Boundaries, Fear, and Personal Power

I. What Are Boundaries?

Despite how simple and clear the concept of boundaries can seem at first blush, any person who has struggled with boundaries can tell you how murky the concept becomes when they begin the process of identifying and enacting their boundaries. Additionally, people that struggle to set and maintain boundaries get confused about their personal rights in relationships, when a boundary ends and control of the other person begins, etc.

When I'm talking to patients, I define boundaries as the parameters we must put in place in our lives to function optimally and feel safe. Even this definition ultimately leads patients to murky waters, so I follow up with an analogy.

My third grade teacher's name was Ms. Gosby. She had a variety of classroom rules we had to follow. *Raise your hand before speaking. Ask permission to leave your seat. Keep your hands to yourself. Stay on task. Don't copy off your neighbor's work.* Why did Ms. Gosby have these rules? Was she a tyrant? Controlling? No, she had a job to do: teach. And she knew that us kids had a job to do: learn. In order to ensure that all of us could do our jobs effectively, she had a set of rules (aka: boundaries) in place to maximize our collective functioning.

Image source: pngtree

This is how personal boundaries are supposed to work as well. If I battled insomnia for a decade, finally fine-tuned my sleep hygiene, and know that staying up late to watch a movie risks reigniting my insomnia, my necessary boundary is that I can't stay up late.

Necessary boundaries vary wildly from one person to the next and are nuanced by one's own history, conditioning, genetics, physiological sensitivities, resources, etc. This level of nuance is a big part of why boundaries are confusing and can't be standardized from one person to the next.

In order to set and maintain our boundaries, we first need to study ourselves to become the expert of what we need to function optimally.

To start this task, make as exhaustive a list as possible of the factors, situations, and circumstances that you know make you function less well. **What I need to reduce or have removed from my life:**

_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____

Next, make an exhaustive a list as possible of the factors, situations, and circumstances that make you function better. *[Note: This shouldn't be just the opposite of the above list.]* **What I need more of in my life:**
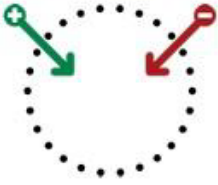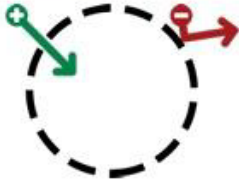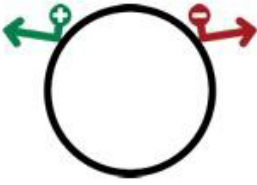
_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____
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_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____

II. Boundary Styles

Now that you have a better idea of what your personal boundaries are, it's important to understand how boundaries work. First, people tend to have different baseline styles of boundaries: porous, healthy, or rigid, as depicted in the graphic below. Notably, some people can have two boundary styles that they move between based on who it is regarding. For example, they may have rigid boundaries with their dysfunctional family of origin – but porous boundaries with their intimate partner or friends.

Review the graphic below to answer the questions that follow.

Boundary Styles

Boundaries define what is acceptable, and what is not, in a relationship. It is possible to have different boundary types in different relationships.

Porous Boundaries	Healthy Boundaries	Rigid Boundaries
Lets almost anyone get close to them	Selective about whom to let in and keep out	Keeps most people at a distance
Overly trusting of others, even strangers	Takes time to build trust with others	Very untrusting of others
Overshares personal information	Shares personal information appropriately	Very guarded with personal information
Has difficulty saying "no" to others	Able to say "no" when needed	Says "no" to others most of the time
Overly involved in others' problems	Supports others without being too involved	Detached from others' problems
Quick to adopt others' opinions	Values both own and others' opinions	Tends to ignore others' opinions
Avoids conflict by giving in to others	Accepts conflict as a normal part of life	Avoids conflict by pushing others away
Does not assert personal values	Stands by personal values, but can adapt	Has inflexible personal values
Communicates passively	Communicates assertively	Communicates aggressively

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What is your primary boundary style? _____

Where do you think that comes from? _____
_____
_____
_____

Do you have different boundary styles depending on who the audience is? If so, who and why? _____

_____

_____

_____

III. Why Some People Struggle to Set and Enforce Boundaries

There are many reasons why a person may struggle to set and/or maintain boundaries, and these reasons can be as broad as collectivist cultural roots, socialized gender roles that emphasize being friendly or helpful, or religious values that highlight charity or personal sacrifice.

While there are normative levels of boundary difficulties, there are also pathological levels that often stem from more insidious roots. These roots either overtly or covertly tell a person that they aren't allowed to set boundaries, and some of that messaging further tells the person that they have no rights, aren't worthy of boundaries, and/or deserve suffering. Some of those insidious roots are:

- Childhood physical abuse
- Childhood sexual abuse
- Childhood verbal abuse
- Childhood emotional abuse
- Childhood neglect
- Intrusive and/or controlling parenting
- Witnessing domestic violence
- High conflict household
- Designated "roles" to please or manage parent(s)
- Parentification (i.e., role reversal with parents)
- Sibling or parent severe or chronic illness or death
- Abandonment (e.g., via divorce, incarceration, foster care, etc.)
- Traumatic adoption
- Parental addiction
- Parental mental illness
- Domestic violence
- Sexual assault
- Dehumanization

These circumstances have well-established associations with negative long-term outcomes (e.g., mental health problems, relationship problems, addictions, underachievement, criminal involvement, chronic illness, etc.). As concerning as those tangible negative outcomes are, any therapist can tell you that there's also a litany of less frequently named negative outcomes (e.g., poor self-worth, conflict avoidance,

codependency, inadequate buy-in to personal rights, trauma responses, numbness to maltreatment, poor self-efficacy, role recapitulation, people pleasing, perfectionism, etc.).

Bronfenbrenner introduced the *Ecological Systems Theory*, which provides us a useful way of examining how various aspects of our childhoods influenced our worldviews. Use the graphic below to consider the various levels of influence in your childhood.
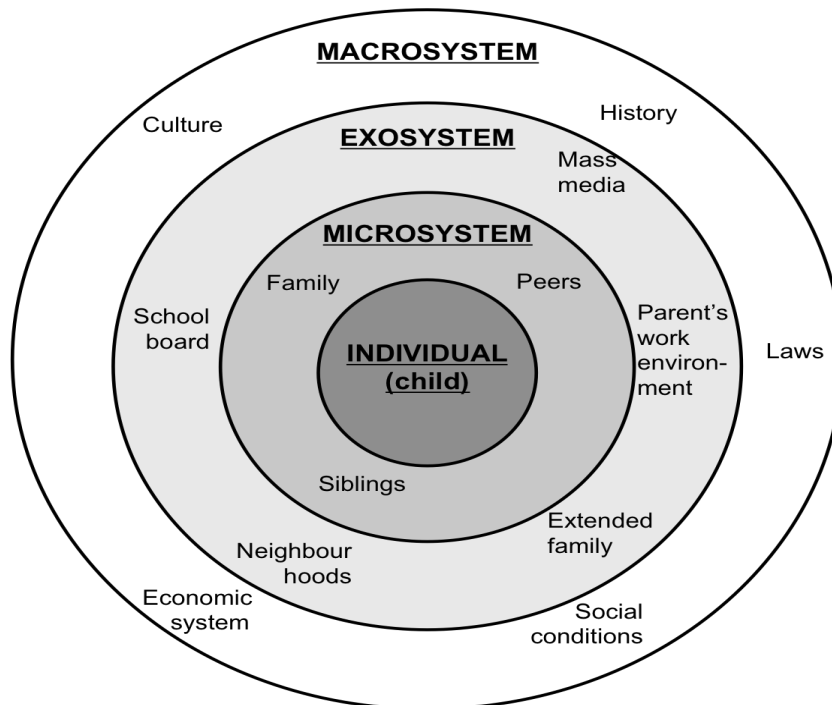

Image source: Eisenmann et al., BMC Public Health, 2008

What messages and modeled behaviors influenced your perspectives on boundary setting in your formative years?

Source of influence	Message(s) or behavior(s) modeled
Parents	
Sibling(s)	
Neighborhood	
School	
Teachers	
Peers	

Source of influence	Message(s) or behavior(s) modeled
Church	
Extended family	
Parents' friends	
Medical professionals	
City	
State	
Nation	
Culture	
Media and/or pop culture	
Laws	
Economic circumstances	

In examining the messaging from your table, did any themes emerge? If so, what were they? _____
_____
_____
_____

Panning back to incorporate all sources of influence, what beliefs about boundary setting do you think you've internalized? _____
_____
_____
_____

IV. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Poor Boundaries

Arguably, there is no mega-truth about the rightness or wrongness of setting or not setting a boundary in a specific situation in a nanosecond of time, but if you're doing this exercise, it's likely that poor boundary setting has caused you some heartburn. For this reason (and to explore your commitment to change), it's wise to assess what poor boundaries cost you and how they benefit you.

Using the scale below, consider times when you struggle with setting boundaries, and list how those instances cost you something and how they benefit you in some way. (Example: Cost = unable to be authentic, Benefit = keeping the peace)

COSTS   **BENEFITS**

_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____

COSTS   BENEFITS
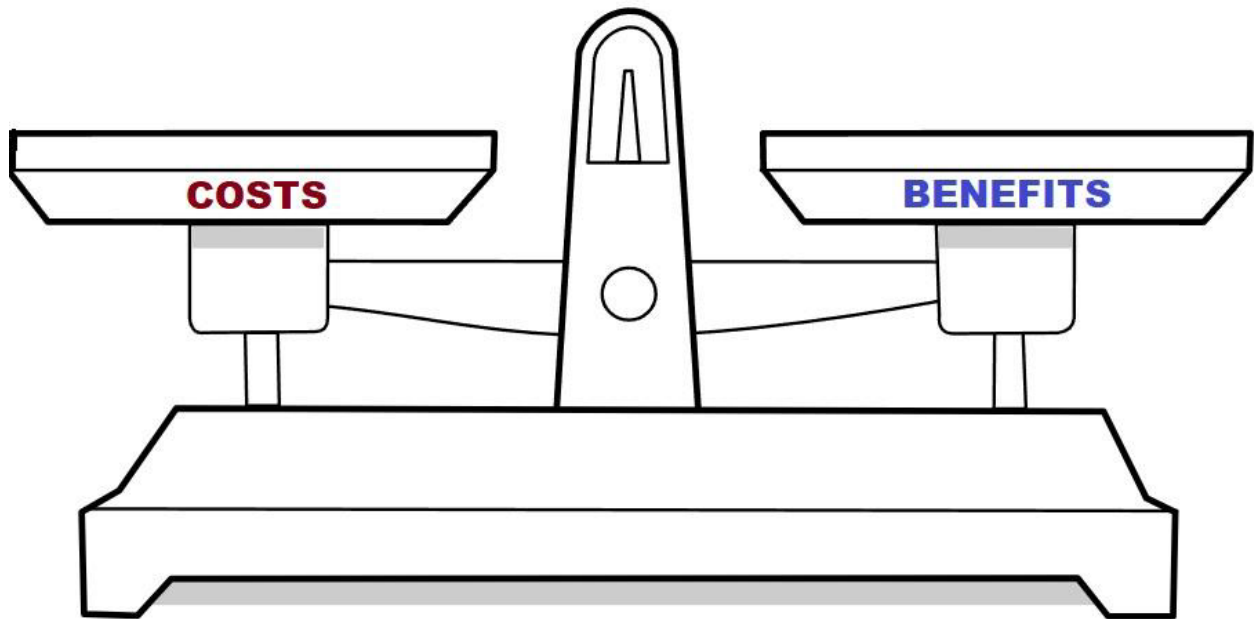
Image adapted from: publicdomainvectors.org

What is your most painful cost of poor boundary setting and why? _____
_____
_____
_____

What is your most prominent benefit of poor boundary setting and why? _____
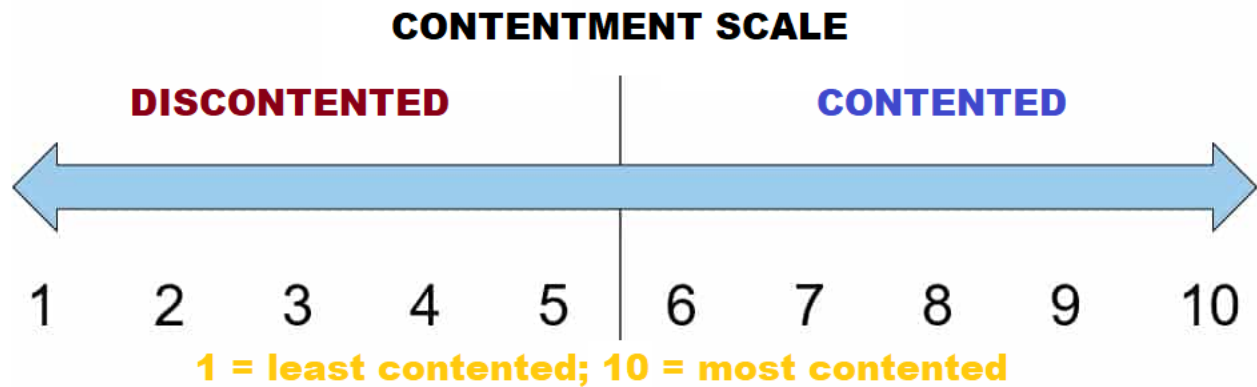_____
_____
_____

Which of the two above are more important to you and why? _____
_____
_____
_____

It is important to note that not all costs and/or benefits are equally weighted. Some costs are tiny, some benefits are gigantic, and vice versa. To help you decipher the relative weight of each of your costs and benefits, consider placing a numeric value beside each using the scale below.

CONTENTMENT SCALE

DISCONTENTED   **CONTENTED**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

1 = least contented; 10 = most contented

Standing back and examining your entire list of costs and benefits, do your deficits in boundary setting cost you more or benefit you more? How? _____
_____
_____
_____

V. People Pleasing vs. Anger

People who struggle with boundaries commonly describe moving between seemingly opposite reactions: automatic people pleasing or anger. Given the context of boundary problems, people pleasing isn't surprising, but what about anger? Why might anger be a reaction to feeling unable to set boundaries?

To answer this, we must first consider that anger is a secondary emotion. That is, there is a deeper emotion (or set of emotions) that precedes anger. That deeper emotion can vary from one person to the next and one situation to the next – and can range from

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resentment to invalidation. Across people and situations, a common root emotion associated with boundary struggles is powerlessness.
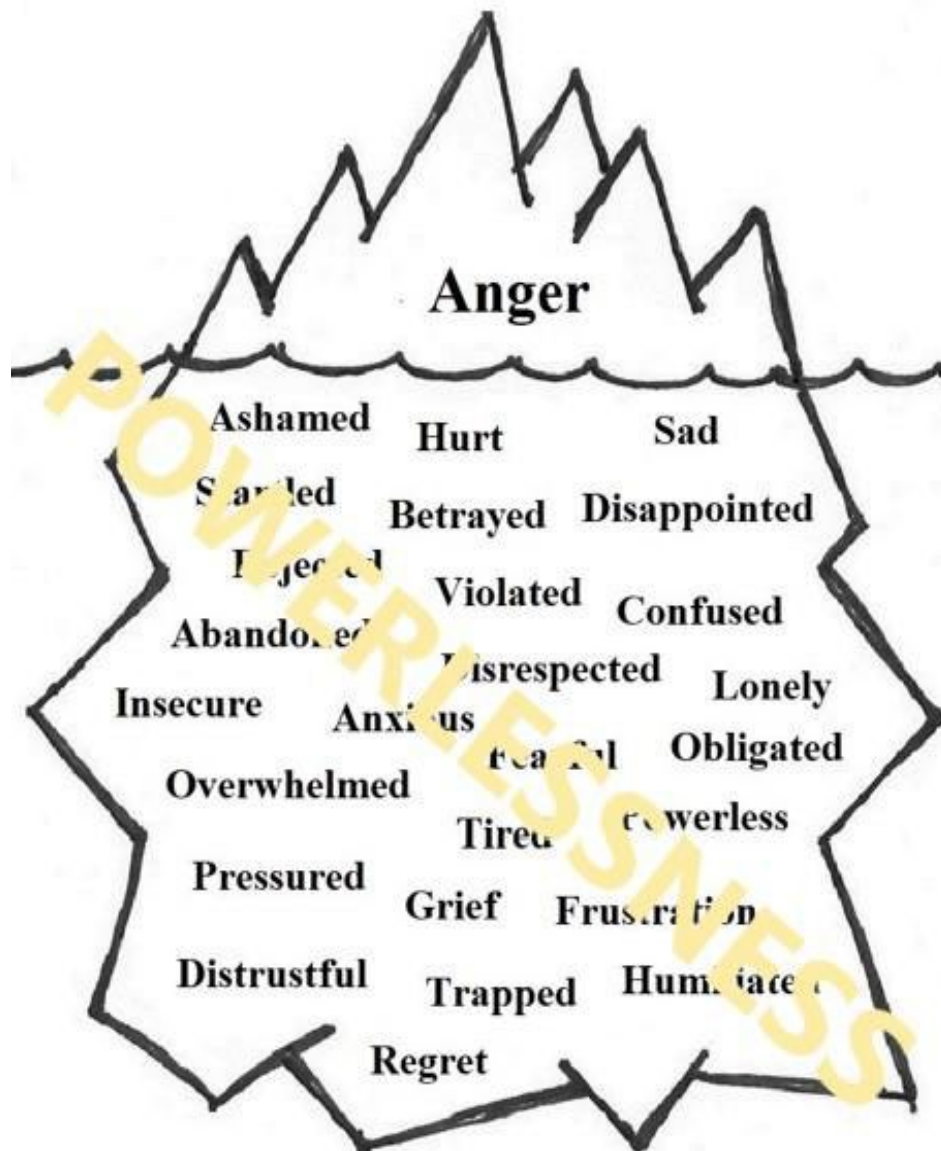
So if an underlying emotion of anger is, for example, powerlessness, what's with the anger? We have secondary emotions (like anger) to serve some function, and arguably, the function of anger is to make us feel less vulnerable (aka: unsafe) than what the root emotion makes us feel. Feeling powerless is the epitome of vulnerability, which doesn't feel safe. As a result, we unconsciously shift to a more powerful-feeling emotion – such as anger.

We can use a pie chart to examine and depict the emotion(s) that are root(s) of our anger. Here's an example:

Underlying Emotions
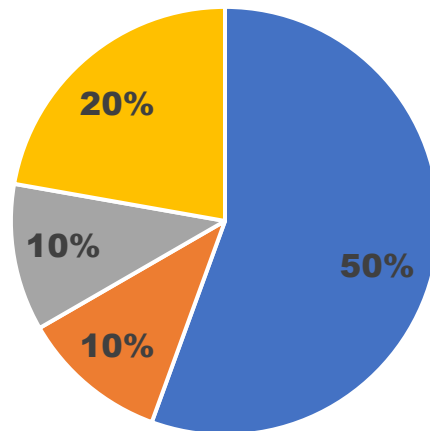
■ Powerlessness ■ Pressured ■ Insignificant ■ Fear

Use the circle below to create your own pie chart of the underlying emotion(s) that are the root(s) of your anger. Try to create and label accurate representations of the proportion of each underlying emotion.

Is powerlessness one of the underlying emotions you have in response to difficulties with settings boundaries? If so, why? _____
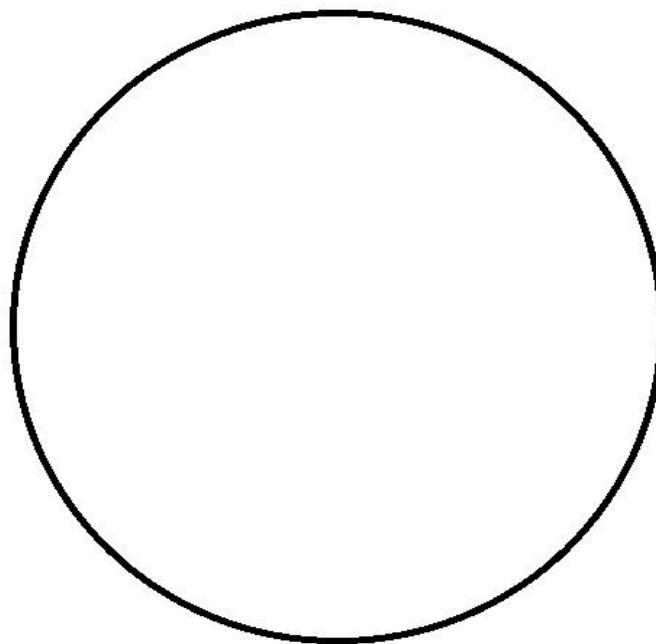
_____

_____

_____

VI. How Power and Control Dynamics Relate to Boundary Setting

In order to address a sense of powerlessness that undermines us, we must first understand our relationship with and beliefs about power and control. To accomplish this, the following eight questions are borrowed and/or adapted from *The PTSD Workbook* (2016, 3rd Ed.) by Drs. Williams and Poijula.

What does personal power mean to me? _____

_____

_____

_____

In what situations in my life right now do I have to share power with others? _____

_____

_____

_____

In my past, when was I forced to give up my personal power? _____

_____

_____

_____

When and how do I try to control others? _____

_____

_____

_____

Do I get into power struggles? With whom? How do they get resolved? _____

_____

_____

_____

How do I react to maladaptive expressions of power in others – threats, manipulations, suicide gestures, etc.? _____

_____

_____

_____

When my power is threatened, do I try to dominate another person, am I appropriately assertive, or am I passive? How so? _____

_____
_____
_____

Can I only rely on myself? Only rely on others? Or a combination of both? Why? _____

_____
_____
_____

Once we better understand how we conceptualize, orient to, and manage power and control dynamics in relationships, we can do a deeper dive into our behaviors in real, perceived, or potential power dynamics – including those that appear under the surface of situations where we do or don't set boundaries.

If we fail to set healthy boundaries, there are a variety of root causes contributing to this choice, as described previously. For example, we may have been parentified as children, had our emotional needs ignored, had a parent model not setting boundaries, and/or had parents who were incredibly punitive and intrusive in response to boundary setting. In all these examples, we've unconsciously learned that there is something negative paired with telling others no or asserting our limitations or needs.

What is that negative thing that you anticipate being paired with setting or enforcing a boundary? (The first few examples are provided. Simply mark out the ones that don't apply to you.)

Fear of conflict
Feelings of selfishness, guilt, or shame
Fear of abandonment
Fear of being disappointed when the other person ignores your boundaries

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

If I fear that the other person will abandon me, I see them as having the power in the relationship…as having the ability to abandon me – rather than recognizing that I have an equal ability to abandon them. Similarly, if I fear that the other person will be mad at me, I see them as having the power. Else, why am I not equally considering that I could be mad at them for asking a favor that puts me in an awkward position?

But until we understand these perceived power dynamics, failing to set boundaries is just unconsciously avoiding a negative thing we anticipate (e.g., conflict, abandonment, anger). In other words, we procrastinate setting boundaries due to anticipating a negative outcome and/or negative emotions.

VII. Procrastinating Boundary Setting

What does procrastinating have to do with boundary setting? Many people have erroneous ideas about what procrastination is (e.g., lazy, poor time management). In reality, there is ample evidence showing that procrastination is the avoidance of anticipated unpleasant emotions (e.g., anxiety, vulnerability, fear, sadness). Thus, if we keep kicking the can down the road on setting and enforcing our boundaries, we're likely procrastinating due to the emotions we unconsciously anticipate having to experience as a consequence of setting boundaries.

Consider the following questions to explore your procrastination and avoidance:

What are my strategies for avoiding emotions? _____
_____
_____
_____

Where did I learn to avoid my emotions? _____
_____
_____
_____

Where there emotions I had to ignore to survive my childhood? If so, describe. _____
_____
_____
_____

What do I miss out on as a result of these avoidance strategies? _____
_____
_____
_____

VIII. Self-Betrayal

The base definition of betrayal is the act of being disloyal. So then what is loyalty? If you look up both the base definition and the definition within the context of relationships, many words appear: consistency, fidelity, support, solidarity, conscious commitment, honest, devoted, allegiance, steadfast, etc.

We so often consider the concept of loyalty with regard to how we commit to and show up for others, but how often do we consider how we commit to and show up for ourselves? To be healthy in relationships and healthy within ourselves, we need to learn to be more loyal to ourselves. Since this isn't a typical way of thinking about loyalty, use the questions below to examine your history of self-betrayal.

What have I allowed in the past that went against my best interests? _____
_____
_____
_____

When have I ignored my needs in service of prioritizing others? _____
_____
_____
_____

What do I need to apologize to myself for tolerating in the past? _____
_____
_____
_____

How can I make amends for betraying myself in the past? _____
_____
_____
_____

What would loyalty to myself look like? _____
_____
_____
_____

How am I betraying myself when I don't set or enforce my boundaries? _____
_____
_____
_____

Some people were raised in such dire circumstances that they don't even view themselves as being entitled to basic human rights. If you're one of these people, this perspective may get in the way of understanding the concepts of self-loyalty or self-betrayal, as the "self" never had rights. To help edge you toward the concept of self-loyalty, consider the following partial list of personal rights that are borrowed from *Therapist's Guide to Clinical Intervention* (2003, 2nd Ed.) by Johnson.

Personal Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to ask for what I want.
2. I have a right to say no to requests for demands that I cannot meet.
3. I have a right to express all of my feelings—positive and negative.
4. I have a right to change my mind.
5. I have a right to make mistakes and do not have to be perfect.
6. I have a right to follow my own values and beliefs.
7. I have the right to determine my own priorities.
8. I have the right not to be responsible for the actions, feelings, or behavior of others.
9. I have the right not to give excuses or reasons for my behavior.
10. I have the right to make decisions based on my feelings.
11. I have the right to my own personal space and time.
12. I have the right to be healthier than those around me.
13. I have the right to feel safe, and be in a non-abusive environment.
14. I have the right to change and grow.
15. I have the right to have my wants and needs respected by others.
16. I have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.
17. I have the right to be happy.

Taking into consideration the above list of personal rights, the self-betrayal questions may warrant a second look. If so, consider rephrasing them in a way that is easier for you and perhaps maps onto the list of personal rights. For example:

Instead of: When have I ignored my needs in service of prioritizing others?

Consider: When have I ignored my personal rights in service of prioritizing others?

If you continue to struggle with the concepts of self-betrayal or personal rights, a likely cause is poor self-worth, which is a common problem for people who were raised on trauma and dysfunction. If this is the case for you, consider doing some deeper work on your self-worth.

You can accomplish this with a licensed therapist, or there are a variety of resources for independently learning more about self-worth. For that purpose, consider these books (in no particular order):

- *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* ~ Dr. Brene Brown
- *The Self-Love Workbook: A Life-Changing Guide to Boost Self-Esteem, Recognize Your Worth and Find Genuine Happiness* ~ Dr. Shainna Ali
- *Self-Worth Essentials: A Workbook to Understand Yourself, Accept Yourself, Like Yourself, Respect Yourself, Be Confident, Enjoy Yourself, and Love Yourself* ~ Dr. Liisa Kyle

IX. Different Circumstances Generate Different Levels of Difficulty

Toxic Relationships

Part of what the standard discussion about boundaries doesn't address is that the implementation of boundaries will be more difficult in some relationships than others. For example, you may have a coworker that is primed and ready to respect your boundaries if you can just speak them into existence. In contrast, your emotionally dysregulated mother may have a meltdown if you say you'd rather have a salad than her casserole.

The proximity of a relationship, history of a relationship, established roles and routines in a relationship, and power dynamics of a relationship can all influence how difficult it is to set and enforce boundaries. Thus, it is recommended that you begin practicing the new skill of boundary setting with the easiest and least costly relationships first.

By the time you get to the trickier relationships, you'll have more practice. Nevertheless, boundary setting WILL be hard in trickier and/or more toxic relationships, so the goal isn't to convince yourself otherwise. The goal is to get some practice under your belt, build increasing internal commitment to boundary setting, and by the time you reach the starting line of setting boundaries in high stakes relationships, being willing to look the fear straight in the eye and press forward despite the fear.

Hard Ask vs. Soft Ask

Another inaccurate depiction in basic boundary discussions is that boundaries are implemented in response to a "hard ask." A hard ask is "Will you cover my shift?" or "Will you feed my cat while I'm out of town?" While people may still have a hard time learning to say no, hard asks are far easier to learn to tackle. These are the requests where we can learn to assess our needs and limitations with authenticity and where we can learn the freedom of saying "No."

In contrast, a "soft ask" is when someone makes a statement or engages in a behavior without ever first asking permission. The statement version of a soft ask might be an abusive father who says, "I never abused my kids," or a serial liar who falsely states in a group setting, "I was in a helicopter crash." In these situations, the narrator isn't asking a question, knows (consciously or unconsciously) that you know the truth, and expects you to either verbally or silently co-sign their falsehood.

The behavior version of a soft ask might be a coworker that starts borrowing office supplies from your desk without asking or an employee who begins deviating from company policy without asking.

Soft asks are a particularly challenging boundary violation, as the clear opportunity to say "No" is robbed from us right out of the gate, because they never checked in with us to begin with. Soft asks require us to initiate hard conversations, which can create feelings of resentment and frustration. In reality, a soft ask is toxic (whether intentional or not), and the level of toxicity can vary from mild to severe – depending on the situation. A soft ask is an involuntary erosion of your personal power, which doesn't bode well for your well-being.

Personal Boundary vs. Controlling Another Person

As mentioned previously, it is common for people who struggle with boundaries to get confused about when a boundary is exclusively related to their personal rights versus when it begins to trespass into the other person's rights.

Let's say that I have celiac disease. In this case, consuming gluten can have catastrophic effects on my health, and I have the personal right to set a boundary and say I won't eat those gluten-laden cookies my grandma just made. What I don't have the right to do is insist that no one is allowed to eat gluten around me, because it makes me feel left out. Similarly, I can opt out of attending functions with large crowds because of my PTSD, but I can't tell my social circle that they can't attend these functions because of FOMO.

Our boundaries are reasonable and appropriate when they are about our own health, safety, well-being, and preferences, but they are not actually boundaries if they infringe upon the rights of others. We can remove ourselves from situations, but we can't control the preferences, experiences, behaviors, and beliefs of the people around us.

X. Turning the Tide on Setting and Maintaining Boundaries

Changing your habits around boundaries can seem like an overwhelming task, but with a good strategy and some consistency, it's definitely doable.

Stage 1: Preparation and Strategy

A. Assess your values
So many areas of behavior change can seem like a good idea, but our commitment to any one of these areas can disappear without us even noticing. To combat this, it's wise to assess and promote our motivation for change. A few of the previous tasks in this exercise can help with that (e.g., cost-benefit analysis, power and control questions). An additional way to leverage your motivation is to assess your values. For example, feeling connected might be a top value for someone, but does that necessarily mean that connection requires you to be a doormat? Clarifying and defining our values can reduce our mental chaos and promote commitment to our core values.

A copy of the values exercise can be found here: https://www.desertwise.com/defining-your-values-to-make-better-decisions/

B. Inventory your boundaries
Next, develop a list of the boundaries you need to function optimally. This may feel redundant to the lists on page 2, but the goal here is to settle on a list (for now) that is influenced by everything you've learned about yourself and your needs throughout this exercise. If the list is the same from page 2, that's totally fine. If your list evolved since page 2, write your updated list here:

_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____

C. Hone your emotional awareness
To best identify when, where, and with whom we need to set boundaries, we need to be aware of what we're feeling at any given time – and why we're feeling that way. Problem is, many people who had the kind of childhood that created poor boundaries also had the kind of childhood that made them ignore their emotions and remain under-

developed in their emotional intelligence. If that's true for you, you may not even notice real-time that something is bothering you and warrants a boundary, so if your therapist of loved one is telling you to start saying "No," they probably don't realize that they're skipping a step. Emotional under-development will require you to do some legwork in developing your emotional self-awareness.

Perhaps the most straightforward way to engage in self-guided emotional growth is to train yourself to "take note" of what you feel on any given day. Start by setting a task reminder in your phone at the same time every evening – a time when you can most reliably assess your day and jot down some notes, and then set up a "Take Note" document in your notepad app to record your daily thoughts.

When your reminder goes off each day, your initial task is to think about any human interaction that made you uncomfortable that day. These discomforts can range from mild (e.g., cashier not responding when you told them to have a nice day) to severe (e.g., cousin with an addiction history aggressively asking for money again). Write the date and each discomfort you experienced. (Note: These don't have to be full sentences, don't need to be explained, and don't need to have any solutions associated with them. The goal is merely to learn to pay attention to your discomfort and narrow the window of time required to identify an unpleasant sensation.) An entry might look like this:

> *7/27 – coworker interrupting me in staff meeting; salesman at store not taking no for an answer; running late for medical appointment; spouse seeming distant*

After a couple of months of doing your daily *Take Note* exercise, start adding associated emotions after each discomfort. This is another emotional skill that can be difficult for people from dysfunctional childhoods. To help you with naming a range of different emotions, trying using a feelings wheel, such as this one: https://feelingswheel.com/ When you are adding emotions to your daily *Take Note* exercise, it might look like this:

> *7/27 – coworker interrupting me in staff meeting (disrespected, annoyed); salesman at store not taking no for an answer (pressured, annoyed); running late for medical appointment (worried, inferior); spouse seeming distant (isolated, abandoned)*

Only you can determine when you've gotten what you need out of the *Take Note* exercise and can stop. A good rule of thumb, however, is when you start hearing your internal voice saying "*I'm uncomfortable*" real time and when you can name what you're feeling and why.

Before you put your *Take Note* exercise aside completely, think about what these various moments of discomfort tell you. Are there gaps in where you need to set boundaries? Are there relational triggers that you need to be more aware of? Is there a person that repeatedly does a particular thing that makes you uncomfortable? Review the trends and themes that emerged and consider whether you need to update your Boundaries Inventory in item B above.

D. Define your desired outcome
Different people want to improve their boundary setting for different reasons. These can include, for example:

- being less of a pushover
- needing to be assertive to advance career
- having more reciprocal relationships
- having fewer toxic relationships
- improving authenticity in marriage
- modeling healthy behaviors for kids
- healing from childhood
- feeling less dehumanized
- feeling seen and heard
- reducing codependency
- having a healthier relationship with parent

What is your desired outcome? _____
_____
_____
_____

Stage 2: Action and Maintenance

A. One step at a time
The most sustainable and successful behavior change happens when we build new habits one step at a time. Think about New Year's resolutions and their reputation for failing. Why does this happen? It's the person saying, "I'm going to eat right, exercise five times a week, lose 50 pounds, and save $200 a month!" Whoa. That's a lot. It's the behavior change equivalent of jumping into a tub of ice water.

The reality is that we humans tend to go on mental and behavioral autopilot, which typically makes us default to rote habit again and again. When we're compromised (e.g., sick, stressed, in conflict), we're even more likely to default to our established habits. These factors make it exceedingly difficult to effectively change multiple habits at once – especially when we're trying to take big leaps.

Instead, we're more likely to be successful if we make just one or two incremental, concrete changes at a time. So instead of the New Year's resolution list above, this person would have higher probability of success if they said, "I'm going to stop eating sweets daily and limit them to one serving per week, and I'm going to start walking twice a week – 30 minutes each time."

Interestingly, successful outcomes beget successful outcomes, which is yet another reason to set and pursue attainable goals. We see so many folks falter and completely abandon their big New Year's resolutions, and they're unlikely to consider setting new goals for months – if not years. In contrast, if a person successfully limits sweets to once a week and walks twice a week, it enhances their sense of mastery, which builds their self-confidence and self-efficacy. Sense of mastery, self-confidence, and self-efficacy all contribute to pursuing and succeeding at subsequent goals. So…we actually set up our future selves to win if we set smaller, attainable goals that will build those positive internal self-views.

The same principles hold true with habit change around things that feel more nebulous – such as boundary setting. One way to think of this is to commit to change the low-hanging fruit first, which could be boundary setting with the lowest cost or in the context of the least critical relationships.

What is the low-hanging fruit of boundary setting that you could target first? _____
_____
_____
_____

Now state your concrete goal(s) around this low-hanging fruit: _____
_____
_____
_____

There are some recommended ideals around boundary setting, such as not explaining yourself when you say "No." Now, that's great and all, but it might be far too big of a leap for a newbie to boundary setting. Consider incremental change instead. For example, at stage one, you might allow yourself to give an explanation if it gives you enough comfort to say the word "no," and then at stage two, you begin practicing setting a boundary without giving an explanation.

All-or-nothing thinking is a trap, and we should strive to free ourselves from this trap every time it trips us up.

There are many great resources for independently learning more about effective behavior change. For that purpose, consider these books (in no particular order):

- *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* ~ Chip Heath and Dan Heath
- *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* ~ Dr. Dan Ariely
- *Nudge: The Final Edition* ~ Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein
- *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones* ~ James Clear
- *Thinking, Fast and Slow* ~ Dr. Daniel Kahneman

B. Practice practice practice

Implementing any new skill is likely to be ungraceful. Think of a toddler learning to walk. They're not graceful. They're wobbly. They're prone to falling. This is normal, because they are in the early stages of learning a shiny new skill. We'd do well to think of any new skill (e.g., setting boundaries) the same way, because it sets us up to be more mentally flexible when we're ungraceful, wobbly, and when we fall down. So, go ahead and tell yourself that you're going to make mistakes.

The more you practice setting boundaries, the more seamless it will look and feel. We learn new habits through repetition, and we dial in our skillset by both repetition and learning from our mistakes. Commit to becoming the resident expert of what works for you and what doesn't…what your trigger points are…and what boundaries you struggle most with. The more you know about the contingencies around your boundary setting, the more solution focused you can be.

When you make a mistake or struggle to set or hold a boundary, consider asking yourself:

What happened? _____
_____
_____
_____

Why did it happen? _____
_____
_____
_____

What can I do to make this go better next time? _____
_____
_____

_____

Do I need to do this perfectly? If so, why? And who is the audience I'm trying to be perfect for? _____
_____
_____
_____

Notably, your boundary practicing will probably look different for a hard ask vs. a soft ask. When faced with a hard ask, your practice may look pretty simple (e.g., "No" or "This isn't a good time for me."). In contrast, a soft ask doesn't give you a direct question to respond to or a pause designed to facilitate your input. As a result, you'll probably have to work harder to develop some interjecting responses that work in various situations. Below are a few examples to try on for size:

Example responses to verbal soft asks
- That's not the way I remember it.
- That isn't my reality.
- I'm not sure what you want me to say right now.
- I'm confused about why you'd say that happened.
- Can we discuss this when it's just you and me?

Example responses behavioral soft asks
- Next time you need something out of my desk, please ask me first.
- Can you help me understand why this change happened?
- I appreciate you trying to be proactive, but I'm going to do it this way.
- I know it makes you feel better to be in the loop, but we can handle this ourselves.
- Our schedule won't allow us to meet up.

Someone whose emotional development is such that they engage in toxic soft asks likely won't respond well to your efforts to set or enforce boundaries. We therapists often forget to mention the many ways people can negatively respond to boundaries, so a 101-level boundary discussion in therapy can send someone out into the world with a false veneer of self-empowerment that instantaneously crumbles with a toxic parent detonates a nuclear bomb in response to a new boundary.

Instead, we need to understand that the other person's response is often irrelevant in our desired outcomes for boundary setting. Sure, it'd be great if everyone in the world was healthy enough to just respect our boundaries and pivot, but that's not realistic. If one of your goals in boundary setting is to stop being a doormat, for example, you've

inched your way toward that outcome merely by speaking up for yourself – even if your eyelashes get singed in the nuclear detonation.

Additionally, a nuclear reaction may just be data that tells us what our next boundary needs to be (e.g., reduced contact). Try to go into high-stakes boundary setting with the anticipation that the toxic person will respond poorly, brace yourself accordingly, and remind yourself that you are collecting data to further refine your boundary setting strategies.

C. Triage and damage assessment

When we maintain contact with toxic people, it can be highly unreasonable to expect ourselves to become some superhero of non-toxicity. Imagine, for example, that you have a toxic parent that spews an endless stream of falsehoods in the form of soft asks. In other words, they state repeated mistruths and expect their audience to unequivocally co-sign their mistruths. If you're trying to be that non-toxicity superhero, you'd never be able to relax and would constantly be correcting mistruths and incurring the relational backlash that comes with each one. (In the context of a non-toxicity superhero, picture that relational backlash as biohazard slime.)

Fact is, that would be an exhausting and fruitless job – exhausting because it would be nonstop…fruitless because the parent never signed up to be non-toxic.

Save yourself some heartache, and instead develop the categories of mistruths that you feel you must challenge in order to protect your well-being. Is your toxic parent telling a false, gossipy story about their former neighbors? Does that matter to you and your quality of life? Is it your job to protect the neighbors? Do they even want to be protected? What damage are you incurring personally or relationally by targeting this mistruth? And does the benefit outweigh the cost?

In contrast, if your toxic parent is denying your experience – trying to suppress and silence your pain, how does this affect your healing and quality of life? Whose job is it to protect you? Do you want and/or deserve to be protected? What damage are you incurring personally if you allow this mistruth about your reality to go unchecked? What damage might you incur relationally if you challenge this mistruth about your reality? Where does the cost-benefit analysis take you?

When you're dealing with highly toxic people on a recurrent basis, it is important to learn to thoughtfully triage which toxic behaviors to target and which ones to merely distance yourself from physically or emotionally. Using the cost-benefit analysis strategy described previously, it's wise to categorize your triaging based on an assessment of probable damage. Using the above scenarios, it may be a reminder of your pain and trauma to witness your toxic parent demonize their old neighbors, but it's unlikely that imminent damage will result. If your parent is denying your reality and their role in it,

however, nearly any trauma therapist will tell you that healing is interrupted when you can't own and acknowledge your story and when others' denial makes you feel powerless.

D. Dynamism of boundaries

When we come from traumatic and/or dysfunctional backgrounds, we are more prone to thinking in absolutes, in black and white terms, and with rigidity. That's not innately bad or wrong. Rather, it's what we had to do to survive. Children being raised in unhealthy environments – especially those with unstable parents – had to learn the "rules" to manage their parents' emotions and to predict threat. This is where all that rigidity comes from.

But what helped us survive our childhoods can get us in trouble in our adulthoods, because the contingencies and circumstances over here are different.

When it comes to establishing your needed boundaries and protocols for setting and maintaining them, having a rigid, all-or-nothing mindset can be defeating – increasing the probability that you'll abandon your efforts and retreat to a baseline of letting people steamroll you. Therefore, you should try to assess for contingencies that might alter your boundaries or strategies therein.

Let's say, for example, that your parent has a history of becoming explosive when you set or reinforce a boundary with them. You don't want your young child to witness or be scared by their explosiveness, so you choose to pause your boundary efforts with your parent when your young child is present.

The bottom line is that there is no hard-and-fast rule about when to insist upon boundary-respect and when not to. Because all of our personalities, histories, and life circumstances are different, you must curate the contingencies that make the most sense for you. The only challenge here is making sure that you're being radically honest with yourself about the whys and hows – rather than falling into the trap of telling yourself lies to make you feel all comfortable and snuggly in the land of avoidance.

E. Managing relapse

Relapse? Isn't that something people do in addictions? Nope. We can relapse at anything – dieting, exercise, saving money, reducing screentime, reading goals, practicing gratitude, being better spouses, etc. Equally, we can relapse at setting boundaries. Sometimes we're tired…or not feeling well…or just feeling plain defeated. That's ok. It happens to all of us.

The goal isn't avoiding missteps and setbacks entirely. The goal is to identify when we're regressing, be curious about why we're regressing, and make a viable plan to recommit to our desired action.

The image below depicts *The Stages of Change*, which is a foundational model in the world of mental health. Essentially all forms of human change can be related to this model – including building new and healthier habits around boundary setting.

Notice that relapse isn't depicted as some aberration or bubble separate from the stages of change. Rather, it is depicted as a normative part of the cycle. This is critical, because it builds psychological resiliency and can inoculate us against the behavioral collapse we typically see with perceived failure. If we know and accept up front that we will relapse and learn from relapse, we won't be emotionally flattened when the inevitable relapse happens.
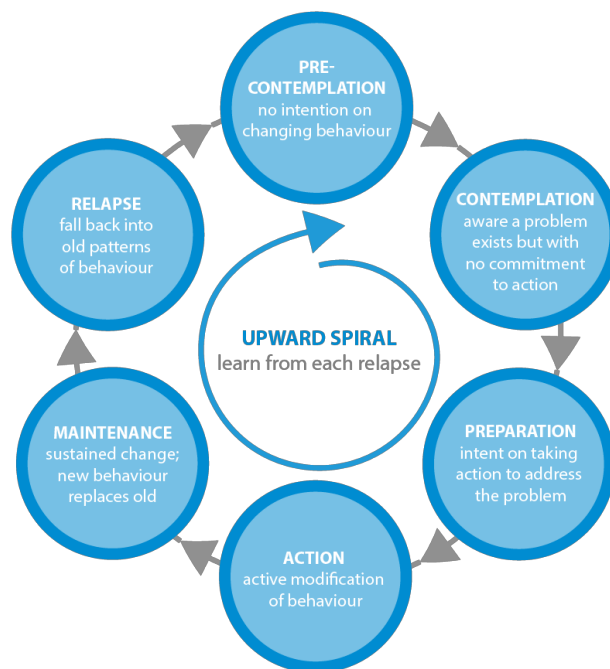
Image: Transtheoretical Model - Stages of Change (Karam, 2017)

As a result, give yourself permission to make mistakes. Give yourself permission to just not have it in you today. And give yourself some grace when you don't live up to your ideals. Afterall, you are just a human trying to heal while charting unknown territories.

F. Continued learning
For additional independent work on boundaries, consider the following two books:

- *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself* ~ Nedra Glover Tawwab
- *The Set Boundaries Workbook: Practical Exercises for Understanding Your Needs and Setting Healthy Limits* ~ Nedra Glover Tawwab