorant of. The underfunctioner becomes more and more underfunctioning as the overfunctioner becomes more and more overfunctioning. The cycle not only continues but feeds itself in an endless loop. Sometimes, in addictions circles particularly, this is referred to as “enabling.” All of these come under the overfunctioning umbrella.

Part of what keeps the cycle going is that the overfunctioner cannot sit in their anxiety long enough to actually allow the underfunctioner to feel the weight of their dilemma and step up. The problem becomes what the one is triggering in the other: the anxiety beneath and fueling this behaviour is the overfunctioner’s SOS—a variation of “I am not enough.” For example, if a parent notices a child leaving a mess and makes that mess mean that the parent is a bad parent (SOS), the parent cannot stand the anxiety of this SOS very long and, rather than wait for the child to clean up the mess, the parent will clean it up and complain about the irresponsible child. This behaviour is being driven by not only a desire to clean up a mess, but more so to shut down the upset in the basement. The child learns to rely on the parent cleaning the mess up. Behind

the scenes, the defence system has re-identified the problem from the fear of being a bad parent to having a bad child. The child learns how to live up to that reputation.

The same dynamic is true in adult relationships. These postures and positions—these strategic selves—make agreements unconsciously together, all in an attempt to sidestep the anxiety inside the basement both ways. The overfunctioning adult can see the problem as being the other person's, and thus justify continuing to caretake and adapt the situation so that the underfunctioner never has to deal with their own problems. This is akin to a goaltender in a soccer match facing an opponent who takes a shot and misses the target badly: the overfunctioner metaphorically moves the goalposts in order for the unskilled player to score.

The underfunctioner has an equal and opposite strategy, founded on a similar fear of not being good enough. Instead of trying to prove their worth, they decide to avoid making mistakes or potentially getting into trouble. They avoid and distance themselves in relationships and, at the extreme, also cut off (meaning that they leave, or decide not to speak to someone anymore). Underfunctioners fear failure and, as a result, abdicate control to the overfunctioner, whom they can then blame (although not necessarily out loud) if things don't work out. A constant underlying sense of inadequacy is apparently avoided by refusing to enter territory where this feeling is activated. Just as in all strategies, however, underfunctioning also backfires, as these avoidant actions end up just reinforcing this sense of inadequacy and fear of failure.

The overfunctioner and the underfunctioner have entered into an unconscious agreement and vicious circle of reinforcing the very thing they are both trying to get rid of. These two can easily remain in a dysfunctional relationship, complaining

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about each other, all the while feeling safer because the battleground is perceived in the relationship now, instead of in the self.