

## Healthy Boundaries

### **Healthy boundaries are:**

- *Flexible.* You are able to be both close and distant, adapting to the situation. You are able to let go of relationships that are destructive. You are able to connect with relationships that are nurturing.
- *Safe.* You are able to protect yourself against exploitation by others. You are able to read cues that someone is abusive or selfish.
- *Connected.* You are able to engage in balanced relationships with others and maintain them over time. As conflicts arise, you are able to work them out.

**Both PTSD and substance abuse can result in unhealthy boundaries.** In PTSD, your boundaries (your body and your emotions) were violated by trauma. It may be difficult for you now to keep good boundaries in relationships. In substance abuse, you have lost boundaries with substances (you use too much, and may act in ways you normally would not, such as getting high and saying things you don't mean). Learning to establish healthy boundaries is an essential part of recovery from both disorders.

### **Boundaries are a problem when they are too close or too distant.**

*Boundaries can be too close (letting people in too much; enmeshed). ★ Do you:*

- Have difficulty saying "no" in relationships?
- Give too much?
- Get involved too quickly?
- Trust too easily?
- Intrude on others (e.g., violate other people's boundaries)?
- Stay in relationships too long?

*Boundaries can be too distant (not letting people in enough; detached). ★ Do you:*

- Have difficulty saying "yes" in relationships?
- Isolate?
- Distrust too easily?
- Feel lonely?
- Stay in relationships too briefly?

*Note that many people have difficulties in both areas.*

**Boundary problems are a misdirected attempt to be loved.** By "giving all" to people, you are trying to win them over; instead, you teach them to exploit you. By isolating from others, you may be trying to protect yourself, but then don't obtain the support you need.

### **Healthy boundaries can keep you safe.**

*Learning to say "no" can . . .* keep you from getting AIDS (saying "no" to unsafe sex); keep you from using substances (saying "no" to substances); prevent exploitation (saying "no" to unfair demands); protect you from abusive relationships and domestic violence.

*Learning to say "yes" can . . .* allow you to rely on others; let yourself be known to others; help you feel supported; get you through tough times.

(cont.)

**Setting good boundaries prevents extremes in relationships.** By setting boundaries, you can avoid painful extremes: too close versus too distant, giving too much versus too little, idealizing versus devaluing others. Neither extreme is healthy; balance is crucial.

***It is important to set boundaries with yourself as well as with others.***

*You may have difficulty saying "no" to yourself.* For example, you promise yourself you won't smoke pot, but then you do. You may overindulge in food, sex, or other addictions. You may say you won't go back to an abusive partner, but then you do.

*You may have difficulty saying "yes" to yourself.* For example, you may deprive yourself too much by not eating enough, working too hard, not taking time for yourself, or not allowing yourself pleasure.

**People with difficulty setting boundaries may violate other people's boundaries as well.** This may appear as setting up "tests" for other people, intruding into other people's business, trying to control others, or being verbally or physically abusive.

***If you physically hurt yourself or others, you need immediate help with boundaries.*** Hurting yourself or others is an extreme form of boundary violation. It means that you act out your emotional pain through physical abuse. Work with your therapist to set a Safety Contract. (See the topic *Healing from Anger* for more on this.)

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