

## Workbook Chapter Ten Set Boundaries

### Self-Assessment Tools:

#### **SKILL BUILDING ACTIVITY: Boundary Building Exercise** **Barry K. Weinhold. PhD**

In this exercise you will learn how to create appropriate boundaries rather than walls. You will also be able to experience what it feels like to be both the invader and the one being invaded and determine which role you feel most comfortable in. Toward the end of the exercise you will learn how to raise and lower your boundaries, allowing you protection when you need it and intimacy when you want it. It is important as you do this exercise that you maintain a high awareness of what is happening at all times in your body.

**Directions:** This exercise is best done on a floor with a pile carpet or a surface where you can draw a temporary circle on the floor with your finger. You need to do the exercise with a partner and each of you needs to take turns following the set of instructions given below. Choose a partner and sit on the floor across from each other. Decide who is going to begin acting as the person who is invaded and who will play the one who invades. This person will complete the exercise first. Your partner will play the invader. At the end of this exercise, you will exchange roles so that you both get an experience of playing invader/invade. You will both find directions for each role in the exercise.

#### **Part One: No Boundaries**

This part of the exercise is designed to have you really feel what it is like not to have protective boundaries. Partners sit across from each other about three feet apart. Your partner should start making some sort of aggressive or threatening nonverbal move toward you.

Do this slowly and with awareness. Notice how it feels to have someone approach you this way without warning. What feelings emerge? What reaction do you notice in your body? What thoughts come into your mind?

#### **Part Two: Boundaries, No Protection**

1. *Partner One:* Now draw an imaginary circle around yourself while sitting on the floor. Use your finger to trace the parameter of the circle in the carpet, if possible, or use string, magazines, pillows, or whatever you have handy. Feel what it is like to have the circle (boundary) around you.

*Partner Two:* Feel what it is like to be outside this circle and not have a boundary like your partner has.

2. *Partner One:* When you have your boundary (real or imaginary) created, tell your partner outside the boundary to begin playing the invader.

*Partner Two:* Using one hand, gently invade your partner's boundary. Each partner should pay attention to how it feels to play the particular role (invader or invader). Ask yourself if you like the role you are playing.

### **Part Three: Creating Boundaries with Protection**

This part of the exercise is for developing an awareness of what an appropriate boundary looks and feels like.

*Partner One:* Using the boundary created around you as a base, now create an imaginary egg-shaped sphere that completely surrounds you. As you set the sphere in place, notice how it feels to have this imaginary protection around you. Next, charge your egg with your own energy by breathing it full of breath through quick bursts of breathing, by radiating out energy from your whole body, or by imagining it full of some color, sound, or other kind of comforting support.

*Partner Two:* Notice what it feels like when your partner begins to isolate him or herself from you with this protective egg. Do you notice any emotions coming up for you? Do you have any other kind of response?

### **Part Four: Protecting Your Physical Boundaries**

In the next part of this exercise you will learn how to protect yourself against physical boundary violations.

*Partner One:* When you have your egg full of protective energy, ask your partner on the outside of your boundary to physically invade you by slowly moving one hand toward your egg. As the hand comes toward you, you can protect yourself in two ways. First, use the energy in your egg to make it impenetrable by your partner. Second, if the hand gets inside your egg, make a countering move with your hand to block your partner's hand. Use only enough force to stop the encroachment and to assert your strength. If you undermatch the oncoming energy, you set yourself up to be victimized. If you overmatch the oncoming energy, you set yourself up as an aggressor.

*Partner Two:* Invade your partner in a way that feels appropriate for him or her. If you are working with a timid partner, use less forcefulness. If you are working with a stronger partner, then you can use more force.

### **Part Five: Protecting Your Mental Boundaries**

*Partner One:* Think of something that people say to you that causes you to lose confidence in your thinking so that they can invade your mental boundaries. Perhaps it is some kind of message that says that you are stupid, dumb, or crazy. Now share this message with your partner outside your boundary. Then return to the safety inside your egg, making sure it is full of energy or whatever kind of protection you have filled it with. Your partner is going to repeat the message you just shared with him or her while you stay in the safety of your egg. When you have your egg ready, indicate to your partner when you are ready to begin.

*Partner Two:* Speak back the disturbing message that your partner shared with you. You can repeat it with different inflections and then begin to add variations of your own that you intuitively sense will fit with the original message.

*Partner One:* Continue to keep the shell of your egg impenetrable. Use the protective devices you have created (color, sound, energy) to keep out your partner's attempts to invade your mental boundaries. You can close your eyes, look away from your partner, or sing a song to yourself if you need to. When you are able to do this successfully, you can tell your partner to stop. If your partner's words begin to penetrate your shell, ask him or her to stop while you recharge your egg. Continue with the exercise until you know you can protect yourself against mental violations without difficulty.

### **Part Six: Protecting Your Emotional Boundaries**

*Partner One:* Remember the kinds of things people do or say to you which cause you to give up, modify, or hide your real feelings. It could be some kind of seductive, "Please rescue me, I'm helpless," message or one that says, "You're so important. We really need you to do this job," which appeals to your need to be important. Now share this message with your partner outside your boundary. Then return to the safety of your egg, filling it again with protection. When your egg is ready, give your partner the signal to begin the invasion.

*Partner Two:* Speak back the message your partner shared with you. Use body language and voice inflections that amplify the feeling part of the message. For example, if your partner's message had a victim tone in it, look and sound like a real victim.

*Partner One:* Continue to keep your egg impenetrable as your partner gives you your message. Give yourself comforting messages if you need to, saying things such as, "My feelings are mine, and they are okay." When you can successfully resist your partner's message, tell him or her to stop. If you have difficulty at any point, stop the invasion and recharge your egg. Continue until you can protect yourself against violations of your emotional boundaries.

### **Part Seven: Protecting Your Spiritual Boundaries**

*Partner One:* Think of the kinds of things that people have done to violate your spiritual boundaries. It could be some kind of terrorizing statement that invokes the wrath of God. It could also be something that attacks you in the very core of your being through shame, humiliation, or judgment that makes you want to die. Now share this message with your partner and return to the safety of your egg. When you have it filled with protection, tell your partner you are ready to begin.

*Partner Two:* Repeat back the message your partner shared with you in a way that reflects a Divine Pronouncement. Look and sound like an authoritative God or parent.

*Partner One:* Hold your own strength, resisting your partner's attack and abuse. If you need to pray or ask God or some other higher power for support, you can do that. When you can successfully resist your partner's message, tell him or her to stop. Stop the process at any time, if you have difficulty resisting, and recharge your egg. Continue until you can protect yourself against violations of your spiritual boundaries.

At this point, it is time for partners to reverse places. Partner One should remove his or her actual or imaginary boundary mark on the floor before moving on to repeat the exercise with his or her partner. When both partners have learned how to protect

themselves from physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual violations and can actually feel the protection that the egg sphere provides, it is time to move on to the next part of the exercise.

### **Part Eight: Moving in the World with Protection and Boundaries**

In this part of the exercise you will learn how to take your egg with you as you are out in the world. Both partners should make sure that they have their egg around them. If you were the first *Partner One*, you should take time to firmly reestablish your protective egg. When both partners have their eggs in place, they should stand up, imagining their egg as a hoop with handles. Picking up your egg/hoop, begin to move around the room. Notice how you react as you encounter your partner and as he or she comes close to your egg. Do you have an impulse to make your egg stronger and invade them? Or do you find yourself giving up your boundary? As you move, try to keep your boundary intact. Stay out of your partner's egg and keep yourself totally separate.

### **Part Nine: Raising and Lowering Your Boundaries**

This is a very important step for people with counter-dependent issues who have little experience in allowing other people inside their boundaries. It is important to go slowly and experiment with this step.

As you walk around the room with your partner, notice when you feel safe and when you feel unsafe. When you can identify the safe people, try opening and closing your egg as you come close to him or her. You can imagine a sliding door, a window blind with a pull string or little lens-type holes that open and close as images for how you might let others inside your egg. Become aware of what it feels like to actually be in charge of who enters your space and how much they can enter it. It is the ability to raise and lower the shell of your protective egg that really allows you to be in the world safely and still be intimate. For many people with unmet counter-dependent needs, this kind of exercise will provide the first experience of both safety and intimacy.

### **Part Ten: Touching and Maintaining Boundaries**

This can be the most difficult part of the exercise, for it requires that you actually let someone completely penetrate your egg while you still maintain your boundaries. This exercise also requires that you learn to give off nonverbal signals that are congruent with your desire or lack of desire for being touched. It also requires that you learn to read the nonverbal signals of other people about their desire or lack of desire for being touched. This kind of learning is valuable for the person with counter-dependent issues who never had an opportunity to develop these skills.

As you walk around the room, nonverbally let your partner know whether or not you want them to touch you. Give off clear signals with your face and body about your position on being touched. Also notice when your partner invites you to touch him or her. Learn to read their nonverbal signals about how much and where to touch. Approach them slowly and cautiously, so that you can stop quickly if you reach the limit.

## **Part Eleven: Discussion and Interpretation**

Now discuss with your partner what you learned by doing this exercise. Talk about ways you can use this information in your life. Make a specific plan with your partner on how you are going to use what you learned to create healthy boundaries for yourself.

### **The Bottom Line:**

People with unmet counter-dependency needs often had their boundaries violated as a child and built walls to protect themselves from further hurts. In order to protect themselves, people with unmet counter-dependent needs often invade the boundaries of others. Healthy boundaries are an important part of sustainable intimate relationships. It is never too late to learn how to create physical, mental, emotional and spiritual boundaries.

### **Case Example:**

Emily, age 28, came to me after having a number of unsuccessful attempts at therapy. She said she read my profile posted online at Betterhelp and knew I was the therapist she needed to see. She began by describing her very abusive childhood. Her father was very abusive toward her and this led to her ending up later in a series of relationships with abusive men. She never set any boundaries with men. She said she was too scared she would again be beaten, which she was.

A major breakthrough happened recently for Emily. She is living with her friend, Paula, and Paula's adult brother, Steve. Emily told me that one evening, they were all stoned and Steve fell asleep. When he woke up, he reached over and touched Emily's hand. She was startled and it triggered memories of when men took advantage of her.

Paula noticed what happened and was angry that Emily, as usual, didn't do or say anything. She told me that she and Steve also hug each other frequently, but Emily assured me that there was "nothing sexual" about their hugs. I don't think she realizes how seductive she can be.

I immediately saw that this was a safe enough situation where Emily could set appropriate boundaries with Steve. She had never in her whole life had set an appropriate boundary with a man. I saw this as an opportunity for Emily to begin to protect herself from men by setting an appropriate boundary with Steve and setting a boundary that he was not to touch her without her permission. At first, she seemed excited, but very nervous about doing that. It took several weeks of talking about doing it before she made the decision to set appropriate boundaries with Steve.

Earlier this week, I received a text from Emily. She wrote the following: " Well, I did it, Dr. Barry. We had the boundary discussion with xxxxx's brother. A real example presented itself and I jumped on the opportunity like I said I would, almost let it slip away but I didn't."

This is huge. I haven't even had time to get all the details about what actually happened, but she likely completed a very important piece of unfinished and unlearned behavior from her past and where she was stuck. She finally set a boundary with a man to take care of herself. I don't know what our future sessions

will yield, but I think this is a big step toward helping her set appropriate boundaries with men and feeling safer in the world as a result.