

Boundaries and Recovery

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Trauma occurs as the result of boundary failure. When a person's dignity is violated in some manner by another person or group, trauma results. A huge part of healing from trauma therefore is to rebuild the boundaries, and in some cases, the walls necessary to reestablish the safe harbor. It is toxic relationships that wound us, and it is healthy relationships that heal us as well. One effect of trauma is the inability to form and maintain healthy intimacy within relationships; traumatized people typically respond to others as an intimacy avoidant or intimacy addict, both of which paradoxically deprive people of genuine, life-giving intimacy with others. But there is a solution. And there is no single element more necessary in attaining that solution than to set healthy boundaries.

What is a boundary? A boundary is a limit you place on the ability of others to affect you—an *internal* discipline of self-containment. Contrary to popular thinking, boundaries are not about controlling the other; rather, boundaries are about self-control, which is one characteristic of the fruit of the indwelling Spirit (Galatians 5:23). Children do not know how to set boundaries. It is up to adults to teach them how to limit how others affect them—to learn to say and hear yes and no. Boundaries maintain not only our dignity, but they also preserve the dignity of the other from experiencing our possible toxic and immature response to them.

Setting boundaries. One way to exercise boundaries is to *share* to be known by others and to *listen* with curiosity to others. Blame is not a part of healthy conversation. When we share to be known we are simply sharing data about ourselves: our thoughts, emotions, needs, and wants. We are NOT indicting the other person for making us think or feel a certain way, for no one can make an adult feel or think anything. When you share, you are simply communicating information about how you responded to what you saw and/or heard. And when you listen, you are simply seeking to understand what that person is saying about themselves, not you. They may refer to you, but that is only their opinion and experience, it is not an indictment unless you make it so, and it is not necessarily true. It is simply the other person making themselves known to you.

There are, of course, limits as to how much you may want to hear about the other person, and it is your responsibility to make that limit known, and the same may be true for how much the other wants to hear about you. There is nothing wrong with saying, or hearing, “That’s enough.” No one is obligated to listen to you, nor are you obligated to listen to another. But if it is agreed that communication is to occur, these talking boundaries will help ensure that the conversation improves healthy intimacy and not deteriorate into a blaming session. One more thing: You are not responsible for how others respond to your boundaries. Period.

Below is a Self-Check-In form that may be used to teach yourself to contain how you respond to people, places, and things.

When I (**saw, heard**) _____.

What I **thought** was _____.

What I **felt** was (emotion) _____.

Doing this twice per day is an excellent spiritual discipline and will help you to recapture control of how other people, places, and things affect you. Once you know what you think and feel, you can set limits, and you can challenge your own negative thoughts and replace those thoughts with what is true about you. Remember, the **thought** is about you, not the other (I thought, “I am not enough” or “I deserve to be abused” or “I am loved”). And the **feeling** is an emotion: Anger, Fear, Pain, Joy, Passion, Love, Shame, Guilt.

All healthy relationships involve healthy boundaries.

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