What Creates Feelings of Freedom in Partnership?

Four years ago, I sat on my couch in my Palo Alto apartment, my face crumpling as I sobbed into my hands, feeling so *helpless* at what to do and how to move forward.

My friend Ana had reflected to me on a call earlier that I seemed asphyxiated whenever I talked about my marriage. Dreams deflated. Desires held back. Feelings boxed in.

“I actually feel *more* free in my marriage,” she'd said. When her husband championed and supported her, she felt capable of doing more in the world.

I certainly didn't feel that way — at least not anymore.

For several months, I oscillated between feeling confident and feeling terrified about leaving the 17-year-long relationship that had been a core part of my entire adult life.

When I finally left, I tasted the sweet, newfound freedom of single life — only to fall madly in love months later with my future wife Candace Sauve.



Here's the kicker. We typically associate the jumping into new relationships and the end of single life with a loss of freedom.

But surprisingly, in entering a new partnership, I discovered an even greater level of freedom than I imagined possible. And it's been a continuous journey of becoming more and more free.

How so?

It boils down to two commitments in the relationship:

1. Our commitment to unconditional love creates an ever-growing **safe haven** where we feel increasingly accepted as we are.
2. Our commitment to champion each other's freedom and authentic expression creates a **secure base** where we're supported in our continual growth.

Together, those two create a foundation for the freedom to be ourselves in the day-to-day and to take bigger risks in the world.

How Safe Do You Feel To Be Yourself in Your Relationship?

It's only in this partnership that I've learned what unconditional love truly is — accepting the person as they are, without needing them to change.

Can our partner be with and hold us in our grief, anger, disappointment, joy, jealousy, and other emotions without needing them to go away? And can *we* be with our partner's emotions — even when they cause us pain or discomfort?

In the very early days of our relationship, I felt embarrassed and a bit ashamed to shed tears and show sadness in front of her — now it's rare to have a day when tears don't move from *something*.

I feel more and more free to reveal parts of myself, as does she.

There are still parts, of course, that are difficult to be seen in — disappointment, anger, and shame, to name a few. After all, our ability to be with and love someone in a given emotional state is limited by our ability to be with and love ourselves in that same state.

But our commitment to doing our own inner work — to deepen our own self-love and self-acceptance through coaching, meditation, reflection, and even plant medicine — so that we can be and love more of what shows up creates an increasingly safer haven for each other.

In her book *Polysecure*, psychotherapist Jessica Fern writes that we have a safe haven "when our partners care about our safety, seek to respond to our distress, help us to co-regulate and soothe and are a source of emotional and physical support and comfort."

The safer the haven, the more free we feel to be supported as we go inward and move through difficult emotions when times get rough.

When I was going through mediation for my divorce, I received an email right before a mediation session that threw my nervous system into panic and shock. I feared potentially losing rights to a book that I'd poured years of heart and soul into, just because it was written while I was married.

I don't have kids of my own (yet), and the experience was the closest I'd come to losing something I considered my baby. Candace guided me back to my breath under some redwood trees and put her hands on my body to ground me back to earth — so that I could show up calm and collected in mediation hours later.

I was able to do more that day because she functioned as such a safe haven for me.

How Supported Do You Feel in Taking Bigger Risks?

Candace and I share a value around growing our sense of freedom — we both want to feel fully alive to make the most of this one precious life. And part of our commitment to each other is to support each other in shining the brightest that we can be in our lifelong journeys.

The degree to which we feel empowered to take bolder risks — as a result of being in partnership — is the degree to which it's a secure base for us.

In *Polysecure,* Fern writes that we have a secure base when our partners "provide the platform from which we can move out in the larger world, explore, and take risks."

This certainly applies for big life choices.

I'd dreamt of doing a year of travel for many years, but the idea of packing everything into storage AND managing my business AND navigating the uncertainty of world travel felt overwhelming for a long time. With Candace, all the risks and choices in deciding to become nomads not only felt manageable but also adventurous — even during COVID.

I'm also a very iterative entrepreneur, usually only dreaming of the next incremental product or program to create and build, based on what I already know. Our partnership has helped me to dream bigger. I want to write a New York Times bestselling memoir some day — and even though I don't know the steps to get there yet, my partnership has fostered a self-confidence that makes considering the dream possible.

But it's not just the big life choices where this matters. Partnership has also provided a secure base in the micro-moments in life as well, supporting me taking bolder risks in the everyday.

Creating a deeper connection with my parents has always felt challenging for me, especially given that neither my Chinese nor their English is that great. The nudging she's done during Christmas family dinners for me to guide the group conversations to a deeper, heartfelt level ("Mom, what's a time when you felt courageous?") has created so much more shared connection. One of my favorite moments was getting my family members to pick their top values from a list of values from Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead* — something that helped me understand everyone on such a deeper level.

Sometimes, the championing of personal freedom leads to sadness or jealousy for the other, and that's okay too.

We **love** spending time with one another — we're each other's favorite person. At the same time, we also know that our individual journeys in life also matter.

I spent three weeks away to hike Kilimanjaro and safari with my brother — because it was what my soul needed — while she spent that time emotionally supporting a few of her friends going through egg freezing. We certainly expressed missing each other, but we also championed each other's freedom.

And sometimes, we make close friends that lead the other to feel jealous. It can be easy to try to control each other's behavior ("Don't hang out with her! You shouldn't feel jealous!") But rather than try to make the other person's desires or feelings wrong, we do our best to communicate what's hurting and ask for the reassurances we need ("I'm afraid you're not 100% devoted to me, and I need you to re-assure me that you are.").

We're not perfect at it — we're still human after all. But we share a deep commitment to keep asking ourselves, "How can I expand my ability to accept and love whatever my partner or I are feeling?" And that commitment means that we move closer everyday to unconditional love and the freedom it affords to be ourselves and to take risks.

I feel more freedom today than I've ever felt in my life. My dreams grow bigger. My desires and feelings get more and more authentically expressed every day. And that's due in large part to the safe haven and secure base that we're co-creating in our partnership.