

# Reflections on Relationships

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## Boundaries

### Boundaries - What are they?

A boundary is a limit or edge that defines you as separate from others:

- your skin is a boundary.
- everything within your skin is the physical you.

## BUT

We have another boundary that extends beyond our skin. We become aware of this when someone stands too close. It is as if we are surrounded by an invisible circle - a comfort zone. We have other boundaries as well:

- emotional.
- spiritual.
- sexual.
- relational.

You have a limit to what is safe and appropriate. You have a border that separates you from others. Within this border is "YOU" - that which makes you an individual different and separate from others. What is an emotional boundary?

- we have a set of feelings and reactions that are distinctly ours.
- we respond to the world uniquely based on our individual perceptions, our special histories, our values, goals and concerns.

We can find people who react similarly, **BUT** none reacts precisely as we do. When it comes to how others treat us emotionally, we have limits on what is safe and appropriate. We have spiritual boundaries. You are the only one who knows the right spiritual path for yourself. If someone tries to tell you he knows the only way you can believe, he's out of line. We can be assisted, but not forced. Our spiritual development comes from our inner selves. We have sexual boundaries:

- limits on what is safe and appropriate sexual behavior from others.
- we have a choice about who we interact with sexually and the effect of that interaction.

We have relational boundaries - parent, partner, and friend: the roles we play define the limits of appropriate interaction with others.

Boundaries bring order to our lives. As we learn to strengthen our boundaries, we gain a clearer sense of ourselves and our relationship to others. Boundaries empower us to determine how we'll be treated by others. With good boundaries, we can have the wonderful assurance that comes from knowing we can and will protect ourselves from the ignorance, meanness, or thoughtlessness of others.

How do we develop boundaries? Boundaries begin to form in infancy. In a healthy family, a child is helped to individuate - to develop a self-concept separate and unique from the other family members. We learn about our boundaries by the way we are treated as children. Then, we teach others where our boundaries are by the way we let them treat us. Most people will respect our boundaries if we indicate where they are. With some people, we may need to actively define them. Boundaries require maintenance. Your skin is an obvious example of your physical boundary. Your emotional and relational boundaries may be less obvious, but they are just as important. If the barrier of your skin is breached by a scratch, you become vulnerable to infection. If your emotional or relational boundaries are breached, you also become vulnerable to harm. When these invisible boundaries are trespassed, by the thoughtless or intrusive actions of others, it is called a boundary violation.

Healthy boundaries are flexible enough that we can choose what to let in and what to keep out. We can determine to exclude meanness and hostility and let in affection, kindness, and positive regard. Questions:

- > What are your boundaries? (physical, emotional, spiritual, sexual, or relational)
- > Do you know?
- > Do you have a sense of your edges - your uniqueness?
- > Are you comfortable within your limits?
- > Are people in your life comfortable with boundaries?

## Context

Context - the type of relationship - defines appropriate closeness and distance in a relationship. Certain relationships presume closeness:

- > marriage - potential for great physical and emotional intimacy.
- > parent-child relationship - offers a range of safe physical closeness and a range of emotional involvement.
- > best friends - can share some physical closeness and a high degree of emotional intimacy.

What is the range of appropriate closeness and distance in the context of an intimate partnership? The acceptable degree of intimacy and distance can vary. They can vary from friendship to friendship and from day to day. Communication clarifies each person's need for intimacy and separateness. Ideally, friendship, boyfriend/girlfriend relationships and even marriages contain enough togetherness to preserve the boundary of "us" and "not us" **AND** enough separation to preserve each person's individuality. In an intimate partnership:

- > each person is whole and intact.
- > they choose to be together.
- > they could still "live" if something happened to the other or if the relationship ended.

Relationships do well when the individuals have a lot in common:

- > shared interests.
- > similar values.
- > Like minded goals.
- > comparable backgrounds.
- > roughly equal intelligence.
- > parallel way of looking at things.

Too much difference can build too much distance. On the other hand - each person is unique - this uniqueness contributes to relationship and world. So, it is critical for each person to have his, or her own thoughts and feelings and for each to take responsibility for his and her actions.

## Enmeshment vs. Intimacy

Enmeshment may feel like intimacy, but it is not. **Intimacy** comes from knowing each other very well, accepting shortcomings and differences and loving each other anyway. This kind of intimacy grows gradually and comes from a respect that develops between both people. This can lead to the ultimate of intimacy in marriage. This intimacy even in marriage continues to grow and evolve. It also is a matter of each person in the relationship encouraging the other to have his or her own interests, activities and goals.

**Enmeshment** is attempting to feel and think as if you were the same person or when one person makes all the decisions and expects the other to just “go along” with it all the time and they do. Since quite a bit of one’s uniqueness is missed this way, neither person can really be known. This is a very different experience from intimacy. When a couple becomes enmeshed - that is - when the individualities of each partner are sacrificed to the relationship, the individuals and partnership suffer.

## What About Too Much Distance

**What is too much distance in a committed relationship?** One cause of too much distance comes from not talking about important matters. If intimacy means being known by the other, *lack of intimacy comes from not being known*. If partners aren’t talking about problems, feelings, needs, and wants, they will feel less known and distance will grow between them.

- When he’s/she’s focused primarily on work, alcohol, drugs, acquiring things, or getting ahead.
- When he or she spends so much time with others that you don’t see each other.
- When he/she expects that you will be ok with him/her not being there and expects you to stay home waiting for him – not having a “life” or friends of your own.

These moments of avoidance and control are all violations of your emotional boundaries. These boundaries develop as we grow to know ourselves and our feelings. So it might take time before you are even aware that these boundaries have been crossed, which is the reason you don’t get married at 15 years old on the first day you meet someone. It is also the reason that you need to wait until you have developed the intimacy of a married person before engaging in sexual relations.

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**Myth** - “the commitment is made”. Therefore intimacy is automatically in place and leads you forward.

**Truth** - “takes a lot of work and must be deliberately undertaken”.

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## Visible & Invisible Boundaries

Two main types of boundaries - physical and emotional:

- physical limits are marked by our skin.
- emotional limits by - age, roles, our relationships with those around us, our requirements for safety, our choices about how we want to be treated.

I set my physical boundary by choosing:

- who can touch me.
- how and when I am touched.
- I decided how close I'll let people come to me.
- Because I have a reverse gear as well as forward, I can back away from someone who invades my personal zone.

I set my emotional boundary by choosing how I'll let people treat me:

- set limits on what people can say to me and how they say it.
- healthy, safe expressions of anger, or even rage by people I'm close to are very acceptable.
- inappropriate anger from an inappropriate person is not.
- I determine the range of personal comments I'll accept from others.
- stop sexual comments or remarks from men or women, e.g., sexist or racist jokes.
- Likewise, I need to be aware of what I say and do that may cross the boundaries of others

## Violations

Violations come in 2 main categories:

- violations of intrusion.
- violations of distance.

Intrusion violations occur when a physical or emotional boundary is breached:

- inappropriate personal questions.
- inappropriate touching.
- attempting to control how another things, believes, or feels.

Distance violations occur when intimacy is less than what is appropriate to the relationship - when someone from whom one has a right to expect closeness is excessively removed or emotionally or physically cut off. This is many times evident when drug or alcohol use comes in to play. Therefore, if closeness is an appropriate part of a relationship and it does not occur, the relationship has too much distance. Too much distance is harmful.

When feelings are met warmly, when we are encouraged to talk about them and helped to identify them, and when a parent correctly interprets our facial expression, our body language and the feelings connected with it, our understanding of our inner self grows. Learning about and connecting with feelings is essential for complete boundary development. Our feelings are rich in meaning about the nature of our connection with others. When we are in contact with our feelings, we can be guided by our inner selves. We can feel who we are and what is right for us.

Therefore, we can know our emotional boundaries. Therefore, to be healthy, we must have clear physical and emotional boundaries. We must be able to defend ourselves physically by setting limits on how close we let people get, on who touches us, and on how we are touched. To do this, we need a definite sense of our emotional boundaries. When we enhance our sense of who we are and what we need, like, want and feel, we strengthen our emotional boundaries.

**After reading the article, please have a parent also read it and then have both of you answer the following questions together.**

1. Name some of your boundaries with at least 1 each in the following areas: physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and sexual.
2. Has there ever been a time when you felt uncomfortable by the boundaries you have set? Did you change your thinking about where your boundaries are or should be?
3. Are other people in your life (friends, family, teachers, coaches etc.) comfortable with the boundaries you have set for yourself?
4. Have you ever discussed your boundaries with your friends or family before?
5. Do you understand the difference between Enmeshment and Intimacy? Try to describe both in your own words. Give an example of when boundaries are crossed in these instances.

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I have read this article and discussed the 5 questions above with my parent:

Student Signature \_\_\_\_\_

I have read the article and discussed the 5 questions above with my teen:

Parent Signature \_\_\_\_\_