

BOUNDARIES by Patience Mason: A reprint of an article from the Gazette

I've been thinking a lot about boundaries this month because they have always been a difficult issue for Bob and me. I suspect it is for all trauma survivors and their families. Bob seemed to me to have walls that shut me out, and I didn't seem to have any boundaries in either direction. When we disagreed about something, he thought I was saying that he was crazy, and I always thought he was being deliberately bad (because I was always right). Our boundary problems led to a lot of pain.

For trauma survivors developing healthy boundaries is important. Often in the most literal physical sense, trauma is a boundary violation: the bullet entered your body, the fist hit your face. Recovering the sense of your rights over your body, that it is safe to be in your body in this world, can be a monumental task.

Family members can also have difficulty with boundaries, as can therapists. This shows up as efforts to fix people because we need other people to be fine to prove our worth. I used to let Bob's actions and feelings control how I felt about myself. (If Bob was depressed it meant I was a bad wife, not that he'd been through a lot in Vietnam). I invaded his boundaries by trying to control his actions and feelings to "fix" him. (Don't be sad.) Boundary violations were my way of life. Therapists and people in 12 Step programs who tell you you don't need *whatever* (usually whatever they are not doing, therapy or program) are having a boundary problem. Only you can know what helps you, and you can only find out by experience. *Experience* is how one develops boundaries and a sense of self. Many of us have never seen a healthy example of boundaries.

Unhealthy Boundaries:

Too Weak: When you become enmeshed in someone else's life and wind up feeling what they feel, doing

what they do, and not being you, you have weak boundaries. Under traumatic conditions, however, that can be a survival skill. Many combat vets could read each other like a book. Hyperalertness to each other kept them alive. Traumatic bonding between abuser and abused is also a survival skill. Reading the emotions of the abuser and becoming what they want you to be can save your life. It also carries a great price. Being able to sense others' moods is helpful in relationships, but always being what someone else wants you to be (the woman who doesn't mind if he gets drunk/ the guy who will do anything for his wife) is a form of dishonesty which prevents real intimacy. No one can be intimate with someone who doesn't know what s/he feels, wants, likes or dislikes, or who can't be honest about it, even though such dishonesty developed as a survivor skill.

The weak boundary experienced by survivors who are endlessly triggered because they are so open to sensing danger is a very painful state of affairs. What's outside you controls your inside. Avoiding triggers is helpful, but developing boundaries so things don't set you off is part of recovery. Furthermore, another safety issue is that hyperalertness can lead you to reading danger into a situation where it doesn't exist, causing unnecessary defensiveness or even violence.

Too strong: Walls don't make you safe either. When you hear about the sexual abuse survivor who gets raped by some guy she met in a bar, realize that her wall of numbness prevented her from reading the danger signs. She's not dumb, she's *numb*. If his buddies died, a veteran may try never to care for anyone again, putting up walls which prevent him from getting the support he needs to heal.

Although aggression (yelling, bossing, rejecting) or isolation (putting up a

wall, or simply not being around others) are the usual forms of too-strong boundary, during prolonged inescapable abuse dissociation can be a way of creating a boundary in order to survive. Denial, too, can serve as a boundary (didn't happen/didn't affect me). So can compulsive behaviors like alcoholism or relationship addiction. Overeating puts up a wall of fat to keep others out. (At the other extreme, the person who always wears skintight clothes may be sending an unconscious message, "I have no boundaries.") Reality keeps breaking through this kind of boundary, sometimes traumatically.

Putting up a wall of numbness or anger can lead you to be abusive because if it "didn't bother me," you may be unable to perceive how it could bother someone else. You can't tell that you are hurting them (or that your numbness is evidence that it did bother you).

Overly strong boundaries require a lot of effort to maintain. Nothing affects you but nothing can get through to help you either. Lots of survivors alternate between weak and too strong boundaries, getting close and then cutting people off, or trusting no one and then quickly becoming totally enmeshed.

Healthy boundaries: Ideally human beings have healthy boundaries that are like the semi-permeable membrane that surrounds a cell. Boundaries allow you to let out bad feelings so you don't drown in your own waste products. They close to protect you from harm, but they open to let good things through. They allow you to give and receive support, become really close at times (like during lovemaking or intimate conversations or quiet cuddling) yet operate independently at other times. Healthy interdependence is the result.

For me it has been important to recognize that small actions taken one day

at a time will help me recover, while great resolutions to change completely and forever (I'll never do that again!) have been both futile and led me to self hatred (What's wrong with me? Why can't I change?) So here is a bunch of suggested small actions to help strengthen your sense of self, and your respect for and knowledge of yourself, and your ability to accept others because you have boundaries. Take what you like and leave the rest. This works if you are a survivor, family member, or therapist.

Pause Button: Visualize a pause button when something upsets you and take a moment to pick out an action that might help you rather than reacting in the same old way. Here are a few actions you can take:

Locating yourself in the here and now: When you are struggling with intrusive PTSD symptoms, it can be very valuable to write out on a 3x5 card an appropriate statement for you to read and say over and over:

"I am _____. I'm _____ years old. I am in _____ and no one here wants to hurt me." Add to this whatever affirmations are helpful. *I need to feel this pain so I can let it go. It's okay if I make mistakes.* Having it written out and in your pocket can be a life-saver. I works best if you pull it out and read and say it till you get relief.

Using the word "I:" People often say "You make me feel..." or "That made me feel..." One of the smallest most empowering changes you can make in your thinking is to use the word "I" when you talk about yourself. Replace "you made" or "that made", which is giving away your power, with the words, "I feel..." Even if you feel other people do make you feel good or bad, just phrase it differently. Say "I feel _____ when you _____." Eventually this new way of talking will strengthen your boundaries. Your perspective on your feelings will shift. You may even feel you have more power over what you feel.

Using the word "I" when talking about yourself can also change your perspective. Many of us habitually use generalities, say "You want to be nice," when what we mean is "I want to be nice." or "You don't want/need that," when what we mean is "I don't want you

to want/need that." Using "I" really made me think! Today I prefer to say what I mean. It helps me to know myself better and see if I'm in your business.

Separating my feelings from yours: When someone else's mood controls yours, it means your boundaries need strengthening. Automatically reacting is a lot of work. Identifying it is the beginning of healing. How? Ask yourself is this my feeling or his/hers? If it is not your feeling say to yourself, "I am not whatever. S/he is whatever, (depressed, angry, numb). Or say "I'm me, and I don't have to feel what s/he feels or think what s/he thinks." A simple but effective technique is to keep repeating it to yourself. This seems awkward and stupid at first but it really helps over the long haul. These phrases block the emotion and remind you that you are separate from others. Visualize a boundary if it helps, a fence between your garden and his or hers. When you can separate what you feel from what others feel, you will find yourself more able to tolerate other peoples' bad feelings, even sympathize, because they will not longer control how you feel. Letting other people feel what they feel (acceptance) is a big part of intimacy. Learning to have a good day when those around you are having a bad one lifts the burden off them of ruining your day.

Another thing that helps me is to visualize a glass globe separating me from another's emotions. When someone picks on me, sneers at me, says something painful, I see the words hit the glass, but they bounce back because, it's *their* problem, opinion, attitude. I might want to examine it, but I don't have to take it in as the truth about me, nor even react to it, because I have healthy boundaries. Criticism becomes not at all devastating, just information I may or may not find interesting or useful

Another technique is **active listening** which I discuss in *Recovering From The War*. By listening to others and reflecting back what they say, you practice having a boundary with them and you sharpen your perception of the difference between you and them. It's a self correcting process, too. When you listen and hear it wrong, they tell you! You can see how you hear things as

opposed to what they actually said. It's really interesting. Learning to actively listen takes a lot of practice. We're usually composing an answer before the other person it through speaking, (which is not listening). Survivors have trouble listening, too, because stuff seems so petty or because they have trouble concentrating, a symptom of PTSD. Active listening helps with concentration by focusing you on what the other person is saying, because you are going to paraphrase it : "I'm so angry! My boss moved my desk to where I can't see out the window." Old pattern: "So what!" (minimizing) or "So quit!" (solution) both of which lead to an argument. Active listening: "He really pissed you off!" As you identify the other person's feeling (confirming the boundary) they feel heard and supported and you get practice in healthy boundaries. It's the same when a trauma survivor expresses pain. Instead of saying, "Get over it," learn to paraphrase. Recently a WWII vet was telling me some of his experiences and my paraphrase was, "you really went through hell," which was exactly what he was trying to tell me.

Trauma survivors need to be able to have and tolerate painful feelings because they are normal when you've been traumatized. They are also evidence of what you've been through. Your family, friends and therapists need to respect that and learn to tolerate them, too. As they develop healthier boundaries, your bad days won't ruin their days.

Tolerating painful feelings instead of running from them eventually leads to healing (see the **HEALS** acronym in V2, N2). By tolerating a feeling, I mean actually feeling it for a short period. **HEALS** means flashing the letters "Healing" in your mind, which is a good pause button. Explain to yourself what you are feeling and feel it for about 30 seconds. Apply self compassion, Love yourself, and then Solve the problem. Feel the feeling without necessarily believing that the feeling reflects reality. I may feel hurt, but that doesn't mean someone meant to hurt me. I may feel guilty, but that doesn't mean I am: it may just be something I'm used to feeling. Most of us were brought up on large

doses of guilt.

Identifying what you feel is another way of working on your boundaries. Keeping a list of feelings written down on paper is a good way to start identifying your feelings. Pull it out and look at it if you are having trouble identifying what you feel. You can also start a journal entry describing your immediate reaction (I'm feeling tense... I just yelled at someone...) and look at when you've felt that way before (the strength of many feelings comes from a different time zone, often the time of your trauma or childhood) or what that action has been caused by in the past (usually when I'm yelling it's because I'm afraid I won't get some need met. What need am I afraid about now?). This kind of examination can become a very useful habit.

Many trauma survivors are angry and defensive. These feelings are a natural result of having one's boundaries violated. Anger may have saved your life. People who are defensive have healthy fear behind it. However when the traumatic situation is long gone, anger and defensiveness can linger and hurt relationships, leaving you without community or love. Behind anger and defensiveness, there are painful feelings needing to be felt. Stifle them long enough and they blow a hole in your wall, shrapnel hits those you care for, and you feel so bad you retreat behind the wall determined to make it thicker.

It's better to work on making it healthier rather than thicker.

We all hate to be told we're angry. I can't tell you how many times I've said "I AM NOT ANGRY," while smoke was probably coming out of my ears. Ditto defensiveness. "Yes, but—" is my clue there. You may have others like black and white thinking (You're either for me or against me).

It can help to **identify the physical part in your body where you feel**: for instance some angry people grind their teeth or clench their jaw or sigh a lot, so if you have trouble knowing when you are getting angry check you body for physical signs or ask your family and friends how they know when you are mad. You may feel fear as a churning stomach. I feel it as total numbness, so

whenever I can't feel anything, I know I'm scared. Then I write about the fear till I can feel it, and it passes.

Developing a healthy boundary can also help you sort out feelings. You feel pain because of the trauma you were involved in (combat, battered wife, house fire.) That is your right. You don't have to be over it no matter what someone says. It is okay to be in pain. You can feel the pain at your own rate and it will pass. If you feel shame at having been hurt, you can feel it without believing it. You can visualize yourself handing that shame back to your abuser. You may have to do that many times in your head before it becomes part of your boundary, but you didn't cause your abuse, you didn't want it, and you didn't deserve it, whatever anyone says.

Learning who you are: For people who don't think they have the right to be, much less be themselves, deepening your sense of self is an important part of recovery. Start writing a list with the heading: **I like....**

Start one with **Things I might like...** Trying new things to see if you like them is one way to get to know yourself. This can be as simple as changing the radio station you usually listen to, driving a new route to work, trying a new food. You can also keep a list of **Things I don't like**. Trying something and not liking it is good. It means you are not afraid to make mistakes and be human. These lists may change with time. Good. It means you are growing.

Other ways of finding out more about who you are include working the 12 Steps especially the written ones (4 and 10), getting into therapy, keeping a journal, or working some sort of recovery book. My experience has been that I do better when I have support. If you start to work a recovery book and become overwhelmed, **GET HELP**. We weren't meant to handle either trauma or the effects of living with someone who has PTSD alone.

Another way to start working on boundaries is to figure out **who owns the problem?** If Bob is depressed because of his experiences in Vietnam, he owns the problem. If I cannot tolerate his depression and insist on trying to fix him, I have made it my problem. I'm

violating his boundaries and making work for myself. I need to detach and let him have his problem. The work I need to do is on becoming able to tolerate his feelings, not either adopt them (getting as depressed as he is or more) nor try to change them. There are 22 readings on **detachment** in the Alanon *One Day at a Time*, (available from Al-Anon Family Groups, 1600 Corporate Landing Parkway, Virginia Beach, VA, 23462). When I was first learning to detach, I read all 22 every day for weeks. Loving detachment isn't ignoring someone. It is listening without adopting or fixing the problem. Practice detachment and you practice boundaries.

Many people, especially men, are solution oriented (giving solutions violates boundaries, by the way, unless the person has said "What should I do?"). People who have a problem want you to listen to it and say "that must be hard for you," not "Do this. Do that." Each time a person with a boundary problem listens to someone else's problem without trying to ignore or fix it, he or she is strengthening his or her sense of self and increasing his or her tolerance for other people's emotions instead of avoiding them, i.e. growing boundaries!

Saying no: Another step in developing boundaries is learning to say no to others and learning to accept no. For trauma survivors, being able to say no to activities that might trigger them is important. As part of learning what you like, saying no to things you don't like is important even if you've always said yes before. Screaming no is a sign that you don't yet feel you have the right to say it. As time passes and your boundaries strengthen, you'll be able to say it politely because you will know inside that you do have the right to say no. Other people do to. Today I can accept no for an answer because it is no longer proof of my worthlessness but simply that person setting his or her limits.

Saying yes: Once you can say no, you can also begin to say yes for healthy reasons. You may say yes to things you'd like to do but have been afraid to try. You may say yes to people who ask you to do things because you would like to do them and can do them for free and for fun (not because you should or for a

payback). You may even say yes to some things you don't necessarily want to do but are willing to do because they fit your values and help you be the kind of person *you* want to be (not *they* want you to be—not people pleasing).

Asking for what you want: once you have more of an idea of who you are, what you feel, what you like, you can ask for what you want. This stops a lot of people because they feel that if they don't get what they want it was all for nothing. That's where the phrase "do the footwork and turn the results over" helps me. Asking early and asking often, so that saying no is okay, also helped me. I used to only ask when I was desperate so it wasn't a request. It was a demand.

Today I do not have to have other people do what I want. I ask for what I want, but I don't have to get it, because someone else's behavior is not a reflection of my worth. The fact that they don't do what I want probably has nothing to do with me. It has to do with their issues, because they are separate from me, and I am not central to their lives like I am to mine. (I can trust that they are human and are going to put their interests before mine.)

By the way, when I *haven't* gotten people to do what I wanted, things have often turned out better than anything I could have imagined.

Perfectionism: Once I learned I stop at my skin, I learned to accept myself and to believe that I was okay even if I wasn't perfect. I'm just me. You are you. When I could accept me, I could accept you and begin to stop trying to violate your boundaries to make you perfect. Perfectionism and healthy boundaries are not compatible. Perfectionism is another big issue for trauma survivors who may feel if they had just been good enough or done it right, the trauma wouldn't have happened. So they try to be perfect or to raise perfect kids. Another variation is the trauma survivor who says it didn't affect him or her but is heavily invested in proving it by being perfect and having a perfect family.

When I'm violating you to make you perfect I do not have healthy boundaries. If I'm letting you violate me to

make me perfect, I don't have them either. With boundaries, I can set limits, say no, have and express my own opinions, keep out of other people's business, especially business between two other members of my family (no triangulating), learn who I am, and let other people be and grow.

Physical boundaries: No one has the right to touch you or your stuff without permission. "Please don't touch me," is a perfectly polite statement and no explanation is required. "Why not?" on the other hand is rude and intrusive.

Physical boundaries also include having your own space. After being very close one way to return to normal boundaries without quarreling is to simply go do something in a different part of the house from your partner.

You don't have the right to touch others or their things without permission unless you are a parent pulling your kid out of harm's way. Please don't take it personally if someone doesn't want a hug. You don't know what they've been through. Please don't make your kids hug you or anyone else. You set them up for abuse that way. Please don't hit them either. It makes them hyperactive and confuses love and violence in their minds. Try to see what the child needs that s/he isn't getting and meet that need directly. It is usually attention. If you fail and spank, don't give up. You can always say you made a mistake because you are human and you are sorry and start over again the next minute. This sets a good example that no one is perfect.

Spiritual boundaries: One of the worst forms of abuse is spiritual abuse. True spirituality is something you find for yourself not something that is thrust down your throat along with a bunch of rules. No one has the right to tell you what to believe. Different people need different answers. I think that's why there are so many different spiritual and religious paths. Not because one is right and the others wrong, but because they all have something that someone needs. I have no argument with someone who says "X is the answer that works for me." Someone who says "X is the answer for everyone," doesn't have good boundaries. They usually want your money

too.

For years, I practiced my boundaries by writing out the **Serenity Prayer** every morning: *Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change* (I wrote in people, places, and things that were bothering me), *the courage to change the things I can* (I wrote in "my own actions, reactions, perceptions, what I'll put up with"), *and the wisdom to know the difference.*

The wisdom (and the willingness) to know the difference comes with practice. The courage to change the things I can showed me what was inside my boundary; accepting the things I can't showed me what was outside my boundary. Seeking a higher power also helps with boundaries. If I'm playing God of course I have no boundaries, but if I'm not God then I am finite and do have boundaries. Accepting help from others and learning to take what I like and leave the rest strengthened my boundaries, too. When I thought we all had to think and be alike, I didn't have boundaries. Today I do.

Living with healthy boundaries is far easier than living without them. I am no longer the prey of emotions that fluctuate with every outside influence. Sometimes I get more reactive, but I know I don't have to continue to react. I call it recycling. I choose to use the tools I've learned to change my reactions by taking new actions. I don't give up when my old patterns come back. I look inside to see what's going on with me. If you find yourself saying "I should be over this," let go of that perfectionism and black and white thinking, get out your feelings list and your journal, figure out whose problem it is, practice your boundaries. It's another opportunity to grow.

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