When Therapy Undermines Marriage: How Differentiation Fails the Christian Model

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Can Crucible Therapy align with Christian marriage? It exalts autonomy over covenant and lacks proven results.

As mental health therapy becomes an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary life, it becomes more important to stop seeing the practice as a monolith and recognize it as a bundle of distinct practices, philosophies, and goals. Sometimes these different approaches even directly contradict one another.

Latter-day Saints understand the importance of caring for our mental health and often utilize mental health practitioners. But that doesn't mean every approach is worth trying or comports with Christian principles.

In therapy, these different approaches are called modalities. One modality that is becoming increasingly popular among Latter-day Saints is called differentiation or "crucible therapy." This marriage therapy has become widely shared by those who understand Latter-day Saint vocabulary and advertise themselves as therapists for Latter-day Saints.

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Differentiation therapy, however, conflicts with the principles of Christianity broadly and the Restored Gospel specifically. In addition, despite the modality's current popularity, there is little evidence that this approach works.

What is Differentiation Therapy?

Differentiation therapy is a psychotherapeutic model advanced by David Schnarch. It is also sometimes called "crucible therapy."

Schnarch posits that the purpose of our relationships is individual growth, and that the way to heal relationships is by focusing on our own needs, identity, and preferences separate from our partner.

Schnarch first published his theories in the early 1990s. He built on the ideas of one of the early practitioners of family therapy, Murray Bowen. Bowen pioneered systemic therapy, a therapeutic approach that recognizes how our struggles are often found within the complex system of relationships in a family. Bowen articulated "self-differentiation," the ability to recognize and define yourself as an individual within that system, as one of the items in tension in the family system.

Schnarch focused and emphasized self-differentiation, recontextualizing this idea within the affective domain of marital intimacy, asserting that the path to greater eroticism, emotional fulfillment, and personal development lies not in interdependent vulnerability but in cultivating emotional autonomy and self-definition. He contends that genuine intimacy emerges when each spouse remains firmly rooted in a differentiated self, experiencing anxiety within the relationship that spurs individual growth, and resisting the urge to seek validation from the other. Schnarch's framework

is built on the maxim that relational maturity is contingent on one's ability to "hold onto oneself," particularly in the face of emotional intensity.

The core assumptions of Schnarch's model are individual sovereignty, personal willpower, and emotional self-regulation. Crucible Marriage Therapy encourages clients to confront and often escalate interpersonal discomfort as a means of growth, bypassing traditional therapeutic emphases on mutual empathy, responsiveness, or repair. Crucible Therapy remains empirically unverified. Recent meta-analyses and long-term trials identify Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), and Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT) as well supported; Gottman-based interventions have emerging evidence for specific programs. No peer-reviewed, controlled clinical studies have demonstrated the long-term efficacy of Schnarch's model relative to these established frameworks.

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As Paul teaches in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good." Differentiation therapy doesn't hold up to those standards.

For Christian or Latter-day Saint engagement, any therapeutic model must be assessed through two interdependent criteria: its empirical reliability and its theological coherence. Specifically, a model must conform to a theology that affirms the covenantal, sacramental, and grace-dependent character of human relationships.

On both empirical and theological grounds, this model raises serious concerns.

Similarities to the Gospel

Before diving into why differentiation marriage therapy doesn't adhere to Christian theology, let's first grant that there is much about the ideology that can appeal to those in our tradition.

Crucible Therapy is so named because the idea is for us to improve ourselves like metal does in a crucible. This metaphor is familiar to Latter-day Saints, who have heard it

consistently in General Conference addresses for decades.

We want to grow, which sometimes requires us to do (or endure) difficult things. Joseph Smith even described his time in Liberty Jail as a "crucible."

Personal growth is a key component of the Latter-day Saint conception of life and the eternities, as we rely on the grace of Jesus Christ to become more like Him.

And we view marriage as a key pathway to achieving that personal growth. Elder Richard G. Scott described the overarching theme of the "eternal blessings of marriage" as "trying to be like Jesus."

Even the concept of self-differentiation itself is not opposed to the gospel. After all, in President Russell M. Nelson's 2008 formulation, salvation is "an individual matter." In each Latter-day Saint ordinance and covenant made from the first at baptism to the temple endowment, individuals participate independently.

The problem with differentiation therapy is not the ingredients, but rather the emphasis, proportions, and timing.

The Sacramental View of Marriage

Scripture and tradition present a vision of marriage not as a mere partnership but as a covenantal and ontological union. Genesis 2:24 and Mark 10:8 declare, "the two shall become one flesh," articulating a unity that transcends sentiment or legal arrangement. This union is sacramental, reflecting the mystery of divine communion and typifying the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church.

Within Latter-day Saint theology, this union also echoes the oneness of the Godhead and extends to eternal dimensions. Eternal marriage is not a symbolic ideal but a sacred ordinance that enables joint participation in the divine nature. In this view, marital unity is achieved through consecrated covenant keeping and divine grace.

President Gordon B. Hinckley famously warned that "selfishness is the great destroyer of happy family life." Christian ethics consistently portray the self not as autonomous but relationally constituted, and pride as the origin of spiritual alienation. Love entails

the displacement of self-centeredness. Schnarch's valorization of emotional self-sufficiency is in tension with Christ's self-emptying love.

The Catholic Church's document on pastoral care from the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes,* articulates a paradox at the heart of Christian growth: "man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." Identity is discovered not through independence but through the giving of the self. Marital love, accordingly, is not the negotiation of bounded selves but the mutual outpouring of personhood ordered toward oneness. The differentiated self posited by Crucible Therapy, shaped in solitude and guarded through strict boundaries, is incompatible with a theology rooted in covenant and communion.

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Schnarch does attempt to articulate an ideal of oneness near the end of his second book. He writes, "Holding onto yourself and becoming more differentiated actually leads to the loss of the self you've been holding onto." In this, he articulates a goal shared by Christians. But Schnarch gets the order precisely backward. In teaching the Twelve Apostles, Jesus said, "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Schnarchian Differentiation	Christian Marital Theology
Ontological goal: autonomous, self-defined individual capable of independent intimacy	Ontological goal: covenantal unity modeled after Christ's sacrificial bond with the Church
Mechanism: emotional boundary integrity and individual identity development	Mechanism: mutual submission, self-emptying, and transformative grace
Primary virtue: self-validation and independence	Primary virtue: charity, humility, and covenant fidelity
Source of transformation: intrapsychic growth and personal will	Source of transformation: the Holy Spirit and divine grace

The Rev. Lauren R.E. Larkin, an Episcopalian, notes that Schnarch's model implies what I might describe as a form of psychological soteriology in which transformation is self-engineered and internally sourced. In contrast, Christian soteriology comes from the sacrifice of the self in our relationship with Christ, and that happy marriage comes from applying the same principle.

Specific Theological and Pastoral Concerns

Schnarch's philosophy is hardly the only one to be at odds with the principles of Christianity. But it warrants attention both because of its growth among those providing therapy for Latter-day Saints and the specific negative behavioral outcomes it can produce.

Reframing of Selfishness as Growth

In Schnarch's paradigm, behaviors that prioritize the self over marital unity are reframed as developmental milestones. This conceptual move risks legitimizing patterns of emotional disengagement or moral abdication that Scripture identifies as destructive.

Devaluation of Mutual Dependence

Christian marriage presupposes mutual reliance and covenantal solidarity. Emotional interdependence is not pathological but redemptive. By pathologizing need and elevating stoicism, Crucible Therapy undermines the logic and purpose of marriage within the Christian life.

Therapeutic Destabilization of the Vulnerable

The deliberate intensification of anxiety may compound harm in couples already contending with trauma or asymmetry. Without a framework of mercy, discernment, and accountability, this method risks exacerbating wounds rather than fostering healing.

Psychological Work as Identity Formation

Crucible Therapy reflects and clinically adopts a broader cultural trend: the belief that personal identity is best discovered through solitary psychological excavation. For Christians, our truest identity is revealed not in looking inward but in looking upward—to God—and outward—to others.

Undermining the Redemptive Power of Weakness

Differentiation therapy often frames strength in a relationship as the ability to withstand emotional storms alone. But Latter-day Saint theology teaches that God's power is made perfect in our weakness, and our spouses as a "help-meet" for those challenges. Schnarch ignores the redemptive capacity of dependence.

Flattening the Eternal Narrative of Marriage

Perhaps most fundamentally, differentiation therapy assumes marriage is primarily a context for individual growth and erotic renewal. But for Latter-day Saints, marriage is the divine setting for exaltation. While it shares the desire for marriage to be a conduit for individual growth, the Latter-day Saint conception of marriage has a project much more lofty and eternal in mind.

Secular therapies can't be expected to fully integrate all gospel understanding. Still, we can avoid the ones whose explicit goals and practices set us toward different goals than those we are pursuing.

A couple prays together, illustrating healing and unity.

Toward a Christological Integration of Differentiation and Unity

The question of how to balance differentiation and unity—how to maintain personal identity while becoming "one" with another—is not merely a psychological puzzle but a theological one. For Christians, the life of Jesus Christ provides the supreme model for how distinctiveness and relational communion are held in perfect harmony. He is not only the exemplar of love but the embodiment of divine identity lived in full self-giving.

Throughout the New Testament, Christ's actions and teachings demonstrate a perfect union of individual authority and relational surrender. In John 5:30, He declares, "I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge … because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." Here we see a Savior who is fully self-aware and fully self-sacrificing. His divine agency is never wielded for isolation but always for communion—first with His Father, and then with those He came to redeem.

Jesus's earthly ministry also models emotional maturity that does not retreat into autonomy. He asks for companionship in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:38), and weeps with Mary and Martha (John 11:35). His invitation is not to harden one's emotional self, but to offer it—to bear another's burdens and mourn with those who mourn (Mosiah 18:9).

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The pre-mortal Christ likewise demonstrates an integrated identity in His dealings with Israel. In Exodus 3, He reveals Himself as "I AM," an assertion of sovereign selfhood. Yet He repeatedly binds Himself in covenant to His people, dwelling with them, feeding them, and pleading for their return. His identity is never diluted, but His divine selfhood is always offered for relationship.

In 3 Nephi, the resurrected Lord descends among the Nephites. What does He do? He weeps. He heals. He prays for their unity, invoking the language of divine indwelling: "that they may be one,

as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee" (3 Nephi 19:23). Here again, the goal is not emotional distance but sanctified closeness. Christ does not ask us to become strong by ourselves. He invites us to be made whole in Him. At no point is differentiation set against unity. Rather, disciples are expected to retain their agency and consecrate it—to grow, yes, but to grow *together*.

From this Christological lens, differentiation is not a prerequisite for unity, nor is unity a threat to identity. Instead, selfhood and love are co-eternal truths, fulfilled in covenant. The Savior does not command us to "hold onto ourselves" but to take up our cross. He does not sever our personhood; He sanctifies it in communion.

In Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we see the perfect integration of individuality and unity.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

For Latter-day Saints looking at what kinds of marriage therapy are appropriate for them and their circumstances, I have a few pieces of advice.

Not all therapists and therapeutic practices are created equal. As mental health resources are often in short supply, it can be tempting to visit the first person with a license and an opening. But it is worth being discerning, especially in a venue where we are opening up our hearts and minds to someone.

While "Latter-day Saint therapists" can be helpful (if unnecessary) in that journey, be careful to understand whether your therapist merely understands the vocabulary of Latter-day Saints or is committed to helping you maintain your worldview.

Ask about the modalities your therapist uses and their underlying philosophies. Be careful of therapists who don't know or won't explain them.

Preserve your moral and spiritual lexicon. Grace is not a synonym for internal resilience. Sin is not a developmental stage we grow out of.

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Based on my experience, observations, and analysis, my advice is for Latter-day Saints to exercise considerable caution before engagin in differentiation therapy or working with clinicians who practice it. There are approaches that better align with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and which the evidence shows work better.

> are well-established and have empirical evidence supporting them.

David Schnarch's Crucible/Differentiation Marriage Therapy presents a psychologically articulate, but ultimately inadequate framework for relational transformation. Its emphasis on self-validation, emotional independence, and internal differentiation diverges from the best practices evidence shows work and the covenantal, grace-saturated vision of Christian marriage.

About the author

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