

## **Emotional Boundaries in Relationships**

A successful relationship is composed of two individuals each with a clearly defined sense of her or his own identity. Without our own understanding of self, of who we are and what makes us unique, it is difficult to engage in the process of an ongoing relationship in a way that is functional and though not always smooth is a safe environment that generally enhances each of the partners. We need a clear sense of self in order to clearly and unambiguously communicate our needs and desires to our partner. When we have a strong conception of our own identity, we do not feel threatened by the intimacy of the relationship and can appreciate and love those qualities in our partner that make him or her a unique person. When two people come together, each with a clear definition of her or his own individuality, the potential for intimacy and commitment can be astounding. The similarities between two people may bring them together, but in an ideal partnership, sometimes called interdependent, their differences are respected and contribute to the growth of their relationship which aids in the growth of the individuals in that relationship.

One feature of a healthy sense of self is the way we understand and work with our emotional boundaries. Personal boundaries are the limits we set in relationships that allow us to protect our selves from being manipulated by, or enmeshed with, emotionally needy others. Such boundaries come from having a good sense of our own self-worth. They make it possible for us to separate our own thoughts and feelings from those of others and to take responsibility for what we think, feel and do. Boundaries are part of the biological imperative of maturation as we individuate and become adult people in our own right. We are, all of us unique, and boundaries allow us to rejoice in our own uniqueness. Healthy intact boundaries are flexible, they allow us to get close to others when it is appropriate and to maintain our distance when we might be harmed by getting too close. Good boundaries protect us from becoming engulfed in abusive relationships and pave the way to achieving true intimacy the flipside of independence, as we grow to interdependence the relationship of two mature individuals. They help us take care of ourselves and if we can receive it, to respect the selves of others.

Unhealthy boundaries are generally as a result of being raised in dysfunctional families where maturation and the individuation process was not properly understood nor the child respected as an individual. In these types of families the unmet needs of parents or other adults are sometimes so overwhelming that the task of raising children is demoted to a secondary role, and dysfunction is the likely result. Consider the role of the father or mother who screams at his/her children or becomes physically, verbally or emotionally abusive with them as a self-centred way of dealing with his/her own stored up anger/grief from their own traumatic childhood. The emotional fallout of these unmet developmental needs, which, depending on the severity of the original pain, is often close to the surface and can be triggered by totally unrelated present circumstances. The pain of their own childhood experiences repressed for so long is felt again, insisting that these experiences be dealt with, relegating the present needs of the children for safety, security, respect and comfort to second place at best. But sometimes because of what they represent and the negative self worth of the parent the child can be perceived as the 'enemy' and so dysfunction is passed on from one generation to the next. This is not to say that the childhood experiences of the parent were necessarily horribly abusive, it is just that what may have been acceptable parenting practices in their family of origin for generations were abusive. More often than not these practices and their underlying attitudes were based on false or abusive religio-cultural premises. What the children are likely to learn in this situation is that boundaries don't matter, that indeed they, as individual human beings,

don't matter except where they are useful for the emotional needs of others. As they grow up in their families of origin, they lack the support they need from parents or caregivers to form a healthy sense of their own identities. their own individuality. In fact, they may learn that to get their needs met they must get their way with others. To do this they need to intrude on the emotional boundaries of other people just as their father or mother may have done. They would in all likelihood grow up with fluid boundaries, that cause them to swing between feelings of engulfment on the one hand and abandonment on the other inevitably leading to dysfunctional relationships later on in life. They would have at best, a hazy sense of their own personal boundaries, not able to properly define where they end and the other begins. Conversely, they may learn that rigid and inflexible boundaries might be the way to handle their relationships with other people. They wall themselves off in their relationships as a way of protecting their emotional selves, and, as a consequence, will, in all likelihood find it difficult to form lasting close interpersonal bonds with others in adulthood as they are still trying to individuate from their parents. The exception in this is of relationships predicated on the same rigid rule based structure as their family of origin where nothing came into the family or out from it, but in this case the bond is likely to be enmeshment.

The following are some ways in which unhealthy boundaries may show themselves in our relationships, along with some remedies:

### **Lack of a Sense of Identity**

When we lack a sense of our own identity and the boundaries of the self that protect and define us as individuals, we tend to draw our identities, our sense of self worth from our partner or significant other as we did in the earliest stage of our biological growth in our family of origin, drawing our sense of worth from their perceptions of us. The structure of the relationship in this case is not that of equals in a partnership but that of parent and child. Leading in some cases to that most unequal of relationships, master and slave. It is quite possible that children developing in a family where the important relationship of the parents is an unequal one will be forced to take on roles as either surrogate spouse and/or adopt roles that it is hoped will restore dignity to the family and balance to the system. If we can't imagine who we would be without our relationship, chances are we come from a dysfunctional family of origin and have learned co-dependent behaviour patterns. Unable to find fulfilment within ourselves we look for such fulfilment in others and are willing to do anything it takes to make the relationship work, just as we may have done in our enmeshed family of origin, even if this means giving up our emotional security, friends, integrity, sense of self-respect or worth, independence, or employment. We may even endure objectification, (an attitude in which we are no longer perceived as feeling human-being but just an object, a part of the family system), in the form of physical, emotional or sexual abuse just to save the relationship.

The more rational alternative is to find out who we are and what makes us unique, and we will rejoice in the freedom of this discovery. We will come to realise that our value and worth as a person is not necessarily dependent on having a significant other in our life, that we can function well as an independent person in our own right. When we move into accepting ourselves for who we really are warts and all, we will be able to accept others for who they are; our relationships and ourselves will actually have a chance to grow into emotionally mature adults able to give freely out of choice and flourish in our new found freedom. This journey of self-discovery can be challenging and painful but highly rewarding. Working with a trained therapist or as part of a support group or a combination of both can provide the structure and support we need to take on this task. But whatever way we may choose the first step is to

acknowledge to ourselves, God and possibly another person that our lives as we have tried to control and manage them have become unmanageable. The second is to give ourselves over to the cleansing and renewal processes.

### **Settling for Second Best**

We may cling to the irrational belief that things are good enough as they are, we feel a measure of security in the relationship, that change is a difficult and fearful prospect, or that we don't deserve any better, our life has always been a sacrifice of the self, and that this is as good as it's likely to get. In the process, however, we give up the chance to be the person we were meant to be and to explore our sense of personal fulfilment in life. We give up not only our own life dreams but our sense of worth in order to maintain the security of a relationship.

A healthy relationship is one in which boundaries are not only strong, but flexible enough, to allow us to flourish with our own uniqueness, but are also known to and respected by each other. There is a sense of respect on the part of both partners that allows each to live as full a life as possible and to explore their own personal potential. We don't have to give up ourselves for a relationship but can become interdependent. Healthy boundaries allow trust and security to develop in a relationship because they offer an honest and reliable framework by which we can know each other. But if we don't know where our self ends and the other begins it is impossible.

### **Over-Responsibility and Guilt**

One characteristic of growing up in a dysfunctional household is that we may learn to feel guilty if we fail to ensure the success and happiness of other members of the household. We may feel responsible or be made to feel responsible for the failure or unhappiness of others. Thus, in adulthood, we may come to feel or be made to feel responsible for our partner's failures. The guilt we feel when our partner fails may drive us to keep tearing down our personal boundaries so that we are always available to the other person. When we feel the pain, the guilt, the anger of being overly responsible for another person's behaviour or life experiences, we may seek alleviate this feeling by rescuing them from the consequences of their behaviour as we learned in our family of origin. Thereby depriving them of one of the most important features of an independent, healthy and mature life, the ability to make our own life choices, accepting the responsibility for and the consequences of our/their decisions. Or we may bear the burden of their unacceptable behaviour for many years.

A healthier response is to show our partners respect by allowing them to succeed or fail on their own terms. You, of course, may choose to support your partner's fulfilment of life goals but it is unhealthy to rescue them from all of life's consequences. When you do agree to help ask yourself two questions is it something they can do for themselves? and, do I resent the giving of my own resources (self, time, money, etc.)? This may be a difficult choice if we have confused love with rescue. You can be there to comfort or encourage your partner when times become difficult, and you can rejoice with them when success is the outcome. When boundaries are healthy, you are able to say, I trust and respect you to make your own life choices. As my equal partner, I will not try to control you by taking away your choices in life.

### **The Difference Between Love and Rescue**

People who grow up in a dysfunctional family may fail to learn the difference between love and sympathy. Children growing up in these conditions may learn to have sympathy for the

emotional crippling in their parents lives and feel that the only time they get attention is when they show compassion for the parent. They feel that when they forgive, they are showing love. Actually, they are rescuing the parent and enabling abusive behaviour to continue. They learn to give up their own protective boundaries in order to take care of the dysfunctional parent, becoming a surrogate co-dependent spouse. In adulthood, they carry these learned behaviours into their own relationships. If they can rescue their partner from the consequences of their behaviour, they feel that they are showing love. They get a warm, caring, sharing feeling from helping their partner, a feeling they call love. But this may actually encourage their partner to become needy and helpless enabling the negative behaviour to continue. An imbalance can then occur in the relationship in which one partner becomes the rescuer or enabler and the other plays the role of the helpless victim. In this case, healthy boundaries which allow both partners to live complete lives are absent. Mature love requires the presence of healthy, flexible boundaries.

Sympathy and compassion are worthy qualities, but they can be confused with love, especially when boundaries have become distorted or are virtually non-existent. Healthy boundaries lead to respect for the other and equality in a relationship, an appreciation for the aliveness and strength of the other person, and a mutual flow of feelings between the two partners, all features of mature love. When one partner is in control and the other is needy and helpless, there is no room for the give-and-take of a healthy relationship.

### **Fantasy vs. Reality**

Children from highly dysfunctional households often feel that things will get better someday, that a 'normal' life may lie in the future. Indeed, some days things are fairly 'normal', but then the bad times return again. It's the normal days that encourage the fantasy that all problems in the family might someday be solved. This is a common cycle in highly dysfunctional families. When they grow up, these adults carry the same types of fantasy into their relationships. They may portray to others the myth that they have the perfect relationship and they may believe, to themselves, that someday all of their relationship problems will somehow be solved. They ignore the abuse, manipulation, imbalance and control in the relationship. By ignoring the problems, they are unable to confront them and the fantasy of a happier future never comes to pass.

**Unhealthy boundaries**, where we collude with our partner in believing the myth that everything is fine, make it difficult to come to terms with the troubles of the relationship.

**Healthy boundaries** allow us to test reality rather than rely on fantasy. When problems are present, good boundaries allow us to define the problems and to communicate with our partner in finding solutions. They encourage a healthy self-image, trust, consistency, stability and productive communication.