

**Boundaries, Bottom Lines, and Threats-
Knowing the Difference Can
Empower Family Member Recovery
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

One of the most frequent questions by family members of alcoholics/addicts is "What's the difference between boundaries, bottom lines, and threats?" Before these significant others get very far into recovery, they hear these terms and are confused. Clearing up the confusion with definitions makes a good beginning, but application gives these concepts the most meaning.

A bottom line is tangible definition of what you will or will not tolerate in your life. A threat is a declaration of expectations and consequences if that expectation is not met. The major difference between bottom lines and threats is **motivation**. One's motivation in communicating a bottom line is to take responsibility for self. When you develop awareness of your bottom line, you know, without doubt, what you are willing to have in your life and what you aren't willing to tolerate in your life. When you take responsibility for your own growth and development, recovery, welfare and happiness, you guard it zealously. To do that, you set and maintain limits as to how much we allow others to contribute those things that impede that growth, recovery, and welfare. So, in communicating a bottom line, we are motivated to take care of our own lives, taking full responsibility for our choices, our happiness or unhappiness.

You may use the exact same words to communicate a bottom line as you would to make a threat. Nevertheless, they are not the same. Threats are motivated by the desire to change someone else. When we make a threat, we are doing so in an attempt to get them to change. We may be convinced that whatever it is that we are trying to get them to do is best for them and for us. We may believe that our intentions are about trying to look out for their welfare. But in this process we are trying to take responsibility for someone else--their life, their decisions, their recovery or disease, their happiness or misery.

In working the first three steps we know that we do not have power over other people. When we are trying to change someone else, through threats, we are not taking responsibility for self. We are investing our efforts in a place where we will have little power over the outcomes. Self is the one place that we do have some power. We do have power over our own behavior, attitudes, decisions, and happiness.

The communication of bottom lines and threats feel different. In communicating a threat we probably have an underlying feeling of uneasiness and fear about what our next step might be when they don't do what we are asking. A bottom line feels solid as you decide what you are willing to have in your life and what you aren't willing to have. You know that you mean it. Its immutable. A threat feels uneasy and scary. Any resolve to stick to a threat eventually yields to opposition. Threats maintain the status quo. Bottom lines effect change. The difference is in the motivation.

Maintaining bottom lines is facilitated by setting boundaries. Generally speaking, boundaries are borders that delineate, separate, and defend us from the world. Setting

protective limits might include denying others the permission to use us, abuse us, take from us, or take us for granted. Boundaries are a demarcation of personal territory. They define where we begin and end. They define areas of responsibility and power. They define our rights and limits in relationships, as citizens, and as human beings. These limits are communicated with assertiveness, with self-confidence, and with self-responsibility. They define a healthy detachment from that which we are not responsible, and promote self-efficacy.

Identification of your bottom lines in relationships and maintaining them through communication of boundaries promotes recovery, self-esteem, and empowerment. Threats reinforce denial, maintain dysfunctional games, increase anxiety, and reduce self-esteem.

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