

Maintaining Our Boundaries

by Deb Elkin, LPC

What exactly are boundaries you might ask. Boundaries are the borders, the limits, that help us distinguish ourselves as separate from others. They help you define where you end and where someone else begins.

When we are clear about our boundaries, we know what behaviors we will accept or not accept from others (and ourselves!), what is appropriate for us and what is not. And when we know that, we have a clearer sense of ourselves and of our relationship with others. Having clear boundaries assures us that we will protect ourselves from others. Knowing all of this helps to keep us safe.

There are many different kinds of boundaries.

- Physical boundaries - they let you know how close people can get to you, and who can touch you and how.
- Sexual boundaries - they let you know who can touch you and how, sexually. They help you set limits on what is safe and appropriate.
- Emotional boundaries - they determine how you let others treat you.
- Spiritual boundaries - they help you claim that you are the only one who knows the right spiritual path for you.

People approach boundaries in many different ways. Some people have healthy and strong boundaries - they know who they are, what they feel, what they want, what their limits are, and they don't give that away or let others talk them out of it. Others' boundaries may not be so healthy. They may be too rigid or inflexible which feels controlling and keeps people at a distance. Or they may be too fluid and permeable which can lead to enmeshment and loss of self. This gets confusing because there are no clear limits or standards. This lack of clarity sets the stage for boundary violations.

Boundary violations occur when someone, whether it's knowingly or not, intentional or not, crosses over the boundary that you have set for yourself. If someone's words or behaviors don't feel good, if they make you uncomfortable, anxious or angry, then your boundary has been crossed. If you can express it and get heard and responded to appropriately, then it can be quickly healed. If not, you need to protect yourself to keep your boundaries intact.

If we have boundary problems, often they were violated in some way during our childhood years which set the stage for our not having strong, clear boundaries or having too strong boundaries as an adult. So how do you improve your boundaries now?

- Through journaling, meditating, or other self-reflective means, begin to identify and get clear on how you let your boundaries get violated. You may want to explore how your childhood boundaries were violated and who the offenders were. Knowing this can help you understand your current patterns and know where the healing work needs to begin.

- Begin to increase your self-awareness. Pay better attention to your feelings, your needs, what's working and what's not working in your life. Take yourself seriously. When you do, your boundaries will grow stronger because you're not discounting yourself or giving yourself away.
- Examine your boundaries in your current relationships. See where you need to make changes.
- Get support. Talk to a trusted friend or family member. If it feels scary or overwhelming, or if you need help getting started or working through some part(s) of this, see a counselor or therapist to help you see it through.

When your boundaries are strong, healthy and clear, life will be easier and you will feel much better about yourself. You will feel safer being in the world and have a much better sense of yourself.

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