Boundaries for Codependents

Rokelle Lerner

What Are Boundaries?

Boundaries are our sense of ourselves, and our perception of how we are different from others physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Boundaries exist for our protection. Our boundaries are not fixed; they change with what we feel and the people we are with. When our boundaries are intact, we know that we have separate feelings, thoughts, and realities. Our boundaries allow us to know who we are in relation to others around us. We need our boundaries to get close to others, since otherwise we would be overwhelmed.

Boundaries ensure that our behavior is appropriate and keep us from offending others. When we have healthy boundaries, we also know when we are being abused. A person without boundaries will not know when someone is physically, emotionally, or intellectually violating them.

This phenomenon is common to codependents in general and adult children of alcoholics in particular, which may account for why so many tend to remain in abusive situations.

Developing boundaries is a core issue for codependents in recovery and nowhere is this more dramatically illustrated than in adult children of alcoholics. They need to understand and develop boundaries in order to fully recover and claim their identities.

For the first eighteen months of life, children have no clear idea of who they are and depend entirely on their mother and father for basic needs. During the "terrible twos" a child begins to push away from parents, learns cause and effect thinking, and develops the important skill of saying, "No, I won't!" and "You can't make me." In this important stage of development, children test others around them so they can begin to answer: *What is and is not under my control? Will others still care for me if I think for myself? Where do I stop and you begin?* These questions must be answered for children to clarify their boundaries.

Children of Alcoholics

According to Dr. Stanley Keleman, author of Your Body Speaks Its Mind, if children do not say "no," they never affirm themselves. If they don't form and maintain boundaries, they become victimized. Often, saying "no" and "I won't" are the strongest expressions of self-affirmation a child can make.

These assertions protect children and allow them to see themselves as separate from their parents. Healthy mothers and fathers respect this important developmental stage. In chemically dependent families, however, children must adapt to their parents. It is because of this forced adaptation that children of alcoholics often develop a focus outside of themselves.

In many alcoholic families, personal space is invaded and emotions are not clearly defined or accepted. Attention is focused on the alcoholic parent, not the children, who learn to match what they feel to the mood swings of the parent. In other words, if Mom is the alcoholic and Mom is happy, then the children are happy. When children focus on their parents and neglect

themselves, they never develop the inner resources that help them to know how to feel, think, or behave in a given situation. This is the essence of codependency and a damaged boundary system.

Children raised in alcoholic families, for example, may learn quite early that getting angry, having tantrums, and saying "no" are dangerous. For this reason, children of alcoholics may come to view anger as something to avoid, and separation as disloyalty. They may never quite learn where their boundaries end and another's begin.

If Mom is angry, the children assume they have caused it. If Mom is depressed, the children are depressed and tiptoe around the house. These children may never clearly find their emotional boundaries and have difficulty deciding whose feelings belong to whom.

When children hear phrases such as, "You drive me to drink!" or "If it weren't for you kids, I wouldn't have to take these pills!" they tend to respond to them as if they were true. They don't yet have the ability to evaluate these types of situations. Young children who take these statements literally often come to believe that if they were more studious, perfect, well-behaved or attractive; their parents would not be alcoholic.

For this reason, these children often develop a sense of responsibility for their parents' welfare that unfortunately does not always diminish over time or with maturity. This sense of over-responsibility results in painful relationships and instills a deep sense of shame for basic human failures.

It's no wonder that children raised with unpredictable, abusive parents are confused about their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. It's crucial for children of alcoholics to understand the idea of boundaries if they are to reclaim the emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual parts of themselves.

How Are Boundaries Violated?

No parent consciously destroys a child's boundary system. In fact, boundaries are often damaged in the name of love by parents who lack a clear sense of themselves or do not understand the importance of allowing their children to set limits.

Alcoholic families are usually emotionally, physically, and intellectually abusive. It is important to remember, however, that this abuse can occur in any family where children are raised by anxious, unpredictable parents. Parents affected by compulsive behavior or addiction often lack a clear sense of themselves and are likely to raise children with the same problem. Children raised with undependable parents often become adults with damaged boundaries. The most obvious form of boundary violation occurs in the form of physical abuse or neglect.

Physical Boundaries

We get to know our physical comfort zones through our physical boundaries. When we have healthy physical boundaries, we can determine how close others should come to us. It also means we can determine how and when we want to be touched, and who we will allow to touch us. It means we give that right to others.

Physical boundaries are most often violated by physical violence, incest, or neglect. Children who are touched inappropriately by parents must deny their discomfort and repulsion in order to survive the abuse in the family. If a father makes sexual advances toward his daughter, she'll probably learn to ignore the sensation of her skin crawling, her stomach tying in knots, and having to hold her breath in order not to feel. It is precisely the "turning off" or ignoring of these responses that will make her vulnerable to problems in the future. She may even abuse her own children.

Our bodies and emotions tell us when someone is violating our space. But many children with alcoholic parents learn to distrust their senses and their emotions. They often ignore bizarre events and treat crises as if they were normal.

When I was speaking to a group of adult children one evening, a fire alarm went off in the hotel. I noticed the audience remained seated even when the smell of smoke became obvious. People began to get up and leave only after I mentioned there was a crisis occurring. This is one example of the perceptual damage that prevents adult children from developing healthy, protective boundary systems.

Another example: A ten-year-old girl was forced each day to give hugs and kisses to her mother, who physically abused her. During a therapy session I asked the child if she minded hugging her mom. The child quietly answered that she did not. When Mom came to pick her up, the girl got out of the chair, took a breath and held it, and went to hug her. While she was embracing her mother, the child pulled in her rib cage and held herself stiffly to avoid bodily contact. Clearly, her body was screaming a message, but she was ignoring it.

Paying attention to her bodily cues would have forced the girl to admit both her fear and her reluctance to let her mother touch her. This pattern of denial, if not stopped, will continue past childhood. As an adult, she may lack the physical boundaries that would protect her from abuse. She will allow herself to be close to people who are not safe. Saddest of all, she won't even trust her senses to know when abuse is occurring. As an adult, she may also begin to form a protective wall of anger and fear instead of a healthy physical boundary. People around her will see that she does not want to be touched, that she is unavailable for intimacy.

When physical boundaries are invaded, the victim often feels a deep sense of shame. Ironically, victims of physical abuse or incest often remain loyal to the people who abuse them. When their physical boundaries are repeatedly violated, victims often feel they are betraying their abuser by setting boundaries. Feeling responsible for this leaves the child with the idea that the intrusion was justified.

Physical neglect often produces children and adults who are greedy for affection. Because their parents rarely comforted them, these children didn't create a physical comfort zone. Chasing after an evasive parent for physical closeness forced them to ignore their own feelings.

As adults, these people often invade the space of others by standing too close, touching others without permission, or allowing others to come too close. Unmet needs in childhood rarely disappear. The lack of physical closeness in childhood contaminates their adulthood. They lose their sense of self in order to satisfy their childhood cravings for intimate bonding.

In order to set physical boundaries, we must be aware of what we are feeling when others get close to us. We have the right to determine how and when people enter our space. We must trust

our senses, and if we doubt what our senses reveal, we can ask someone whose opinion we value. It's important to remember that we are the only experts on our boundaries; that no one can tell us where our comfort zone is. This is something we must determine.

Emotional Boundaries

Emotional boundaries are formed early in our life and are greatly influenced by the nature of the bond with our parents. Emotional boundaries protect us like an internal shield, helping us determine which emotions are ours, and letting us deflect emotions that are not ours. When we have healthy emotional boundaries, we can honestly determine our feelings about any situation, person, place, or thing. If we take responsibility for expressing our emotions and notice the impact of our behavior on others, we have healthy emotional boundaries.

Typically, when parents are irresponsible with their feelings, their children will become irresponsible with theirs. If a father repeatedly rages uncontrollably at his child, that child will inherit feelings of rage and shame. The only way a child avoids this is to have an emotional boundary. Unfortunately, young children do not immediately possess boundaries. If the father were to explain to the child that his rage was his own and had nothing to do with the child's behavior, perhaps this boy or girl would develop an emotional boundary.

Many parents, however, never explain this to their children or deny that it is necessary. This lets the rage move from father to child and to future generations. The child in this family will take on Dad's rage and feel overwhelmed. Then the child may carry this rage into adulthood and dump this rage on his or her children and intimate partners.

Emotional boundaries are damaged in the family by:

- Role Reversal
- Emotional Incest
- Shaming and Humiliation
- Enmeshment

Role reversal occurs when parents do not function as adults, and children become responsible for meeting their parents' needs. In an alcoholic home, for example, it is common to see the "childification" of parents and the "parentification" of children — the parents' neediness is met by the child and the child's needs are ignored. Children learn quite early to accommodate needy parents, often by emotionally shutting down. Realizing that their parents can't tolerate anger, sadness, or pain, they learn to ignore and deny those feelings, according to Alice Miller, author of *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. Expressing these emotions means risking Mom's love or making Dad sick. The emotions become enemies, and are numbed or feared.

Children raised with reversed roles act like little adults. They often enter adulthood emotionally deformed, believing that their feelings are dangerous, and that their emotions will harm them or others around them.

Emotional Incest occurs when parents share adult secrets with children. These parents treat their children as close adult friends or surrogate spouses. As adults, we have been told secrets we wish we didn't know. We can imagine how children feel when they are told inappropriate information.

Parents who share their intimacies with children tangle their children in an emotional web that prevents growth. Children battling emotional incest are not able to strengthen their boundaries enough to become individuals. The shared secrets become the children's problems to solve, and they become unable to determine whose feelings are whose. This is a sign of a damaged emotional boundary.

Often, as a result of this type of boundary damage, children may feel the unexpressed pain of their parents. As adults they may enter into relationships with people who cannot express their pain. The unspoken agreement is: *My partner will feel the pain, and I'll express the feelings for him or her*, write Merle A. Possum and Marilyn J. Mason, authors of *Facing Shame: Families in Recovery*.

It is common for these children to become their parents' therapists . They often continue this role into adulthood where intimacy becomes a chance to "help someone do it correctly."

Shaming and humiliation: Parents who constantly humiliate and blame raise emotionally deprived children. Shame eats away at the bond between parents and children and teaches children to humiliate and shame others as well as themselves. Children hold on to these critical messages, and, by the time they become adults, good and bad messages are constantly at war in their minds. They develop walls instead of boundaries. These people not only reject nurturing and compliments, but also mistrust those who try to get behind their walls.

Adults who were shamed as children for expressing emotions often carry with them an unseen "committee" that criticizes and judges their reactions.

When our emotional boundaries are destroyed, we feel transparent, worthless, and can't accept nurturing from others. We build walls instead of boundaries, and all messages, even good ones, bounce right off. We not only reject compliments and nurturing, but mistrust everyone who tries to come through our walls.

Enmeshment is a term used to describe families in which members must have the same feelings and beliefs as the person in charge. These families appear close and tight, but often feel distant from one another. Enmeshment destroys a child's sense of emotional separateness. These families provide children with a heightened sense of belonging that requires children to give up their emotional autonomy. When our boundaries are damaged by enmeshment, we often become emotionally empty or "emotional sponges." We tend to soak up the feelings around us, allowing others to determine our feelings. Children battling this type of boundary damage find it difficult to develop the tools to discover their feelings. They search outside themselves for definition.

Repairing Emotional Boundaries

We can begin to rebuild damaged emotional boundaries by paying attention to when we feel shame. If we consistently feel shame with certain people, we should ask ourselves if our boundaries are being invaded or abused. Even if we are unsure what the abuse is, we must trust our feelings to help us know.

It may be necessary to set emotional boundaries by explaining to another person, "I don't know why, but every time I'm with you, I don't feel good about myself. So, for right now, I can't be with you."

For those of us whose parents humiliated, criticized, and shamed us, it will be helpful to learn to talk to ourselves without shame and humiliation. Some call this re-parenting. We can comfort ourselves by simply commenting internally on our shame*: Okay, I'm doing it to myself again. I'm shaming myself again*. Sometimes, this alone diffuses it.

Complimenting ourselves and affirming that we are good people is a helpful tool in unpacking shame. Learning to comfort the little boy or girl inside of us helps feed our imagination with different thoughts and a healthier view of the world.

If our feelings of fear, anger, or pain are consistently overwhelming, we may have to uncover the source of our feelings with the help of a competent therapist. This is a process that often begins with writing about our life, explaining how we think our emotional boundaries were damaged. We state the events and how we felt about them. With a therapist's guidance, we then talk about the events and hopefully why we feel pain and anger. It is the therapist's job to point out the denial and minimizing of situations that people with damaged emotional boundaries often battle with.

It is common, for example, for an adult child of an alcoholic to discover some early childhood abuse and talk about it as if it didn't really matter. "When I was young, my mom kept telling me that she would kill herself . . . but it's not really a big deal." Or, when a memory surfaces that involves abuse, an adult child may quickly deny the memories: "I remember Dad telling me about his affair, but I know I must be making this up!" It takes a patient therapist to keep us on track and help us believe the importance of our memories.

Adults who were victims of emotional abuse must learn to trust their feelings. Feelings provide us with an immense amount of wisdom and information. Uncomfortable feelings that may have been dangerous to express in our original families are no longer dangerous. We have a right to be angry when someone offends us. Our fear protects us and even our pain helps us grow. For example, fear helps us know when we are in danger.

If these emotions scare us, we need to think about what we're feeling and why we're feeling it. If this causes us to doubt our feelings, we can check with people we trust to make sure we are not taking on feelings that don't belong to us. We can determine our feelings in any situation.

Intellectual Boundaries

A healthy intellectual boundary lets us trust how we view the world. It allows us to know what we want and need, and helps us to sort out our desires from those of others. A flexible intellectual boundary lets us accept information from the outside world and look at it before we make it "ours."

Intellectual boundaries are blurred by parents who too tightly control their children's perceptions. Often, children who become dependent on their parents to think for them don't develop intellectual boundaries. This kind of relationship encourages dependency and discourages responsibility.

According to Paul Watzlawick, author of *How Real Is Real? Confusion, Disinformation, Communication,* the language we use helps determine our world view. Well-meaning parents can hinder their children's ability to think for themselves with simple statements like, "Don't

cross that street, you'll scare me to death!" or, "You know you feel better when you wear that shirt." These children will learn not to cross the street in heavy traffic, but their reasoning becomes skewed. They will not cross in traffic because they do not want to scare Mom, not because it's dangerous. Similarly, a child will put on a different shirt, not because he or she chooses it, but because the parent makes the choice. This kind of boundary destruction is difficult to repair.

Some parents often assume they know what their children think or feel without asking them. Children who are denied the right to think and feel for themselves often learn to distrust their ideas about the world. If, as children, we are often punished, ridiculed, or overruled for creating our own ideas of our world, we will learn to distrust what we believe.

For example, we might find our father passed out on the floor, smelling of alcohol, while our mother insists he is simply tired and taking a nap. Or our mother might come home from work drunk and violent, yet demand that we see her as gentle and loving.

These examples are common in an alcoholic family. As children, we were often forced to see reality not as it looked to us, but how our parents told us it was. We learned to surrender our reality to theirs. To avoid this surrender, we would have had to possess an intellectual boundary and "buck the system." To maintain our ideas of reality and what is true and not true, we needed nurturing parents to make us confident in our reality. When this guidance was not available, we began to distrust what we thought and felt. Many children of alcoholics, therefore, believe themselves to be crazy.

Adults who have been raised with this confusion find it very difficult to behave appropriately in many situations. They spend a lot of time figuring out how they "should" see reality. This lack of trust in one's perception is typical of codependency.

Adolescents raised in an atmosphere of distorted reality often will follow whoever is in charge. When teenagers are told that "everyone else is doing it — why don't you?" a damaged intellectual boundary will cause them to mistrust their beliefs and go with the group. Many anti-drug campaigns aimed at youth fail to consider that many young drug users have damaged intellectual boundaries, and they aren't able to say no.

Denial, a powerful tool that allows us to live with pain and an unhealthy environment, also damages intellectual boundaries and represses memory. According to Rene Fredrickson, author of *The Lost Childhood*, children will have problems with denial and will not be able to know truth from lies, or fantasy from reality, when a family lives by the following rules:

> ***Appearances are everything.*** If the response to alcoholism is, "Don't go to Alcoholics Anonymous — what will people think?" and the response to bruises from physical abuse is, "Wear long sleeves!" children will learn to deny their pain. After years of this denial, children won't allow themselves to know when they feel pain and when they don't.
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> ***The good times are enshrined — the bad times are forgotten.*** Often in alcoholic families, good times are used to deny pain. When a child complains about pain, the child might quickly be reminded of a holiday celebration some years ago when there were 40 people for dinner and a three-piece band. These parents are telling their children to forget and deny that pain exists. This family clings to one another in a desperate and dishonest way, attempting to prove closeness.

"You are crazy if you think something is wrong here!" This rule more than any other causes immense confusion and denial. Typically, one person in the family will project blame on another family member for discovering the alcoholism, abuse, incest, compulsive behavior, or other family secrets. Because of this rule, children and adults feel as if they are crazy. This typifies adult children of alcoholics who do not know what "normal" is.

Repairing Intellectual Boundaries

An often-used tool to repair intellectual boundaries in codependents is journal writing. It is important, particularly for adult children of alcoholics, to take time each day to write their daily perceptions of events -- what they like and dislike, and what they desire.

Adults with damaged intellectual boundaries may fall into the trap of writing for some unseen audience. Or, they may feel their papers will be corrected at the end of each day: words must be spelled correctly, columns must be even, and nasty words can't be used.

We need to reassure ourselves that this journal is only for ourselves, and that no one is to see it without our permission. Keeping this journal in a safe place will provide us with the privacy we need.

We also need to remind ourselves that feeling crazy is different from being crazy. A therapist we trust can reassure us of this. It's a common symptom of children raised with intellectual abuse to feel crazy. When this perception of being crazy occurs, it's helpful to ponder the following*: Someone taught me to feel crazy. Who am I still being loyal to? What is it that I've not yet discovered?*

Many children of alcoholics feel as if they have been on stage most of their lives, saying what they're supposed to say, and thinking what they're supposed to think. It's crucial for us to get off the stage if we want to become honest with ourselves. We often need the guidance of a mentor, a sponsor, or a therapist to help us.

Finally, when others comment on our perception of reality, we can accept or discard it. In order to do this we must slow down enough to ponder what has been said. Sometimes we simply have to let ideas float in the air for a few moments before taking them in. After we practice this technique we'll begin to discover which ideas are good for us and which ones aren't.

Spiritual Boundaries

A spiritual boundary gives us the sense that we are not earthly beings trying to become spiritual, but spiritual beings in human form. This spiritual boundary allows us to believe there is a Power in the universe greater than ourselves.

A healthy spiritual boundary lets us embrace our human-ness. When we grow up with the notion of a Higher Power who loves us unconditionally, we feel we can make mistakes and we'll still be loved. Infants are not born into this world hating themselves. Healthy children are able to give and receive love. It is the mutilation of our spiritual boundary that causes us to fall out of love with ourselves and disconnect from our Higher Power.

Children who are spiritually abused often walk in a state of terror. Terror is a combination of shame and fear that promotes perfectionism, shame, and over-controlling behavior.

A friend of mine who is troubled by spiritual abuse put it this way: "It's hard to think of a loving God when you feel so shameful. If you feel you are a mistake, it's hard to hear God's voice saying that He loves you unconditionally."

Spiritual abuse comes in many forms. When parents use God as punishment, children develop a deep sense of shame. Statements like, "You will go to hell for thinking those things!" or, "God will punish you for breaking that dish!" instill in the child an inaccurate view of God and a terror that prevents genuine spiritual growth.

Children raised with this view of God see God as they do their parents — violent, unpredictable, and punishing. Embracing the idea of a Higher Power who is loving and forgiving becomes difficult.

A spiritual boundary is also damaged when parents put themselves on a pedestal and don't reveal their humanness to their children. When children come to their parents in pain, they need to be comforted and reassured. If parents turn away their children without comforting or reassuring them, it will be hard for the children to believe that God is loving and kind, since they learn little of love, kindness, and comfort from their parents.

Some families quote Scriptures to cover pain, as if Scriptures should take the place of warm reassurances or hugs. Instead of receiving loving hugs and comfort, the child gets quotes from the Bible. This type of parenting makes a child's spiritual life meaningless. The ritual and words are there, but a sense of love and comfort are missing. In other words, the house is wired for electricity, but no one knows how to plug into it. A damaged spiritual boundary leaves us in doubt about our view of ourselves, our lives, and our Higher Power.

Repairing a Spiritual 'Boundary

The healing of a spiritual boundary takes time and patience. There is an old saying in Alcoholics Anonymous that spirituality is the first thing to go and the last to return. As codependents with damaged boundaries, we live in confusion, often not separating our physical, mental, or emotional reality from others. As we emerge from the confusion and pain caused by damaged boundaries, we begin to reach a clarity that invites us to consider our spiritual lives. We must first realize our sep-arateness in order to feel a sense of oneness or spiritual union. Eventually our ideas about God must be our own.

As we repair damaged boundaries, we begin to take the risk of establishing close, healthy relationships. When we are able to form deep connections with others, we begin to see a part of ourselves that is spiritual. As our beauty is reflected back to us, we begin to consider that we are indeed magnificent, that we are unique expressions of God.

By repairing damaged boundaries, we discover who we are. The process of knowing our reality from the reality of others requires us to look inward, where we may find our true spiritual identity. Codependency implies that we are alienated from our feelings, beliefs, and behaviors. As we reclaim our thoughts and emotions, we truly come home to ourselves. There, we gradually develop our ideas of a Higher Power that are not dependent on other people's beliefs. This is important if we are to leave behind destructive notions of a violent, punishing God.

Treating ourselves with gentleness and firmness through this process is crucial. As our spirituality returns or is established for the first time, we see the emergence of childlike qualities that were buried deep in us. Spontaneity, flexibility, humor, joy, play, laughter, and risk-taking let us believe the idea of a loving, accepting, and forgiving God.

The following affirmations can help us to repair a damaged spiritual boundary.

I am a beloved child of God.

I am allowed to make mistakes.

I am protected and supported in the loving hands of God.

Learning where we end and others begin takes practice. Setting our limits with others takes courage. The excitement that comes with establishing our boundaries is well worth the effort. In the end, we have a clearer identity and a stronger sense of dignity.

Do not expect others to automatically appreciate the effort it takes to establish clear boundaries. On the contrary, those close to us may become upset that we're forming a separate identity. Be assured, however, that as our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realities become clear and strong, relationships will become healthier and more satisfying.

In the end, it is up to us to form our boundaries with others. No one can do this for us. Repairing damaged boundaries may require the guidance of a mentor, sponsor, or a therapist, but the responsibility for our healing lies with us.

About the Publication:

So much of recovery from codependence has to do with figuring out where we stop and where another person begins. Growing up in an alcoholic or dysfunctional family often prevents us from creating healthy physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual boundaries. This publication offers meaningful insight on how to build healthy boundaries.

About the Author:

Rokelle Lerner is a founding board member of the National Adult Children of Alcoholics organization. She lectures internationally on how to develop treatment services for the alcoholic family