

Independence concerns your ability to operate on your own, without relying on the thoughts and actions of others.

Like all areas of emotional intelligence, your level of Independence, is a combination of nature (what you were born with), and nurture (how you've developed). If you have worked in many positions where you operate autonomously, then that will contribute to your sense of independence. Similarly, if you have always worked as part of a team, particularly where there is a great deal of group decision making, you may operate less independently of others. Your Independence can be part choice, part conditioning.

This is one of the most interesting things about emotional intelligence. You don't *have* to behave a certain way, just because you can. You may choose to reduce your demonstrations of emotional intelligence in a certain area, or you may decide to use it to your maximum capacity. We call this 'discretionary use'.

People with a high level of independence will care very little about what others think of them. They will make decisions autonomously and tend not to be easily influenced by others. They are often very self-directed and will take action on their own.

In contrast, people with lower levels of Independence are more comfortable being told what to do. They tend to be followers more than leaders, and may look to others for reassurance, guidance, or advice.

Many people struggle with lower levels of independence, caring too much about what others will say about them, or how they will be judged. This impact can vary greatly based on their relationship with the other person. You may care little about what a complete stranger thinks but care greatly about what a family member may think.

People who worry too much about the opinions of others often avoid situations that make them vulnerable to criticism. They hesitate to put their own ideas forward. As the old saying goes, “doubt has killed more dreams than failure ever will.” We’ll never know how many ideas the world has lost through fear of criticism. If this resonates with you personally, you may have a lower level of Independence.

When you think about your own Independence, what comes to mind? Think about the last time you had to make a significant decision. Did you rely heavily on the advice or guidance of others, or did you do most of the thinking on your own, perhaps asking others what they thought of your ideas, but not necessarily letting them overly influence you?

To explore your own Independence, consider the following reflective questions.

1. Think back to a time when you acted in a very independent way - taking control of a situation and making decisions on your own. What was the situation, and what empowered you to act that way?
2. Think of a recent situation when you didn’t say something, or didn’t do something, that you wanted to, because of concern about how people would judge you. What was the situation, and what did you believe other people would think?
3. What is one thing that you would like to say or do in your current situation, at work or at home, that you’re holding back on out of concern for how others may judge you? Realistically, what is the worst possible outcome if you do act or speak up? What is the best possible outcome? (Hint: the reality is likely somewhere in the middle!)

Here are some things you can do to build your Independence:

1. Try a new activity by yourself (for example, go to a movie, an art gallery, an exercise class, a craft or music workshop.)
2. Politely say 'no' to a request for your time when you know the request will only benefit the other person.
3. Where it's appropriate, practical, and reasonable, make decisions without consulting anyone.

Working With Others

Working with people who have a low level of Independence can be very challenging. They need constant reassurance that what they are doing is correct and will frequently look to others to take charge in a situation.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a lower level of independence:

1. Recognize that making decisions or taking action is hard for them. If they need to act or decide, support them.
2. Provide respectful, positive feedback, ideally before they ask.
3. In group decision making situations, try to have them state their opinion or perspective first. Otherwise, they'll just agree with others, and you may miss out on valuable ideas or solutions.

People with a very high level of Independence can be equally challenging as they may not feel a need to consult with others and are happy to make decisions on their own. The risk is they can sometimes miss the benefits of collaborating with others. Perhaps worse, if they are also high in other areas of emotional intelligence, like Self-Regard that we talked about in the last lesson,

they may see consulting with others as a waste of time. After all, they feel, it's quite likely that their perspective is correct, and there is no need to consult with others.

Here are three tips for working with someone who has a higher level of Independence:

1. Understand that making decisions and acting individually comes naturally to this person. If you need them to consult with others, that expectation needs to be made clear.
2. This person may see reassurance or feedback as patronizing, false, and unnecessary. If you do provide reassurance, make it very specific so that it doesn't seem like judgment or advice.
3. If you have a different perspective or idea from theirs, introduce that to the discussion early. The further down the road a highly Independent person gets with their own approach, the more determined they will become.