

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

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Setting Personal Boundaries - protecting self

"The purpose of having boundaries is to protect and take care of ourselves. We need to be able to tell other people when they are acting in ways that are not acceptable to us. A first step is starting to know that we have a right to protect and defend ourselves. That we have not only the right, but the duty to take responsibility for how we allow others to treat us."

"It is important to state our feelings out loud, and to precede the feeling with "I feel." (When we say "I am angry, I'm hurt, etc." we are stating that the feeling is who we are. Emotions do not define us, they are a form of internal communication that help us to understand ourselves. They are a vital part of our being - as a component of the whole.) This is owning the feeling. It is important to do for ourselves. By stating the feeling out loud we are affirming that we have a right to feelings. We are affirming it to ourselves - and taking responsibility for owning ourselves and our reality. Rather the other person can hear us and understand is not as important as hearing ourselves and understanding that we have a right to our feelings. It is vitally important to own our own voice. To own our right to speak up for ourselves."

"Setting boundaries is not a more sophisticated way of manipulation - although some people will say they are setting boundaries, when in fact they are attempting to manipulate. The difference between setting a boundary in a healthy way and manipulating is: **when we set a boundary we let go of the outcome.**"

"It is impossible to have a healthy relationship with someone who has no boundaries, with someone who cannot communicate directly, and honestly. Learning how to set boundaries is a necessary step in learning to be a friend to ourselves. It is our responsibility to take care of ourselves - to protect ourselves when it is necessary. It is impossible to learn to be Loving to ourselves without owning our self - and owning our rights and responsibilities as co-creators of our lives."

On this page codependency therapist/inner child healing pioneer/Spiritual teacher writes about the importance of, and process of, setting personal boundaries.

This article is part of a series of articles that began with [Emotional Abuse](#), and was followed by [Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility Part 1](#).



This page includes quotes from [Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls](#) and

quotes from other articles, columns, or web pages (indented) written by Robert Burney. The internal links within this article open in a separate browser window.

Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility part 3:

Setting Personal Boundaries - protecting self

Earlier in this series I mentioned that I would be focusing on three primary areas in relationship to learning to have a healthier relationship with self and others: boundaries, emotional honesty, and emotional responsibility. The three areas are intimately interrelated, and because I do not feel I can talk about one area without also discussing the others, I may have gotten the cart before the horse in a sense in this series. I started the series in the first two articles focusing more on emotional honesty and responsibility - and learning to have internal boundaries with ourselves in terms of seeing the process of life more realistically (what we need to accept, and what we can change) - and starting to take responsibility for our behaviors and emotions.

The reason I started there, is because changing our relationship with ourselves and life is vital in order to make any long term changes in our relationships with others. It is vital to learn to respect and honor our selves, so that we can awaken to the need to have boundaries that let other people know that we deserve and demand respect.

What is so powerful and effective about the inner child healing process, as I have learned to apply it, is that it changes our core relationship with ourselves. Once we start having a more Loving relationship with ourselves, everything changes. We start to naturally and normally: set boundaries with others; speak our Truth; own our right to be alive and be treated with respect and dignity.

To start by learning how to set boundaries and assert ourselves, without changing the core relationship with ourselves, will ultimately not work in the relationships we care most about. It is relatively easy to start setting boundaries in relationships that don't mean much to us - it is in the relationships that mean the most to us that it is so difficult. That is because, it is those relationships - family, romantic, etc. - that our inner child wounds are the most powerful. The little child within us does not feel worthy, feels defective and shameful, and is terrified of setting boundaries for fear everyone will leave. The other extreme of this phenomena is those of us who

throw up huge walls to try to keep people from getting too close - and sabotage any relationship that starts getting too intimate - to try to protect the wounded child within from being hurt.

With boundaries, as in every area of the healing process, change starts with awareness. I had to hear about boundaries, and start learning the concept before I could even realize that I didn't have any. I had to start getting some glimmer of an idea of what boundaries are, and how to set them, in order to understand how hard they were for me - and how absolutely vital to learning to Love myself.

So, in this third article of this series on emotional honesty and emotional responsibility I am going to be focusing on setting personal boundaries with other people. I am going to attempt to keep the focus on a very basic level for those readers who are new to the concept of boundaries.

Personal Boundaries

"Boundaries define limits, mark off dividing lines. The purpose of a boundary is to make clear separations between different turf, different territory. . . .

In relationship to recovery and the growth process, I am going to be talking about two primary types of boundaries. Natural boundaries that are part of the way life works - that are aligned with the reality of the rules that govern human dynamics - and personal boundaries." - Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility Part 2

The process of Recovery teaches us how to take down the walls and protect ourselves in healthy ways - by learning what healthy boundaries are, how to set them, and how to defend them. It teaches us to be discerning in our choices, to ask for what we need, and to be assertive and Loving in meeting our own needs. (Of course many of us have to first get used to the revolutionary idea that it is all right for us to have needs.)

(Text in this color are quotes from Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls)

The purpose of having boundaries is to protect and take care of ourselves. We need to be able to tell other people when they are acting in ways that are not acceptable to us. A first step is starting to know that we have a right to protect and defend ourselves. That we have not only the right, but the duty, to take responsibility for how we allow others to treat us.

We need to start becoming aware of what healthy behavior and acceptable interaction dynamics look like before we can start practicing them ourselves - and demanding the proper treatment from others. We need to start learning how to be emotionally honest with ourselves, how to start owning our feelings, and how to communicate in a direct and honest manner. Setting personal boundaries is vital part of healthy relationships - which are not possible without communication.

The first thing that we need to learn to do is communicate without blaming. That means, stop saying things like: you make me so angry; you hurt me; you make me crazy; how could you do that to me after all I have done for you; etc. These are the very types of messages we got in childhood that has so warped our perspective on our own emotional process.

I grew up believing that I had the power to make my father angry and to break my mother's heart. I thought that I was supposed to be perfect, and that if I was not, I was causing the people I loved great pain. I grew up believing that something was wrong with me because I was human. I grew up believing that I had power over other peoples feelings - and they had power over mine.

In my codependence I learned to be enmeshed with other people - to not have healthy boundaries that told me who "I" was, and that I was a separate person from them. I had to become hyper-vigilant in childhood. I learned to focus on trying to interpret what my parents and other authority figures were feeling in order to try to protect myself. As an adult, I unconsciously tried to manipulate people - by trying to be what they wanted me to be if I wanted them to like me, or trying to be either intimidating or invisible if that seemed the safest course. I had no real concept of being responsible for my own feelings because I had learned that other people were responsible for my feelings - and vice versa. I had to learn to start defining myself emotionally as separate from other people in order to start learning who I was.

I was not able to start seeing myself as separate in a healthy way (I had always felt that I was separate in an unhealthy way - shameful and unworthy) until I started to see that I had been powerless over the behavior patterns I learned in childhood. Since my behavior patterns, my behavioral and emotional defense systems, had developed in reaction to the feeling that there was something wrong with me, I had to learn to start taking power away from the toxic shame that is at the core of this disease. Toxic shame involves thinking that there is something wrong with who we are. Guilt - in my definition - involves behavior, while shame is about our being. Guilt is: I did something wrong; I made a mistake. Shame is: I am a mistake; something is wrong with me.

On an emotional level the dance of Recovery is owning and honoring the emotional wounds so that we can release the grief energy - the pain, rage, terror, and shame that is driving us.

That shame is toxic and is not ours - it never was! We did nothing to be ashamed of - we were just little kids. Just as our parents were little kids when they were wounded and shamed, and their parents before them, etc., etc. This is shame about being human that has been passed down from generation to generation.

There is no blame here, there are no bad guys, only wounded souls and broken hearts and scrambled minds.

In order to stop giving the toxic shame so much power, I had to learn to detach from my own reactive process enough to start being able to see a boundary between being and behavior. I had to stop judging myself and other people based on behavior. I started to learn how to observe behavior without making judgments about myself and others. There is a huge difference between

judgment in my definition and observation. It is vital for me to observe other people's behavior in order to protect myself. That does not mean I need to make a value judgment about their being based upon their behavior.

Judgment is saying, "that person is a jerk." Observation is saying, "that person seems to be really full of anger and it would be better for me to not be involved with them."

[When I use the term "judge," I am talking about making judgments about our own or other people's being based on behavior. In other words, I did something bad therefore I am a bad person; I made a mistake therefore I am a mistake. That is what toxic shame is all about: feeling that something is wrong with our being, that we are somehow defective because we have human drives, human weaknesses, human imperfections.

There may be behavior in which we have engaged that we feel ashamed of but that does not make us shameful beings. We may need to make judgments about whether our behavior is healthy and appropriate but that does not mean that we have to judge our essential self, our being, because of the behavior. Our behavior has been dictated by our disease, by our childhood wounds; it does not mean that we are bad or defective as beings. It means that we are human, it means that we are wounded.

It is important to start setting a boundary between being and behavior. All humans have equal Divine value as beings - no matter what our behavior. Our behavior is learned (and/or reactive to physical or physiological conditions). Behavior, and the attitudes that dictate behavior, are adopted defenses designed to allow us to survive in the Spiritually hostile, emotionally repressive, dysfunctional environments into which we were born.]

Formula for emotionally honest communication

So, it is very important for us to learn to communicate about how another person's behavior is affecting us - without making blaming "you" type of statements. There is a simple formula to help us do this. It is:

When you

I feel

I want

Since I am powerless over you, I will take this action to protect myself if you behave in this way.

The fourth part of this formula is setting the boundary. I will get to that in a moment. The first three parts of the formula are a very important part of taking responsibility for our self - an important step in learning to define ourselves as separate in a healthy way.

When you

The "When you . . ." statement is a description of behavior. It is very important actually describe the behavior. To say to another person: when you get angry; when you shame me; or such statements - is too general, not specific enough. These types of general statements do not really describe the behavior - they are our interpretations of the behavior. A major facet of codependence is assuming, interpreting, mind reading, and fortune telling - due to our childhood conditioning. We think we know the intentions and motives of others. We assume that they are conscious of their behavior and will know what we are talking about.

It is vital to realize that we do not know how to communicate in a direct and honest manner. We need to stop interpreting and start communicating. It is important to describe the behavior rather than our interpretation and assumptions about what the behavior means.

"When your face gets red and your voice gets louder and your hands clench into fists" - is specific and descriptive. It does not assume - rather it describes the behavior that appears to us to indicate anger.

"When you look at me with a frown on your face and your eye brows slightly raised and give a loud sigh" - is a description of behavior that causes us to react with guilt and shame. Usually the other people have no idea of what their behavior looks like. Our parents tried to control our behavior with fear, guilt, and shame because that is how their parents tried to control their behavior in childhood. We react in the ways we do because of the emotional buttons, the triggers, that our parents behavior toward us installed in our programming.

Usually, when we first confront such behavior in a healthy way, the other people will profess innocence and ignorance of what we are talking about. But, by describing the behavior, we will be planting seeds of consciousness in them that may eventually cause them to get more conscious of the sound of their own voice, or their sighs. Describing behavior is an important step towards making it possible for the other people to get past their toxic shame so that they can start seeing a boundary between being and behavior.

We of course, are powerless over them - over whether they get it, understand what we are doing. But in learning to communicate in a healthy way, without blame and shame, we are maximizing the possibility of communication.

I feel

This is the part of the formula where we start learning to express our emotions in a healthy and honest way. This is a vital part of the process of owning our emotions. Anyone who is fairly new to this process, and isn't sure what I mean by owning the feelings, would probably benefit from reading two short articles about emotions and emotional defenses. Those articles: [The Journey to the Emotional Frontier Within](#) and **Further Journeys to the Emotional Frontier Within** can be accessed right now by clicking on the link for the first one and then following the link to the second one. (The article will appear in a new browser window, so that after reading the articles you can collapse the new window and return to this article.)

It is best to use primary feeling words (described in the articles above) when expressing the "I feel" part of this formula - but it is also OK to use words that describe the messages we feel are inherent in their behaviors.

When your voice gets louder and your face gets red and you clench your fists,

I feel scared, intimidated, unsafe. I feel like you are going to hit me.

When I try to talk to you while you are watching television and I have to say your name 3 or 4 times before you respond,

I feel angry, hurt, discounted, unimportant, insignificant, invisible, like I am being punished. It feels like you do not want to communicate with me.

It is important to state our feelings out loud, and to precede the feeling with "I feel." (When we say "I am angry, I'm hurt, etc." we are stating that the feeling is who we are. Emotions do not define us, they are a form of internal communication that help us to understand ourselves. They are a vital part of our being - as a component of the whole.) This is owning the feeling. It is important to do for ourselves. By stating the feeling out loud we are affirming that we have a right to feelings. We are affirming it to ourselves - and taking responsibility for owning ourselves and our reality. Rather the other person can hear us and understand is not as important as hearing ourselves and understanding that we have a right to our feelings. It is vitally important to own our own voice. To own our right to speak up for ourselves.

As we get farther along in the process, and start to get more aware of our inner child wounds, we can start being more discerning in our communications techniques. For instance, if one was hit as a child, then a raised voice is a trigger to the child's fear of being hit. For the little child it was life threatening when a giant adult raged. In your adult relationship, you may feel very confident that your significant other (or boss or whatever) would not hit you - but when we are triggered, we react out of the emotional wounds of the child, out of the child's emotional reality.

So then you might say something like:

When your voice gets louder and your face gets red and you clench your fists . . .

I feel scared and hurt. I react out of the 5 year old in me who got hit when my father raged. I react to a loud voice by feeling like I am going to be hit.

(Often someone that comes from a loud expressive family will get involved with someone that comes from an very emotionally repressive family. Then the first person will not think anything of being loud - while the second will be very upset by loudness. The only way to work through the programming from our childhood is to be able to communicate with each other so that we can start becoming conscious of our behaviors and how they affect others.)

I want

I want is pretty self explanatory. But again it is important not to be too general. Saying something like: "I want to know I am important to you. I want to know you love me." is not specific enough. Describe the kind of behaviors that would give you the message that you want from the other person.

"I want you to answer me when I talk to you. I want you to tell me you love me - and show me with funny little gifts and cards and making plans on your own for a special date for just the two of us. I want you to ask me how my day went and really listen to my answer." etc.

Setting Boundaries

The purpose of setting boundaries is to take care of our self. Being forced to learn how to set boundaries is a vital part of learning to own our self, of learning to respect ourselves, of learning to love ourselves. If we never have to set a boundary, then we will never get in touch with who we really are - will never escape the enmeshment of codependence and learn to define ourselves as separate in a healthy way.

When I first encountered the concept of boundaries, I thought of them as lines that I would draw in the sand - and if you stepped across them I would shoot you (figuratively speaking.) (I had this image of some place like the Alamo - from a movie I guess - where a sword was used to draw a line in the sand, and then those that were going to stay and fight to the death stepped across it.) I thought that boundaries had to be rigid and final and somehow kind of fatal.

Some boundaries are rigid - and need to be. Boundaries such as: "It is not OK to hit me, ever." "It is not acceptable to call me certain names." "It is not acceptable to cheat on me."

No one deserves to be treated abusively. No one deserves to be lied to and betrayed.

We all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. If we do not respect ourselves, if we do not start awakening to our right to be treated with respect and dignity (and our responsibility in creating that in our lives) - then we will be more comfortable being involved with people who abuse us than with people who treat us in loving ways. Often if we do not respect ourselves, we will end up exhibiting abusive behavior towards people who do not abuse us. On some level in our codependence, we are more comfortable with being abused (because it is what we have always known) than being treated in a loving way.

Learning to set boundaries is vital to learning to love our self, and to communicating to other's that we have worth.

There are basically three parts to a boundary. The first two are setting the boundary - the third is what we will do to defend that boundary.

If you - a description of the behavior we find unacceptable (again being as descriptive as possible.)

I will - a description of what action you will take to protect and take care of your self in the event the other person violates the boundary.

If you continue this behavior - a description of what steps you will take to protect the boundary that you have set.

One very drastic example (in the case of someone who is just learning about boundaries and has been physically abused in the past) would be:

If you ever hit me, I will call the police and press charges - and I will leave this relationship. If you continue to threaten me, I will get a restraining order and prepare to defend myself in whatever manner is necessary.

It is not always necessary or appropriate to share the third part of this formula with the other person when setting a boundary - the first two steps are the actual setting of the boundary. The third part is something we need to know for ourselves, so that we know what action we can take if the other person violates the boundary. If we set a boundary and expect the other person to abide by it automatically - then we are setting ourselves up to be a victim of our expectation.

It is not enough to set boundaries - it is necessary to be willing to do whatever it takes to enforce them. We need to be willing to go to any length, do whatever it takes to protect ourselves. This is something that really upset me when I first started learning how to set boundaries. It took great courage for me to build myself up to a point where I was willing to set a boundary. I thought that the huge thing I had done to set a boundary should be enough. Then to see that some people just ignored the boundaries I had set, seemed terribly unfair to me.

Consequences

It is very important to set consequences that we are willing to enforce. If you are setting boundaries in a relationship, and you are not yet at a point where you are ready to leave the relationship - then don't say that you will leave. You can say that you will start considering all of your options including leaving - but do not state that you will do something that you are not ready yet to do. To set boundaries and not enforce them just gives the other person an excuse to continue in the same old behavior.

If you verbally abuse me by calling me names like stupid or jerk, I will confront you about your behavior and share my feelings.

If you continue that behavior I will leave the room/house/ask you to leave.

If you keep repeating this behavior I will start considering all of my options, including leaving this relationship.

~

If you break your plans with me by not showing up or by calling me at the last minute to tell me that you had something else come up, I will confront your behavior and share my feelings.

If you repeat that behavior, I will consider it to mean that you do not value or deserve my friendship - and I will have no contact with you for a month.

Since behavior patterns are quite ingrained in all of us, it is important to allow the other person some wiggle room to make a change in behavior - **unless the behavior is really intolerable**. To go from one extreme to the other is a reaction to a reaction - and is codependent. There are choices in between which are sometimes hard for us to see if we are reacting. To go from tolerating verbally abusive behavior to leaving a relationship in one step is swinging between extremes. It is helpful to set boundaries that allow for some gradual change.

When I ask you what is wrong and you say "Never mind," and then slam cabinet doors and rattle pots and pans and generally seem to be silently raging about something,

I feel angry, frustrated, irritated, hopeless, as if you are unwilling to communicate with me, as if I am supposed to read your mind.

I want you to communicate with me and help me to understand if I have done something that upsets you.

If something is bothering you and you will not tell me what it is, I will confront you about your behavior and share my feelings.

If you continue that behavior, I will confront your behavior, share my feelings, and insist that we go to counseling together.

If you keep repeating this behavior I will start considering all of my options, including leaving this relationship.

The consequences we set down for behavior we find unacceptable should be realistic - in that, the change that we are asking for is something that is within the others power (rather they are willing to take that responsibility is another thing altogether) - and enforceable, something that we are willing to do.

It is also important to set consequences that impact the other person more than us. Often when people are first learning how to set boundaries, they do not think it through far enough. They set boundaries that impact themselves as much or more than the other person. For example, a single parent with a teenager who needs to get consequences for coming home late, or bad grades, or whatever, may be tempted to say something like "If you miss your curfew again, you will be grounded for a month." The reality of grounding a teenager for a month is that it often means the parent is also grounded for a month. If taking away driving privileges means then you will have to drive them to school - maybe you want to choose some other consequence.

Choices

Setting a boundary is not making a threat - it is communicating clearly what the consequences will be if the other person continues to treat us in an unacceptable manner. It is a consequence of the other person's behavior.

Setting a boundary is not an attempt to control the other person (although some of the people who you set boundaries with will certainly accuse you of that - just as some will interpret it as a threat) - it is a part of the process of defining ourselves and what is acceptable to us. It is a major step in taking what control we can of how we allow others to treat us. It is a vital step in taking responsibility for our self and our life.

Setting boundaries is not a more sophisticated way of manipulation - although some people will say they are setting boundaries, when in fact they are attempting to manipulate. The difference between setting a boundary in a healthy way and manipulating is: **when we set a boundary we let go of the outcome.**

We want the other person to change their behavior. We hope they will. But we need to own all of our choices in order to empower ourselves to take responsibility for our lives and stop setting ourselves up to be a victim. One of our choices is to remove ourselves from relationship with the person. We can leave a marriage. We can end a friendship. We can leave a job. We do not have to have any contact with our family of origin. It is vitally important to own all of our choices.

If we do not own that we have a choice to leave an abusive relationship - **then we are not making a choice** to stay in the relationship. Any time we do not own our choices, we are empowering victimization. We will then blame the other person, and/or blame ourselves. It is a vital part of the process of learning to love ourselves, and taking responsibility for being a co-creator in our life, to own all of our choices.

It is essential to own that we have choices in order to escape the codependent suffering victim martyr role - or the other extreme, which is being abusive in order to try to make others do it "right" (that is, do what we want them to.) Both, the people who appear to be victims and the people that appear to be abusers, are coming from a victim place in terms of blaming others for their behavior. "I wouldn't have to hit you if you didn't talk to me that way" is a victim statement. Both victim and perpetrator are coming from a victim perspective, blaming their behaviors on others - or on themselves, "I can't help it, that is just how I am."

When we look outside for self-definition and self-worth, we are giving power away and setting ourselves up to be victims. We are trained to be victims. We are taught to give our power away.

As just one small example of how pervasively we are trained to be victims, consider how often you have said, or heard someone say, "I have to go to work tomorrow." When we say "I have to" we are making a victim statement. To say, "I have to get up, and I have to go to work," is a lie. No one forces an adult to get up and go to work. The Truth is "I choose to get up and I choose to go to work today, because I choose to not have the consequences of not working." To say, "I choose," is not only the Truth, it is empowering and acknowledges an act of self-Love. When we "have to" do something we feel like a victim. And because we feel victimized, we will then be

angry, and want to punish, whomever we see as forcing us to do something we do not want to do such as our family, or our boss, or society.

"And we always have a choice. If someone sticks a gun in my face and says, "Your money or your life!" I have a choice. I may not like my choice but I have one. In life we often don't like our choices because we don't know what the outcome is going to be and we are terrified of doing it 'wrong.'

Even with life events that occur in a way that we seemingly don't have a choice over (being laid off work, the car breaking down, a flood, etc.) we still have a choice over how we respond to those events. We can choose to see things that feel like, and seem to be, tragic as opportunities for growth. We can choose to focus on the half of the glass that is full and be grateful for it or to focus on the half that is empty and be the victim of it. We have a choice about where we focus our minds.

In order to become empowered, to become the co-creator in our lives, and to stop giving power to the belief that we are the victim, it is absolutely necessary to own that we have choices. As in the quotation above: if we believe that we "have" to do something then we are buying into the belief that we are the victim and don't have the power to make choices. To say "I have to go to work" is a lie. "I have to go to work if I want to eat" may be the truth but then you are making a choice to eat. The more conscious we get about our choices, the more empowered we become.

We need to take the "have to"s out of our vocabulary. As long as we reacting to life unconsciously we do not have choices. In consciousness we always have a choice. We do not "have to" do anything.

Until we own that we have a choice, we haven't made one. In other words, if you do not believe that you have a choice to leave your job, or relationship, then you have not made a choice to stay in it. You can only Truly commit yourself to something if you are consciously choosing to do it. This includes the area that is probably the single hardest job in our society today, the area that it is almost impossible not to feel trapped in some of the time - being a single parent. A single parent has the choice of giving their children up for adoption, or abandoning them. That is a choice! If a single parent believes that he/she has no choice, then they will feel trapped and resentful and will end up taking it out on their children!" - [Empowerment and Victimization](#) - the power of choice

We always have a choice. The choices may seem to be awful - but in reality, allowing ourselves to buy into the illusion that we are trapped will have worse consequences in the long run. It may seem ridiculous to suggest that a parent can abandon or give a child up for adoption - but owning our choices no matter how outrageous is a step in owning responsibility for being co-creators in our life. If we are blaming and being the victim we will never be happy.

(And this is a good example of when sharing the 3rd part of this formula is not appropriate. It would be abusive to threaten a child with being put up for adoption. This is a choice that we need to own to escape feeling trapped in our relationship with ourselves - **it is strictly an**

internal thing. With children it is vital to not project our own internal struggle onto the child - it doesn't have anything to do with the child, it is all about our relationship with self.)

Negotiation

We set a boundary to define our territory, to protect our space - physical, emotional, mental, sexual, spiritual, financial, etc. We set the boundary because it is what we need to do for our self, to protect and take care of our self. We set it knowing that the other person may not be able or willing to change their behavior - and that we are prepared to take whatever action we need to take if that proves to be the case. That action may include cutting that person out of our life completely.

I was scared of setting boundaries because the little boy in me was afraid of: hurting other people; having other people be angry at me; being abandoned; losing the relationship. Ultimately, it came down to: people will go away if I say no or set a boundary with them.

I had to become willing to take that risk. I had to decide that I had enough worth to stand up for myself even if people did go away. And some people did go away. Some people do still when I set a boundary. But I was also amazed to see that some of the people that I set a boundary with started to treat me with more respect. They were able to hear me and valued me enough to change their behavior.

By becoming willing to take the risk of setting boundaries, I got the wonderful gift of getting what I wanted - **some** of the time. I had to let go of the outcome and learn to accept the situation however it unfolded. I had to let go of a lot of people that I had considered friends. I came to the realization that the people I had been calling friends, were not really friends at all - because as long as I did not know how to be a friend to myself, I could not truly recognize friendship in others. As long as I was unconsciously reacting out of my old programming, the people I was attracted to were people who would abuse me, shame me, abandon and betray me.

I came to the realization that anyone who is a friend is someone I can communicate with - and be able to negotiate boundaries with. The vast majority of boundaries are in fact a negotiation rather than a rigid line in the sand. Adults need to negotiate boundaries between themselves. This is very true in romantic relationships - and is the standard for all relationships.

What we are striving for is healthy interdependent relationships. We want friends who are allies. With alliances it is necessary to negotiate boundaries. Here is what I am willing to do, and here is what I need from you. We want a romantic relationship with a partner who will share our journey with us. In order to make that possible it is necessary to communicate, share feelings, and negotiate agreements about behavior. By setting boundaries, we are communicating with another person. We are telling them who we are and what we need. It is much more effective to do that directly and honestly than to expect them to read our minds - and then punish them when they cannot.

Often it is little things that seem inconsequential that it is most important to set boundaries about. Irritating little habits or mannerism of another person. The irritating little things will grow into huge monsters unless we learn to communicate and negotiate. When we stuff our feelings we build up resentments. Resentments are victim feelings - the feeling that somebody is doing something to us. If we don't speak up and take the risk of sharing how we feel, we will end up blowing up and/or being passive aggressive - and damaging the relationship.

Learning to set boundaries is a vital part of learning to communicate in a direct and honest manner. It is impossible to have a healthy relationship with someone who has no boundaries, with someone who cannot communicate directly, and honestly. Learning how to set boundaries is a necessary step in learning to be a friend to ourselves. It is our responsibility to take care of ourselves - to protect ourselves when it is necessary. It is impossible to learn to be Loving to ourselves without owning our self - and owning our rights and responsibilities as co-creators of our lives.



This is the third article in a series about [Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility](#) that is being written as a follow up to an article about [Emotional Abuse](#). You may also wish to read [Codependence vs Interdependence](#) to understand the difference between a healthy relationship and a codependent one.

For the fourth article in this series click here [Discernment in relationship to emotional honesty and responsibility](#)¹

Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility

"Because we were discounted and invalidated in childhood (and for most of our adult lives due to our repeating patterns); because we were taught not to trust our own feelings and perceptions; because we learned to have twisted, distorted relationships with ourselves and our own emotions; we need validation from other people that what we are awakening to is in fact real and not some product of our defective, shameful self image.

At the same time, it is a codependent pattern to gather allies. To have people to complain to, who will sympathize with us and tell us how awful the other person/people were for abusing us. We gather allies that will give their approval to our self righteous indignation. When we are feeling self righteous indignation we are buying into a victim perspective."

"Anytime that we are focusing on the situation at hand and giving power to the belief that we are victims of the situation/people we have just interacted with, without looking at how that situation is connected to our childhood wounds - we are not being honest with ourselves.

We will feel like victims - because we have been abused. But feeling like a victim and giving power to the belief in victimization are two completely different things."

"I have often told clients that going from feeling suicidal to feeling homicidal is a step of progress. It is a stage of the recovery process that we will move into - and then at some later

point will move beyond. An incest victim transforms into an incest survivor. Owning the anger is an important part of pulling ourselves out of the depression that turning the anger back on ourselves has created. It is often necessary to own the anger before we can get in touch with the grief in a clean and healthy way. If we haven't owned our right to be angry, it is possible to get stuck in a victim place of self-pity and martyrdom, of complaining and gathering sympathetic allies - instead of taking action to change."

On this page Spiritual teacher/codependency therapist writes about the need for emotional honesty and responsibility.

This page includes quotes from [Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls](#), some email questions, and quotes from other articles, columns, or web pages (indented) written by Robert Burney. The internal links within this article open in a separate browser window.

Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility

Last month I posted a page on emotional abuse. It was a topic that I realized I had not specifically focused upon previously. When I finished with that page, I was aware that it wasn't finished - that I had just written about emotional abuse from the perspective of learning to recognize it for the pervasive and damaging factor it is in our wounding. Recognizing emotional abuse is the beginning of becoming aware of the codependent patterns that set us up to be emotionally abused - and the beginning of a process of learning how to have a healthier relationship with our self so that we can start to have healthier relationships with others.

As with any facet of recovery, changing our behavior in relationship to emotional abuse is a process. It is a journey from living unconsciously in reaction to our old wounds - setting ourselves up to be a victim of our disease and other people - to learning how to find a healthy balance. To move into a place where it is possible for us to recognize what it means to be healthy and balanced it is necessary to move through different stages on our journey. We will gradually evolve and grow to understand: what it means to be emotionally honest with ourselves; how to protect ourselves by having boundaries; how to take responsibility for our own emotions; how to stop giving other people the power to emotionally abuse us; etc.

The recovery process, and the process of finding some balance, is multi-leveled and multi-dimensional as I stress in numerous places in my writing. What that means is that there are really no simple answers to the

question "what do I do when I realize I have been emotionally abused?" There are simple answers that we need to hear on a basic level in the beginning of our recovery, but those simple answers are just the beginning of the quest. Each of those answers opens up a new range of questions. For example, telling someone they need to learn to have boundaries opens up a range of questions about what boundaries are and how does one set them. Any single topic or issue opens up a range of other interrelated areas.

Writing this article (which appears to require at least three web pages) has been difficult because of all the levels involved. I received some e-mails with some basic questions that I wanted to answer in as complete a manner as possible - but answering some of the basic questions takes me into some quite advanced levels of recovery. I realized that I had never really written previously - except for a line or two here and there in the middle of something else - about such issues as: the misconception of many recovering people that emotional honesty means we are supposed to be emotionally honest with all of the people in our lives; or, specifically about what our responsibilities are in relating to others.

So, I am going to attempt to answer the basic questions in a way that hopefully will be helpful to those new to the process - and at the same time discuss some of the more advanced facets that arise in relationship to the issues involved. I am going to use some questions from those e-mails to help me write this article.

What should I do? I know that I feel in my heart and soul that I have been abused. I really do think that they are hateful and selfish. I believe I have a right to be treated with as much respect and love as I treat others and myself.

Congratulations on recognizing that your parents were emotionally abusive towards you in the situation you described. And yes, you definitely have a right to be treated with respect. Recognizing that you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect is a vital step towards learning how to protect yourself from behavior that is abusive.

This is a real good news/bad news event. The good news is that you recognized the behavior as abuse - the bad news is that this is not the first time this has happened. Your parents have been emotionally abusive to you your whole life. You mention that they just celebrated their 50th anniversary and that they were both addictive personalities. They did not just become selfish now. They are wounded people who do not know how to Love themselves in a healthy way - and they have never been capable of loving you in a healthy way. Their form of love was always emotionally abusive to some extent because they grew up in a codependent society with wounded

parents.

The most simple way to answer your question about what to do, is to tell you that you need to get into recovery. It is only by getting into recovery that you can start to see this situation more clearly. My sense of the focus of your e-mail that culminated in this question, was that you wanted to know what you could do to get them to admit and apologize for this abuse - and act in the way you want them to act.

The answer to that is that they probably will never give you any satisfaction in that regard. You will need to let go of thinking that you need them to change for you to be OK. Any time we buy into thinking that we need someone else to behave in a certain way, to treat us in a certain way, to be comfortable with our self - we are giving power away and setting ourselves up to be a victim.

This is a great example of the different levels involved in this type of issue - and how important it is for us to start becoming conscious of the dynamics of our process in order to change our patterns.

It is important for any of us to be validated. When we first start owning our own Truth and standing up for our reality, it is very important to be validated - to have someone tell us "Yes, you were abused in that situation. I am really sorry that happened." Because we were discounted and invalidated in childhood (and for most of our adult lives due to our repeating patterns); because we were taught not to trust our own feelings and perceptions; because we learned to have twisted, distorted relationships with ourselves and our own emotions; we need validation from other people that what we are awakening to is in fact real and not some product of our defective, shameful self image.

At the same time, it is a codependent pattern to gather allies. To have people to complain to, who will sympathize with us and tell us how awful the other person/people were for abusing us. We gather allies that will give their approval to our self righteous indignation. When we are feeling self righteous indignation we are buying into a victim perspective.

Victim Perspective

It is vital in recovery to stop buying into the belief that we are victims. Anytime that we are focusing on the situation at hand and giving power to the belief that we are victims of the situation/people we have just interacted with, without looking at how that situation is connected to our childhood wounds - we are not being honest with ourselves.

We will feel like victims - because we have been abused. But feeling like a victim and giving power to the belief in victimization are two completely different things.

If we have a pattern of setting ourselves up to be abused - then that pattern is our responsibility. To continue to blame and complain is not healthy, is not recovery, is not honest. It is also not honest to blame ourselves. When we buy into the critical parent voice that tells us it is all our fault, that we are losers or failures who deserve to be treated badly, then we are being the victim of ourselves.

It is vital to start viewing our own process from a recovery perspective so that we can stop being dishonest with ourselves. In our adult lives, it is our childhood programming that set us up to repeat patterns. We cannot get healthy until we start to recognize that.

As little kids we were victims and we need to heal those wounds. But as adults we are volunteers - victims only of our disease. The people in our lives are actors and actresses whom we cast in the roles that would recreate the childhood dynamics of abuse and abandonment, betrayal and deprivation.

We are/have been just as much perpetrators in our adult relationships as victims. Every victim is a perpetrator because when we are buying into being the victim, when we are giving power to our disease, we are perpetrating on the people around us and on ourselves.

We need to heal the wounds without blaming others. And we need to own the responsibility without blaming ourselves. As was stated earlier - there is no blame here, there are no bad guys. The only villain here is the disease and it is within us.

I want to make it clear that when I say "without blaming others," I do not mean to deny our anger. We need to own and release the anger and rage at our parents, our teachers or ministers or other authority figures, including the concept of God that was forced on us while we were growing up. We do not necessarily need to vent that anger directly to them but we need to release the energy. We need to let that child inside of us scream, "I hate you, I hate you," while we beat on pillows or some such thing, because that is how a child expresses anger.

That does not mean that we have to buy into the attitude that they are to blame for everything. We are talking about balance between the emotional and mental here again. Blame has to do with attitudes, with buying into the false beliefs - it does not really have anything to do with the process of releasing the emotional energy.

We also need to own and release the anger against those whom we feel victimized us as adults - and we need to take responsibility for our side of the street, own our part in whatever dysfunctional dance we did with them.

We need to own, honor, and release the feelings, and take responsibility for them - without blaming ourselves.

On the level of our perspective of the process it is very important to stop buying into the false beliefs that as adults we are victims and someone else is to blame - or that we are to blame because there is something wrong with us.

(Text in this color are quotes from Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls)

In the situation you describe with your parents, you were emotionally abused. From a recovery perspective this is an opportunity for growth. This is an opportunity to become more conscious of your codependence. This may be the incident that causes you to become willing to start taking action to heal yourself.

Congratulations! This was a gift from the Universe. Please do not judge yourself for what I am saying. The hardest thing in codependence recovery is not to judge and shame our self for the awareness we are gaining.

Recovery is a process of peeling away levels of denial. Denial is a wonderful human survival tool that made it possible to survive the pain of childhood. It is also a powerful block to healing in our adult lives.

With each level of denial we peel away, like peeling the layers of an onion, there is pain and grief about the truths that get revealed. The Truth will set you free - but it is also very painful to see truth on a new level each time you peel away some denial.

There are a multitude of facets to the level that has just been revealed to you. It will be important to get more conscious of your self, your relationship with self (and all the parts of self), and of your history and patterns in relationship to life and other people.

It is important to use this opportunity as a new beginning - a doorway into a new way of living life. In order to do that, it will be necessary to start looking at how the incident relates to your childhood and to your patterns in adult life. You will need to get honest with yourself about: how you set yourself up in this situation; what your motives and agenda were (all of our adapted behavioral patterns are in one way or another attempts at manipulation); what your pay off is for being a victim; etc. As you get honest about these different aspects of the situation, the recovery challenge is to have compassion for yourself - because you have been powerless over the attitudes and behavior patterns you learned in childhood.

Recovery is not about blame, it is not about finding fault - the blaming and fault finding comes from the disease, the critical parent voice within. In order to heal and get healthier, it is necessary to take responsibility for our side of the street - and hold others responsible for their behavior.

I am going to discuss in the course of this article, some of the details of how to have healthier boundaries (both externally and internally), and what emotional honesty and responsibility entail. For the moment, let me say, that the simple answer to your question is you need to get into recovery in order to learn and grow from this incident (because if you do not, you will keep repeating the pattern.)

You are going to find that recovery is an adventure in which each question leads to another series of questions. Each revelation will take you to new perspectives.

Early in my 12 step recovery, someone told me that all I had to change was everything. And that is the Truth. I needed to change my perspective of, and relationship with, everything. I needed to learn how to stop giving power to the belief in victimization that growing up in a dysfunctional society imposed upon me. I need to start to heal the codependence that caused me to look outside of myself for self-definition and self-worth.

Codependence is outer or external dependence. As long as I was focused outside of myself - looking for the princess who would fix me, or blaming the villains who were ruining my life - I was set up to be the victim of my self and others. In recovery, it was necessary for me to start focusing on my self and my relationship with self. I needed to start looking within for the answers.

"A very important part of my process of finding some balance in my life - of learning how to see myself and how I relate to others and life more clearly - was to get clear that everything in my process relates back to me and my growth process. I had to get past my codependent belief that I was doing something **for** you - or you were doing something **to** me." - [The Recovery Process for inner child healing, Part 1](#)

The emotional abuse you experienced from your parents behavior in this incident is part of the lesson plan in the school of Spiritual evolution you are enrolled in. That does not excuse it, or make it OK for them to treat you this way. What it means is that on a higher level they are teachers, instruments used by your Higher Power, to help you become aware that there is some healing to be done. It Truly is a new beginning. It is a wonderful opportunity to become more aware of your Spiritual Path. It is a blessed gift that will help you connect more clearly with who you really are - with your Spiritual Self. That really is good news.

The Process of Recovery

Recognition, awareness, is the first step in healing. Becoming aware is what is necessary before any conscious changes can be made. It is both a beginning and an ending. It is an ending in terms of our ability to unconsciously keep replaying our old patterns. In most cases, we will replay our old patterns some more times - will for the rest of our lives catch ourselves starting to go down those old roads - but we will never be able to do it as quite as unconsciously again. It is the end of our denial on one level.

It is the beginning of recovery, of healing, of awakening. It is the beginning of being conscious that there is a new level of healing to be done. Recovery is a continuous process of beginnings and endings - of uncovering and discovering new levels on which it is necessary to learn and heal. It is a gradual process of making progress on the path to Self realization - of moving out of the darkness into the Light.

The dynamics of this process are basic. As human beings we have much more in common than we have differences. Basic human emotional dynamics are the same for all human beings. The details may differ but the dynamics of the wounding process and the recovery process are intrinsic.

Discovery, recognition, that we have been victims of abuse is vital. Rather that is emotional abuse, or any of the other kinds of abuse that also cause emotional abuse - physical, verbal, mental, sexual, spiritual. etc. It is vitally important to own our own victimization - and at some point start getting angry about it. Getting angry about how the behavior of others has wounded us is a vital step in owning ourselves - of honoring our Self.

I have often told clients that going from feeling suicidal to feeling homicidal is a step of progress. It is a stage of the recovery process that we will move into - and then at some later point will move beyond. An incest victim transforms into an incest survivor. Owning the anger is an important part of pulling ourselves out of the depression that turning the anger back on ourselves has created. It is often necessary to own the anger before we can get in touch with the grief in a clean and healthy way. If we haven't owned our right to be angry, it is possible to get stuck in a victim place of self-pity and martyrdom, of complaining and gathering sympathetic allies - instead of taking action to change.

So, it is very important to own our right to be angry. That is a stage of the process that also needs to be moved through so we don't get stuck in an angry victim place. In order to heal, it is usually not necessary to confront our abusers. For some people it is an important part of the process to confront their abusers with their anger. Hopefully this can be done in an appropriate environment - although sometimes that is not possible. What is important to emphasize, is that we can heal without confronting our abusers directly - because the relationship that needs to be healed is within. To go to a place where we are lashing out at our abusers will often be just going to the other extreme - where we abuse the people who abused us.

There was a point in my codependence recovery where I would rage in AA meetings at old timers who were shaming and emotionally abusive out of their untreated codependence - their rigid, controlling, black and white thinking. That was a stage in my recovery that I outgrew - that I realized was not healthy. It was not bad or wrong (although the behavior was sometimes something I needed to make amends for afterwards) - it was a stage in a growth process. I learned to confront that kind of behavior in a gentler, kinder - and more effective - way as I grew.

Sometimes in our growth we find ourselves lashing out and being abusive. When that happens we can make amends for **how** we expressed ourselves - we never have to apologize for having the feelings. We cannot go from repressing our feelings and being emotionally dishonest to communicating perfectly in one step. Communicating in an appropriate way is something we learn gradually - and something we will never do perfectly every time.

With all types of abuse, we need to own and honor our right to feel and release the grief and anger about our victimization so that we can move into a place of empowerment. In order to move into a place of empowerment, in order to start being healthier in our relationships it is vital to start getting emotionally honest - and start taking emotional responsibility. Usually, prior to being able to name the fact that we have been abused, we blamed ourselves for the abuse. Upon realizing that we have been abused, we will want to place blame for that abuse on the abuser. Eventually, we will move into a place where we learn to take the blame out of the process completely. We will learn to take responsibility for our attitudes and behavior that set us

up to accept abuse, while also learning that we were powerless over that behavior because of our wounding - and therefore not to blame. We will learn to protect ourselves from those who would abuse us, while also recognizing that they are reacting to their wounding - and not really doing anything to us specifically.



This topic is another one in which I feel I have opened a can of worms. It looks like we have another multipart series evolving here because of all of the levels and facets involved. As soon as I get the next article posted, the end of this sentence will be a link (underlined and a different color) to [Emotional Honesty and Emotional Responsibility Part 2](#). The third article in this series may have been more appropriate as the first. It focuses on the basics of [Setting Personal Boundaries](#).