

## Boundaries Introduction

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“You can always count on her.” “He’ll do anything you ask.” “Call any time, day or night, 24/7/365.” “Overworked, over worried, underappreciated, always taken advantage of.” Does this describe you or someone you know? These statements indicate a lack of clear boundaries. People tend to behave consistently across the different relationship systems in their lives, meaning that a lack of boundaries in one area (at work, for instance) will likely also manifest in other areas (family, friends, and personal health).

Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend have an entire series of resources drawing on their landmark 1992 book from Zondervan: Boundaries: When to say yes, How to say no, to take control of your life. We learn most of what we believe and practice about relationship boundaries early in life in the context of our primary relationships. Our parents and siblings, other adults and peers teach us whether it is ok to attend to our own wants and needs, and if so how. Some of us learned that to ever think about self is equal to selfishness. To ever say no is equal to meanness. Others learned that you should always put self first, because no one else will. Selfish and selfless are two ends of a spectrum that show an unhealthy relationship with boundaries – too rigid on one end and completely absent on the other. Having a healthy sense of self and healthy boundaries is a middle way between these extremes.

One of the most powerful chapters in this text is #4 “How Boundaries Are Developed”. The fact that boundaries develop over time, through a process, is an important insight. It means that we can change our understanding and practice of boundaries and develop new ones through the implementation of a new process. Healthy boundaries enable us to say yes to the good/beneficial and no to the bad/harmful ideas, things, relationships and experiences in our lives.

Symptoms – such as addictive behaviors and unhealthy relationships with things like food – express poor boundaries in that particular area. They also often demonstrate a lack of healthy boundaries in a more significant, deeper, and more difficult area. For instance, when someone lacks good and healthy emotional boundaries in their intimate relationships, they will often self medicate to alleviate the pain. People with addictive behaviors surround themselves with codependents who make their addictions possible, and codependents are drawn to addicts because they “need” someone to care for. These behaviors feed off each other, perpetuate the system, and ingrain these attitudes, beliefs and habits in the lives of others.

Me and You – Boundaries are about knowing where I begin and end, what is mine to own and what is not. People with healthy boundaries do not take on others’ emotional issues and struggles, nor do they project their own onto them. Imagine a medical professional, attorney, or therapist who personally (mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically) took on the struggles of their clients! We would say their boundaries are too porous. Alternately, when they seem indifferent, we say they are unrelatable, cold and aloof, and have not bedside manner. Either extreme is undesirable. We want professionals who express interest, care and even concern, while not getting down into our hole with us. We need them to stay above, where they can assess the situation and help us move toward wholeness.

Next steps – Ask yourself where you experience emotional stress in your life. There may well be room for developing healthier boundaries. Where do you wish you could do something different, but can’t find a way forward? Again, this may be a boundary issue. The Boundaries series includes workbooks that can be very helpful. A professional coach can help you identify, strategize, and work toward healthier boundaries.