

Boundaries as a Recovery Concept

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Does the concept of "boundaries" confuse you? If so, you are in good company. The concept of "setting boundaries" has become synonymous with assertiveness". Boundaries have to do defining personal external space and limiting internal emotional baggage. Boundaries are a reflection of our sense of personal rights and responsibilities. The purpose of boundaries is to be able to be comfortable with ourselves and to be comfortable while engaging in meaningful relationships with others.

Popular use of the concept of "boundaries" is different from family systems theory definition and descriptions. In a recovery movement context, "boundary issues" have been used variously to describe difficulty with defining a sense of self, difficulty in distinguishing your own feelings, problems, and responsibilities from others', and the need to clarify your rights to others. "Setting boundaries" has also been used synonymously with setting limits with others.

Boundaries conceptualize personal territory that when invaded, creates a sense of discomfort. Boundaries can be viewed as personally enforced dividing lines that that define, separate, and protect us from the world. "Setting boundaries" might involve telling someone they can't use/abuse us or take something from us. Boundaries mark the personal territory of body, mind, feelings, possessions, and rights. Development of healthy boundaries is related to assertiveness, detachment, self-esteem, responsibility for one's own feelings, and personal sense of spirituality.

Where does our sense of boundaries come from? Boundaries are initially learned from our very early days when we notice that mother is an "other" rather than extension or part of self. It continues with learning the spoken and unspoken rules in the family. An example of a rule and a boundary learned from your family might be the directive, "we don't talk about mom getting drunk and passing out on the floor to people outside the family". Alcoholic families tend to have rigid or enmeshed boundaries, which severely limits communication between family members or others. Rigid boundaries tend to be associated with disengaged families, where members are very psychologically distant from one another. On the other extreme are the enmeshed families, where boundaries are blurred and unclear. Enmeshment involves an unhealthy amount of closeness and intensity between family members.

The two extremes, disengaged or enmeshed family systems lead to major "boundary issues" in adult relationships. Disengaged families with rigid boundaries make it difficult for family members to allow others to get close to them. Enmeshed families, with weak boundaries, tend to create a tendency toward over-involvement with others, and the sense of losing one's own identity in the process. Alcoholic families also have some tendency to move back and forth between enmeshment and disengagement as they move in and out of crises.

One major goal in recovery is to develop healthy boundaries. Healthy families have boundaries that allows each family member to feel confident in their assessment of reality. Healthy family boundaries clearly define appropriate roles, responsibilities, and acceptable behavior. Boundaries don't shift according to the mood of the most powerful person in the family. Healthy family boundaries encourage self-sufficiency, freedom to disclose feelings, wants, and needs. Healthy boundaries are reliable and consistent over time but are flexible enough to change as family circumstances and membership changes. Healthy boundaries allow each person to take care of their own individual needs and responsibilities while maintaining an appropriate level of connection/closeness to others.

Recovery is a challenging time, regardless of whether you are the recovering addict or a family member. A casualty in the family dynamics of addiction can be the development of unhealthy boundaries or a loss of boundaries. One of the tasks of recovery for everyone is to develop healthy boundaries. Sometimes people in recovery have to learn or re-learn what the appropriate roles and codes of behavior are for various family members and for others outside of the family. It involves defining and describing that personal space and sense of appropriate treatment by others. It also involves defining appropriate treatment of others. An example could be the family member who gives frequent unsolicited advice, with the expectation that you will follow that advice. Setting the boundaries with this family member might involve telling them that you don't want or need their advice or thanking them for their concern, while saying that you will be making a decision by weighing the merits of your own pros and cons.

"Boundaries" also involves identifying what we as individuals are responsible for, and what we are not responsible for. A simple example could be that your spouse expects you to be the one to clean the windows, and you "set the boundary" with that, by saying "I don't care for washing windows; let's see what else we can figure out". Another example could be that the alcoholic blames family members for their drinking. The boundary is knowing the reality--that family members do not make the alcoholic drink. The alcoholism makes the alcoholic drink. Setting the boundary might involve telling the alcoholic that you know you are not responsible and requesting that s/he quit saying it.

With a healthy sense of personal boundaries, we begin to listen to and trust ourselves and others. We do not have to accept warranted blame or unreasonable responsibility from others. With a healthy sense of boundaries, you can believe that you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, that your wants, needs, and preferences are important, that you have personal rights, and that you have responsibility for self. As your sense of boundaries become clearer to you, they will become clearer to others. You will also be able to communicate those boundaries to others without acting out feelings. Appropriate boundaries and a clear sense of self allow us to get close to others without fear of rejection or engulfment.

The task of identifying your boundaries and clearly communicating them to others is not an easy recovery task. It takes courage, practice, and patience. Just as with any new

skill you are learning, the more you practice, the better you get at it. The advantages are tremendous for being able to set and maintain appropriate boundaries. This skill enhances your ability to communicate and problem solve, to risk being close with others, and to feel confident in your ability to know what is really going on in your relationships and to act accordingly.

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