

# Establishing Boundaries in Recovery

## Introduction

Whether we are aware of them or not, we all have boundaries. This pamphlet explores what boundaries are and how they support us in developing healthy and loving relationships with others and ourselves.

## Defining Boundaries

Boundaries are limits. Boundaries separate one person, place, or thing from another. Boundaries are verbal or physical divisions that separate our identities, responsibilities, feelings, needs, and issues from those belonging to others.

Throughout the recovery process, we constantly rediscover that our first responsibility is always to ourselves. Boundaries help us to clarify where our responsibilities end and where other people's begin. By establishing healthy boundaries, we slowly learn to take care of our issues and recognize that others have the same privilege. Boundaries fall in several categories that include different aspects of our lives:

- Spiritual
- Social
- Sexual
- Physical
- Emotional
- Intellectual

A good example of a healthy boundary is CoDA's "no crosstalk" guideline. This essential boundary helps us to focus on ourselves at meetings, instead of trying to fix others. Learning to establish and maintain healthy

boundaries is one of our greatest recovery tools.

## Establishing Internal Boundaries

After we develop an intellectual and emotional understanding of what boundaries are and why we need them, we often discover that a good starting place is getting in touch with ourselves. As part of this process, we find that we want to establish new boundaries with our inner selves. The lack of these internal boundaries can be subtle and may result in abandoning our feelings, losing touch with ourselves, wanting to be intimate to please someone else, not ourselves, and thinking obsessively. As one member shared,

"I used to get insomnia because I couldn't shut down my 'worrier.' Now I listen closely to that part of me and let it have its say, but I also draw a boundary with it. I'll tell myself 'OK, you can have 15 more minutes, but then I need to get some sleep.' This has worked well for me."

By establishing healthy internal boundaries, we gradually relieve ourselves of our compulsions. We are then able to work on feeling our feelings and move forward with our recovery. Establishing healthier internal boundaries allows us to get in touch with aspects of ourselves that we've kept hidden for most of our lives. As we develop a heightened awareness of our inner world, we learn to listen to ourselves and trust our intuitions and feelings.

## Establishing External Boundaries

Apart from establishing healthier internal boundaries, we may also discover that we

want to establish new boundaries in our existing relationships. These relationships may be with spouses, children, parents, siblings, in-laws, friends, colleagues—even passing strangers. In examining our boundaries, we can ask ourselves, "Am I trying to control this person?" Asking ourselves this question helps us to create a healthier middle ground between the extremes of either controlling others or allowing others to control us.

We need to set healthier boundaries to avoid abandoning ourselves, caretaking, fixing, or otherwise trying to control other people. We must set boundaries with others who attempt to control us by telling us how to think, feel, or behave. Setting boundaries supports us in our program of learning to care for the self. As one member shared,

"I spend a lot of time on the phone. I have found that setting a time limit for my calls helps me stick to my daily schedule. Without this boundary, I would feel angry about the amount of time that I spend on the phone, and my schedule would feel unmanageable."

## Assessing Boundaries

Determining the appropriateness of our current boundaries is a vital step in the recovery process. Good questions to ask ourselves include:

- Am I angry?
- Do I feel used?
- Do I feel violated?
- Do I feel resentful?
- Do I feel isolated?
- Do I feel frightened?
- Do I feel like a child?
- Are my boundaries (or lack of them) allowing me to maintain healthy relationships with others and myself?

If our boundaries are too rigid, we might be unable to form intimate relationships with others. In redefining boundaries that have grown too rigid, we may discover that we need to examine core issues such as trust and vulnerability. While these rigid boundaries may have protected us in the past, today they may be preventing us from achieving fulfilling levels of intimacy. We can learn to relax overly rigid boundaries when we feel that we can trust ourselves to practice self-care.

In assessing our current boundaries, we may also discover that our boundaries are not firm enough or are nonexistent. Again, we can trust our feelings to guide us when we feel taken advantage of or when our lives may become unmanageable. We learn to recognize and trust these feelings and then set healthier boundaries, if necessary. If we are unsure about our feelings, we can call our sponsor or others in recovery. We can take a minute to ask ourselves, "What do I need right now?" If our boundaries have been inappropriate, we can redefine them. We do not need to feel guilty or afraid, but if we do, we are still entitled to set a new boundary. Recovery teaches us that we are capable of change. Setting a boundary or changing an existing boundary to make it more effective is healthy and sometimes necessary.

## Establishing Boundaries

For many of us, setting boundaries can be a new and sometimes frightening experience. However, developing healthy boundaries is crucial to our recovery. When we are ready to set a boundary, we may want to consider the following:

1. Determine the need for creating a boundary or changing an existing boundary. We do this by listening to

our feelings. For example, if we feel angry, used, or guilty, we probably need to set a boundary.

2. Sometimes we may need to state our boundary out loud to the person we are establishing it with, even if it's with ourselves.
3. Listen to objections as long as they are stated in a respectful manner.
4. Despite objections, restate our boundary and stick to it. If we decide to reconsider our boundary in the face of conflict, it's helpful to do so on our own time, away from any outside influence.

The following list provides examples of some typical challenges that recovering codependents may encounter when establishing boundaries:

- Mom comes to visit without calling. Is this OK with me? If not, what boundary can I set? Do I ask her to call me an hour before visiting? A day?
- A friend asks for a loan. Do I feel comfortable with this? Do I expect to be paid back? How might I feel if I'm not repaid? Am I being kind or caretaking?
- I'm single or divorced and dating. Do I have sex on the first date? Do I stick to my boundary? Do I tell dates of this boundary? Do I have sex because I feel pressure?
- My partner is late for dinner. Do I go ahead and eat when I want to? Do I wait until I'm hungry and resentful?
- My partner spends a lot of money on something. Do we have an agreement

on how much money we spend? Do we keep and spend our own money? Share it?

- One member always leads a CoDA meeting. Is this healthy? Do I offer to lead the meeting? Do I ask for a business meeting to discuss rotating service positions?
- My meeting usually starts late. Is this respectful of our time boundaries? What prevents us from starting promptly? Have I raised this issue at the meeting?
- I need to leave for an important appointment, but an acquaintance is "monologuing" and won't stop talking. Do I continue to fidget and hope they read my body language? Do I politely wait until they are done, while feeling increasingly used? How do I take care of myself?

## Conclusion

The most important point to remember in establishing boundaries is that we need to listen to and fully consider our own feelings first. Before recovery, we may have allowed others to control and possibly even dominate us, or we may have tried to do the same to them. As recovering codependents, we continually discover old and new boundaries. In the beginning, establishing internal and external boundaries is difficult work. With practice, setting boundaries comes more easily. Learning to set healthy boundaries helps free us from our lifelong patterns of codependency. We can care for ourselves and know peace.

## Establishing Boundaries in Recovery

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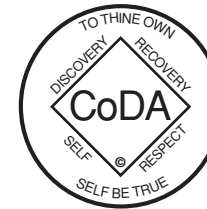
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