
Setting Boundaries Within Relationships

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In the article “Life’s Ultimate Privilege,” I wrote of divorce and how it rips through a person, leaving ragged tears. For both parties involved, hopes for being healthy and happy together have ended. In other instances in life, a lesser degree of pain can come from our interactions with people whom we trust and love. Individuals who are important to us may say or do things that dig deep into our souls. We don’t expect these people to hurt us, yet they do. Afterwards, they may say, “I’m sorry.” Yet, if those words are said blithely you may perceive the person truly does not feel sorry. It then becomes a matter of checking it out, by asking, “I hear your words but I don’t think you feel the feeling. Could this be true?” Or, “I hear those words and my feelings are hurt.” This confrontation helps the person think about their actions and perhaps to even grow in sensitivity to the feelings of others.

Unfortunately, if we have poor self-image, we are likely to blame ourselves when challenges come up in relationships, thinking, “I must be wrong.” Or, “I must be bad. Otherwise, these things would not be thought of me or said about me.” This can result in living with a distorted core belief of, “I am not loveable,” which is crippling. The outcome of this belief is that a person rarely, if ever, confronts family, or friends. In the end, low self-esteem causes us to slip even further into self-doubt which prevents us from responding in healthy ways within relationships.

Certainly, there are people who are blessed with healthy self-esteem through parents who were able to build that esteem into their children, early on, through caring touch and loving words. Yet, for a large number of people, myself included, good self-esteem comes through a lot of personal effort as we mature and do our emotional healing work (which is also called “inner healing work”). Meanwhile, before coming into the blessed stance of having good self-esteem, caring friends or family members may try to affirm us and encourage us to think highly of ourselves. This can help. For the most part, though, good self-esteem comes through our own hard work. It is a gift we give to ourselves.

Dr. Gerald May states in *Care of Mind Care of Spirit*, “We carry with us basic attitudes of trusting or mistrusting, fundamental self-appraisals of value or worthlessness, and deep seated fears, aspirations, longings, and repulsions that are our heritage from childhood.”¹ These strong psychological determinants are often called baggage. This baggage can easily get triggered within our relationships, our work experiences, or sometimes within the church we attend. Our inner baggage can even get triggered at the grocery store! Remember the last time someone rammed your cart, blocked the aisle, or behaved in some other non-caring way?

Most experts in the field of psychology agree that by age six our personality traits and attitudes were already essentially established. So, there is no doubt that the majority of us suffered some damage to our self-image and our sense of self-worth very early in life. For me, in my childhood a belief developed, one that said *the big people don’t care enough*. Along with that, I believed that I was *not good enough*. Eventually I was able to replace these beliefs. However, until that happened (at times, even today) these inner statements can be triggered in a mere moment. All it takes is for

¹Gerald Mays, *Care of Mind Care of Spirit* (San Francisco:Harper One , 1992).

a happenstance to touch a memory that resurrects old pain. Now, I am able to catch myself when that old feeling comes back and quickly tell myself, “That is my old stuff coming up. I reject the tendency to project that belief onto this current situation; I release the feeling attached to this old belief that no longer serves me well.” The belief that God is in control of all things, able to heal anything and everything, replaces ancient, adverse beliefs. This allows me to step out of a snare I’ve inadvertently stepped into.

Most of us carry beliefs that we need to relinquish. One such belief is that whatever others say about us must be true. Yet this is simply not true. What is true is that you don’t have to personalize everything that is said about you by another person. Too often people with low self-esteem are inclined to do so to their detriment.

Another belief that handicaps us is that we need to set others straight *on the spot*. Far too often when we feel hurt, angry or afraid we are apt to react immediately. This is because we take in the words of others before evaluating whether or not we need to own those words. Reacting, versus responding, before emotions are understood and under control can become a major element of dissent in a relationship. For instance, what if a co-worker spouts off saying, “You are not pulling your weight around here!” Take a moment to evaluate, asking yourself, “Is this true?” If so, you can take a deep breath and own up to it, saying, “I think you may be right. I plan to do better.” Or, since extraordinary circumstances can interfere with our work an explanation may be in order such as, “My dog got lost and I had to spend three hours looking for him. Otherwise, I knew the coyotes could get her. I apologize and will get back on schedule with the work load.” (This presumes that you called your boss earlier to explain your emergency.)

On the other hand, given the instance of what feels like an unwarranted, aggressive personal attack, you still do not have to react even though feelings may run hot and high. A response that allows you to have boundaries with the person can be given. For instance, “I am sorry you believe that about me. I don’t see that as being true for me.” This allows the person to see her or his statement to you as not gaining your acceptance. We do not have to accept what is not true. Breathe deeply and let those words land somewhere else. Breathe away the feelings that arose within. Breathe away the sense of being judged or misunderstood. Unless the matter must be handled immediately, a healthy self-esteem will see us stepping away from a situation while promising to talk about it later. This allows space for identifying what is felt and determining how to respond.

Once you are alone, ask yourself, “Was it hurt that I felt? Did I feel insulted? Betrayed? Or, was I afraid? Did I feel ashamed, blamed, or scorned? Once our emotions are identified, allowing us to understand what is going on inside ourselves, we can choose to revisit the matter later with the person, or not. When we do choose to revisit an incident, it is important to avoid saying, “You made me feel angry” (or, controlled, misunderstood or whatever it was that you felt). Placing blame through that mode will meet with resistance. A much better way is to say, “When we last talked I felt blamed” (or, whatever it was that you felt). In this way you own your feelings taking responsibility for them.

Difficult feelings come when we feel judged or criticized. It happens with being alive--alive and able to achieve something. Defending ourselves to individuals who judge or criticize us is nonproductive as it simply serves to say they have a right to judge or criticize us. For instance, saying, “Oh, I did it that way, because . . .” is a defensive statement. Those words encourage their bad manners. Only

constructive criticism from a person whose help you have requested is appropriate. Otherwise, maintaining silence speaks best at points when people take it upon themselves to criticize our actions or our words. (Still, something important may be learned by *listening and thinking about* what was said. Expectations always set us up for disappointment. We are not being realistic if we expect to be understood or appreciated by everyone. Failing to set boundaries for ourselves when it comes to wanting everyone to like us robs us of the happiness we deserve as God's beloved children.

It is true that our emotions are important. We need to identify them as they come and reckon with what is behind them. Emotions are simply molecules within our body chemistry. We hold the power to control, to a great degree, the biochemistry of our bodies based on what we believe and what we think. The Motivational Model provided below shows our beliefs create how we perceive the world we live in, and everything that happens to us in this world. What we believe creates how we perceive ourselves, God, and others. The cycle shown on this illustration may be an eye opener. It is not hard to comprehend that our perceptions prompt the way we think. Yet, few people realize that *what we think creates how we feel*.

Far too often we live like puppets, depending on our emotions to pull the strings. This sees us acting on every strong emotion as it arises. Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain scientist, informs us that powerful emotions do not have to rule us. We can choose not to be a product of our biochemistry, of which the brain is very much the CEO. Once we change beliefs that fail to serve us well, our thinking becomes much healthier. For instance, if we come to know God as a loving, forgiving and accepting God, while letting go a former belief that God is an angry, punishing God, we experience more joy and gladness in life. Since many of our beliefs were formed before we were six years old, it is important to evaluate what we believe. We develop good boundaries with ourselves in this way.

Dr. Taylor, author of *My Stroke of Insight*, writes that it only takes 90 seconds for our biochemistry to capture and then release us. Dr. Taylor writes, "What an enormous difference this awareness has made in how I live my life."² We too can experience this great help during our most agitated moments. It takes reckoning within the heat of the moment: "What was I thinking and believing." Breathe deeply and remember: "Yes, I feel completely under the power of this emotion right now, but in 90 seconds this feeling is going to lose its grip." It is important to look further as we deal with our emotions, for it is *what we think and what we believe* that creates our emotions. Once we wait out the first great rush of feeling, we can ask, "What was I thinking (or believing) that would support such feelings?" It is through monitoring and shifting our cognitive thoughts that we can best set boundaries for our emotions.

Dr. Taylor, an expert in brain activity, assures us that we can have boundaries with our emotions as they arise. We can breathe deeply while waiting for the emotion to dissipate. Doing this provides the brain with a fresh load of oxygen, allowing us to do our best thinking and speaking. Without a doubt, gaining rulership over our biochemistry can keep us out of a lot of hot water. It is not good to give anyone "a piece of your mind" while your biochemistry is playing its tune.

We know our emotions can fall out of our mouths through words spoken in haste. Our tongues can start fires resulting in more upsets in life than would otherwise take place. The adage, "bite your tongue," speaks of keeping this fiery little serpent in place. It is hard to stop and think when we are

² Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight* (New York: Viking, 2006).

angry. But, we can do hard things. Using just the right words, after forethought, is an art form. This is superbly expressed through this favorite quote, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”

Boundaries are a must in life if we plan to take care of ourselves within our interactions with others. Having boundaries with ourselves, and with others, is all about good self-care. It is about watching our thoughts and emotions, while monitoring our behaviors. For instance, if we follow our desires, without considering the consequences, we invite havoc into our lives. That is not good as we then suffer some very difficult feelings such as remorse, self-disgust and outright guilt.

Anger is a protective emotion. We are not meant to be doormats allowing others to walk on us. Nevertheless, anger can act as a wind, blowing out the lamp of good judgment resulting in abusive behavior which includes raging. Here we must have boundaries with ourselves. This is a two way street. Having boundaries with ourselves is of equal importance to having boundaries with others. We are humans and we get angry, especially in face of injustice. As Scripture says, “Be angry and sin not (Eph 4:26).”

Without boundaries, you get abuse. One abuse experienced early in my life was spiritual abuse. I was ill, yet was ashamed of being sick. At church our congregation prayed for people to be healed. Although sometimes I was healed through prayer; other times healing did not come. I was eighteen when my struggle with blood clots began. Many prayed for me, yet the problem continued. This weighed heavy on my soul, as I believed God was disappointed in me. My father misunderstood the premise of faith healing, during those years. Consequently, he told me I didn’t have enough faith, else I would be healed. So, guilt was added to my physical distress. I inwardly whipped myself due to this belief that my faith was lacking. This caused me to see myself in a negative light. Self-castigation, confusion and self-doubt were hard to overcome.

As an adult, with maturity as a Christian, I can see this belief about healing is not true. Healing is a mystery. Sometimes our prayers for healing are answered. Sometimes we have to wait out the pain and suffering. Once we let a belief go, though, our thinking does change and our emotions change as a result.

Many people lack the concept of maintaining boundaries with others. Yet, without boundaries we are prone to allow others to behave in harmful ways. Relationships can be destroyed in this way. It is a wonderful thing to learn the power of setting boundaries. It is also vitally important to extend consequences when these boundaries are not honored. In the process of learning to do good self-care, all becomes grist for growth.

For certain, my early life pain created a great thirst for God’s love. Slowly, I grew in my ability to sense God’s love and acceptance. Romans 8:28 carries a treasured promise: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Still, like many people, I was three decades into life before learning how to validate myself enough to invest the time and energy needed for speaking my truth and expecting to be heard. First, I had to discover what I truly believed before being able to know who I truly was. The process of letting go some beliefs while strengthening others evolved slowly. Eventually, with God’s help and guidance, my inner healing work enabled me to realize my self-worth. This brought about a much healthier and happy me.

Self-validation is crucial to allowing forgiveness to take place within every hurtful and angry-making experience in life. I tell my clients, "If you want to be emotionally free, forgive everything that has ever hurt or harmed you. And, forgive every person who has brought pain to you in life." Those who take this teaching to heart, and do the work of forgiving all, not only enjoy more emotional freedom in life, they have more energy. Most people do not know what a large amount of their energy is expended, within each 24-hour period, when they do not forgive (let go and release) what, and who, has hurt them. Holding down old buried pain takes a lot of energy. Here, it takes setting boundaries with ourselves by setting our wills to give up the grudges, the desire to get even and the hurt and the hate. Only then can the healing process begin. This work of forgiving ourselves and others truly is a process, one that is not finished until all the foul feelings are gone. In an awesome passage Jesus tells us, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you (Mt 6:14)."

At times, forgiving is a very hard thing to do. Yet, as I said before, we can do hard things. It takes being motivated through believing that doing this work will create better mental and emotional health, and therefore, a happier life. However, forgiving is a process. We will work with painful experiences over and over again, until the hurt, the anger and the fear are relinquished, or at least subsided. Within this process, those difficult memories will come up less and less until they lie at rest in our souls, forgiven. In some instances, forgiving can take decades of persistent efforts. It all depends on how deep the pain is and what meaning we have placed on the cause of the pain. The process gets easier as each effort is made.

Doing inner healing work brings slow but sure results. The process is compared to peeling an onion, as the layers of pain and confusion come off one-by-one. During this process, it is also imperative to cry. These tears not only carry relief, but also a sense of there being a rainbow up ahead, one that carries the promise that we are getting well.

No one really wants to do this healing work at first. Yet, once we gain a taste of the freedom that comes through healing our physical and emotional wounds, we are not likely to turn back. An article on the home page of this website titled "Tears – How They Help the Body and the Soul," extends the science behind why it is important to let our tears flow. Yes, tears help us release difficult emotions, but what is equally true is that tears have a positive effect on our physical health as well.

As stated in "Dealing with Difficult Emotions," Socrates was right-on with, "Know thyself." And, so was Ralph Emerson right with his words, "To thine own self be true." Learning to recognize what is going on inside ourselves creates a greater likelihood that others will respect us. Furthermore, we will get better at perceiving when to give a wide berth to any person who cannot allow others their boundaries.

Reading from left to right you will see how our: 1) beliefs create our perceptions; 2) perceptions create our thought; 3) thoughts create our emotions; 4) emotions affect our decisions; 5) decisions result in action; 6) actions reinforce our beliefs, or change beliefs that no longer serve us well.

The Motivational Model

