Be Known, the Podcast

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Episode 79: Respecting the Autonomy of Others

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This is Be Known, and I’m Kerrah Fabacher. You’re listening to episode \_\_\_79\_\_\_. We were made for relationship, but so often our relationships are broken. And when our relationships are broken, *we* are broken. One of our deepest human desires is to be known, but we often have lost ourselves along the way. This is a podcast to help you get your relationships back to a place of wholeness. A place of authentic connection, where you feel truly known.

So come on in and sit a while. Let’s exchange fear for love and finally see what good relationships are made of. And let’s see what kind of healing happens here.

The other day I was processing a client case with my colleagues at work, something we do from time to time to help us when we’re stuck. I shared how frustrated I was with the person’s situation and decisions in the situation. I was able to name what frustrated me the most— that she wasn’t having great boundaries, that she was being mistreated, that she could choose a different path for herself. Everything in me wanted her to choose to go one way, but she chose to go another. And I felt frustrated and even angry about that. What one colleague reminded me about in the conversation was how counselors have a duty to honor the autonomy of others. It’s one of the main principals in our code of ethics. We must at all times respect the autonomy of the client.

When you read the definition of the word “autonomy,” you get this picture of a self-governing territory. So like, you know the United States. We fought for this self-governing autonomy in the American Revolution. We wanted the freedom to make our own laws and choices, and we won it. According to Mirriam-Webster, autonomy is “the quality or state of being self-governing or self-directing freedom and moral independence.”

As counselors, we’re taught we must respect each client’s independence and freedom in the counseling room and out. We respect and honor their choices, even if those decisions aren’t the ones we’d make in the same situation. Sure, we can teach them how to be aware of unhealthy choices and brainstorm better options, but at the end of the day, they are responsible for their own decisions, and we have to honor that. No matter how much we disagree. We can’t ever tell a client what to do, what decision to make. We can’t push our values on them and what we think is the right way. We have to allow them to decide what their own values are and live according to those.

I haven’t stopped thinking about this concept after that consultation at work because I think we as humans need to respect the autonomy of others around us, too. Not just between therapist and client.

Each person has the freedom to choose. To choose this way or that. To vote red or blue. To go to mass or the synagogue or the church or not go at all. To live here or there. To do this work or that. To be with this person or not.

We all have been given this freedom. Since day one. When God made man, he immediately gave them the free will to choose. Eat this fruit or not. Sure if you eat that fruit, there are consequences. But you’re still free to choose. He’s not a puppet master. He’s not a master manipulator. He allows us to choose. Yeh, sometimes we choose things that aren’t great, and we live with the outcomes of those decisions. But we still have the autonomy.

He doesn’t want us to be fully self-governed, if we use that language. He wants us to follow Him and do what He says, but he also isn’t forcing that.

He allows us to be responsible for our own decisions, including the consequences of our decisions.

And I think, that’s one of the highest forms of love there is.

So for us, you know, regular human people, what does it look like to respect someone else’s autonomy? How can it play out in daily life?

Well, I’ve got just a few things here I think could help us grasp this and walk it out in our relationships:

1. Respect others’ boundaries and what they need.

This should always always always be a given, but I’ll say it again. If a person is brave enough to tell you what they need and what boundaries they need, too, listen to me. You need to respect that. You don’t have to meet every need they have (that’s impossible), but you definitely need to respect that they have found the courage to use their voice to say what they need and the wisdom to honor their own limits. Listen to them when they say these things. Really listen. What a way to honor their autonomy.

2. Refrain from telling someone the right thing to do or what you would do in a given situation.

This irks me to no end. I think as a parent, I’m finding this really hard to navigate. Like, I need to be the one to tell my kids what is wrong and what is right, but to an extent, I need to help them come to that conclusion on their own (in developmentally appropriate ways). For example, if my 4 yr. old Eden takes something out of her sister’s hands (eh hem, this happens daily), instead of me saying, “Don’t do that Eden. That’s not nice. Give it back.” (Which is my first reaction)… I can say, “Eden do you think it’s nice to take something out of your sister’s hands? Why? How would you feel if someone took something from you?” You hear the difference? The first one I’m telling Eden what is right. The second, I’m helping her understand the right thing and why it’s the right thing without pushing my opinion of it on her. She decides it on her own with some guidance from mom.

With adult relationships, this could be hard for people who struggle with being opinionated or think they know best. Sure there are some exceptions. A boss is allowed to tell their employees what to do at their job, but even this can become micromanaging. A friend is allowed to tell their friend to get in the passenger seat if their friend is intoxicated. A daughter is allowed to take her mom to the hospital if her mom is suicidal, even if her mom doesn’t want to go. If safety is a factor, you sometimes have to step in and boss people around a bit.

But there are going to be people every day who tell you things they’re thinking about or trying to make a decision about (big things and small). But I’m telling you it’s not helpful for them or you if you tell them what you think they should do. Hear them out. Gently challenge if they are becoming unhealthy or scary in their decisions. Encourage them to seek therapy if they seem to be making one bad decision after another. But try to refrain from telling them what you think they should do. And refrain from giving direct advice unless that’s asked of you. If they want your advice, then remember it’s okay if they don’t heed it. They still have the autonomy to choose.

3. Practice non-judgment.

So this is super important. I can’t imagine my life without close friends who are this way with me. They are excellent listeners, try to help me see other angles and other perspectives, and try to help me find hope if it’s there. But what they always do is treat me with a gentle loving kindness that’s hard to put in words. They may disagree with my thought process or a decision I’ve made, but if they do, they still allow me to make whatever decision that is. And they support me in those things, too, as long as they trust I’ve been wise about my decision. They validate how I feel. They even give me permission to be brutally honest about how I feel, even if it’s not how I was taught to do so from the church growing up.

Listen. If a person is consistently making decisions that hurt you or people you care about, or even themselves, and aren’t a safe person for you anymore, it’s okay to walk away or set some really serious boundaries. That is still a way to respect their autonomy while respecting your own at the same time.

Friend, we aren’t responsible for anyone’s decisions but our own. We must let people make their own choices and stop trying to mold them into replicas of us. This is making space for freedom in the relationship, and freedom is one of the key components of a healthy relationship.

So can we back off a bit if we’re being too controlling, too overbearing, too manipulative? Can we stop talking over people and listen instead? Can we respect other’s ability to choose? I need to work on these things, too. So we’re in this together.