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BOUNDARIES: Define Your Emotional Space!

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Everyone understands the need for clear property boundaries if neighbours are going to get along with each other. Without such property lines, one neighbour might begin to encroach on another neighbour's property resulting in bad feelings all around. It is surprising how few people understand that the same concept is true in our relationships.

Emotional boundaries define how much we are willing to give and what we expect back in our relationships. As you would expect, these boundaries are different depending on the nature of the relationship we have with each person. At work for example, the expectation is that you will perform to fulfill your job requirements while maintaining an appropriate working relationship with those around you. In our personal relationships, we are continuously defining and redefining the boundaries that help us to develop increasingly healthy relationships.

The following physical example may help you understand the concept of boundaries. We all have a certain area of personal physical space that we like to maintain when interacting with others. The next time you are talking with someone, move forward a certain amount as you talk to the person and watch what happens. What you will probably notice is that not only does your level of discomfort increase but the person will move back to reestablish their personal space boundary. If you continue this slowly over a period of time, you can literally back someone "into a corner" without them being aware of what is happening. If you decide to try this, you need to know that the amount of personal space that is needed to feel comfortable varies depending on the person's cultural background.

What happens when we don't develop and maintain appropriate emotional boundaries? First, you may allow others to take advantage of you far more than is healthy for you. When this happens, you may feel angry, frustrated, taken for granted and used. This can occur in our primary relationship as well. In a healthy relationship, there is an ebb and flow in which each person gives more at certain times than the other. This gets evened out when they receive what they need in support from their partner. However, in some relationships one person is clearly defined as the "giver" while the other person is the "taker". Not surprisingly, such relationships are fundamentally unhealthy and seldom work successfully for very long.

The concept of boundaries applies to many areas of our daily life. For example, understanding the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness requires a clear idea of boundaries. Many highly educated professionals have trouble establishing clear boundaries in their professional life because of the gratitude they receive from their

clients and patients. Workaholics are another excellent example of individuals who are unable to establish appropriate boundaries between their personal lives and their work environments.

Here is a simple exercise to determine if you have clear emotional boundaries. Write a description of the boundaries by which you live your life. Describe how you interact with family members as well as friends and coworkers. Notice the differences in your expectations and what you are willing to give to each group of individuals. If you are not able to clearly define your boundaries for each group of people, or if you find that you are consistently blurring or mixing up your expectations in different areas of your life, you may want to consider getting some help to sort out your emotional boundaries. Remember, just as good fences make good neighbours, good emotional boundaries contribute to healthy long lasting relationships.

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