

Establishing Healthy Boundaries in Relationships

(Adapted by C. Leech from “*Tools for Coping with Life’s Stressors*” from the Coping.org website)

Introduction

People with low self-esteem have their major difficulties in relationships with others. This is because they are unable to establish healthy boundaries or limits with people. The reason, for this inability, is that with low self-esteem comes a variety of irrational thoughts, emotions and actions that leads people to lose themselves in relationships with others. This absorption of self into others leads to a loss of personal internal control. People with low self-esteem have a weakened “internal locus of control” and become dependent on a “strong external locus of control”. They become victims to being controlled by how others think, feel about and act towards them. People with low self-esteem are dependent on others’ approval and recognition and are therefore fearful of rejection by and conflict with others.

How about your relationships?

- How well are your physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual boundaries established and maintained in your relationships?
- How successful are you in protecting and maintaining your boundaries when your relationship partners are highly intrusive or persistent?
- Do you use unhealthy, compulsive or addictive behaviors as a barrier or unhealthy boundary to protect yourself from intimacy with your relationship partners?
- How well do you stay unhooked and detached when your relationship partners are working you over to lower your boundaries in the relationships?
- When you consider trying to maintain healthy boundaries in your relationships without the use of body weight, food, or some other compulsive behaviors to protect and medicate you in the process, are you scared?
- Would you prefer to stay stuck on learning how to establish healthy boundaries in your relationships?

If the answer is that you need to strengthen your boundaries with your relationship partners to enrich or regain the health of your relationships then read on.

To maintain health intimacy in your relationships, you will need to first identify whether you have healthy intimacy in your current relationship(s) at this time. That is, you have established healthy intellectual, emotional and physical boundaries with your relationship partners.

Characteristics of a Healthy Intimate Relationship

The goal in an intimate relationship is:

- To feel calm, centered and focused.
- The intimacy needs to be safe, supportive, respectful, nonpunitive and peaceful.
- You feel taken care of, wanted, unconditionally accepted and loved just for existing and being alive in a healthy intimate relationship.
- You feel part of something and not alone in such a relationship.
- You experience forgiving and being forgiven with little revenge or reminding of past offenses.
- You find yourself giving thanks for just being alive in this relationship.
- A healthy intimate relationship has a sense of directedness with plan and order.
- You experience being free to be who you are rather than who you think you need to be for the other.
- This relationship makes you free from the “paralysis of analysis” needing to analyze every minute detail of what goes on in it.
- Has its priorities in order, with people’s feelings and process of the relationship coming before things and money.
- Encourages your personal growth and supports individuality.

Use the following questions with your relationship partner(s) to discuss the issue of intimacy:

1. Does our relationship sound, look and feel like this description?
2. What factors impede our ability to have this kind of relationship?
3. Do we have good time together, but fail at being emotionally, spiritually, and physically intimate?
4. Do we have an openly affectionate relationship with healthy emotionally based communication or do we just do things together, with no communication or affection giving?
5. How important is it to you to have healthy intimacy in our relationship?

10 Emotional Hooks in Relationships

1. Lack of Individual Identity
2. Scarcity Principle
3. Guilt
4. Inability to Differentiate Love from Sympathy
5. Helplessness and Neediness of Relationship Partners
6. Need to be Needed
7. Belief that “Time Will Make it Better”
8. Belief that “It Must be All of My Fault that there are Problems in the Relationship”
9. Fear of Negative Outcomes for Relationship Partners
10. Idealism of Fantasy Thinking

1. Lack of Individual Identity:

Maybe you are hooked by the irrational belief that: ***“I am a nobody without a somebody in my life.”*** If you are, you maintain no boundaries with your relationship partners because you are very dependent in getting your identity from being with your partners. You are willing to do whatever it takes to make the relationships happen, even if you have to give your healthy, money, security, identity, intelligence, spiritual beliefs, family, country, job, community, friends, values, honor and self respect.

The rational message needed to establish healthy boundaries from this hook is: *“I am somebody, just by being who I am. I am OK just the way I am, even if I do not have my relationship partners in my life. My value and worth as a person is not dependent on having one or more significant others in my life. It is better for me to be on my own and healthy than to be with my relationship partners and be sick emotionally, intellectually, or physically. I will work diligently with my relationship partners to correct this faulty thinking, which has made me too dependent. By being more my own person, my relationships will flourish and grow healthier”.*

2. Scarcity Principle:

Maybe you are hooked by the scarcity principle of feeling happiness: ***“because the current status of our relationship is better than anything we have ever had before”.*** This is a common problem for people recovering from low self-esteem who have faced trials and challenges in relationships in the past. The problem is that the current status of your relationships might be better than what you have experienced in the past, but they might not really be as healthy and intimate as the intimate relationship described earlier. You may be so

happy with your relationship's current functioning that you are willing to give all of yourself intellectually, emotionally, and physically with no regard for what you need to retain for yourself so that you do not lose your identity in these relationships. For example, you may find that in your relationships you have no time to do the "recovery or growth activities" of maintaining contact with your support system, going to 12-Step meetings, or reading recovery literature. If this is true, then your relationships may not be supportive for your personal and spiritual growth. Your relationships may not be healthy for you no matter how good they look or how happy you are in them. If in your relationships you have no time, energy or resources to put into your career, education or current job then they are not healthy for you no matter how happy you are in them.

The rational message needed to establish healthy boundaries in this hook is: *"I will focus on my needs, my identity, my individuality and my personal integrity in my relationships. I will set aside my time, resources and energy to give to my spouse, my children, my family, my friends, my support system, my recovery program, my spirituality, my career, my education and my community involvement while maintaining healthy intimate relationships with my relationship partners. I will insist that I have the time, resources and energy to focus on all aspects of my life in my relationships. I will not become complacent in my relationships just because there are no conflicts or crisis in them at the time. I will work with my relationship partners to insure that the health of our relationships is ever growing and increasing."*

3. Guilt:

Maybe you are hooked by irrational **guilt** that you must think, feel and act in ways to insure that your relationships are preserved, secured and nurtured no matter what personal expense it takes out of you. You have a problem of feeling over-responsible for the welfare of your partners and cannot allow your partners to accept personal responsibility, to make choices and live with the consequences of these choices. This irrational guilt is a driving motivation to keep you tearing down your boundaries so that you will always be available to your relationship partners at any time, in any place, for whatever reason your partners "need" you.

The rational message needed to establish healthy boundaries from this hook is: *"My relationship partners and I are responsible for accepting personal responsibility for our own lives and to accept the consequences for the choices we make in taking care of our own lives. I am not responsible for the outcomes, which result from the choices and decisions, which my partners make. My partners and I are free to make our own decisions with no one forcing us to make bad ones which will result in negative consequences to ourselves if they should occur".*

4. Inability to Differentiate Love from Sympathy:

Maybe you are hooked by the inability to differentiate the difference between love and sympathy or compassion for your relationship partner. You find yourself feeling sorry for your relationship partners and the warm feelings, which this generates makes you think that you are in love with them. The bigger the problems your relationship partners have, the bigger the “love” seems to you. Because the problems can get bigger and more complex, they succeed in hooking you to lower your boundaries so that you begin to give more and more of yourself to your “pitiable” partner out of the “love” you feel.

The rational message need here to establish healthy boundaries is: *“It is OK to have sympathy and compassion for my partner, but that does not mean that I have to sacrifice my life to “save” or “rescue” my partner. Sympathy and compassion are emotions I know well and I will work hard to differentiate them from what love is. When I feel sympathy and compassion for my partner, I will remind myself that it is not the same as loving them. The ability to feel sympathy and compassion for another human being is a nice quality of mine and I will be sure to use it in a healthy and non-emotionally hooked way in the future in my relationships”.*

5. Helplessness and Neediness of Relationship Partners:

Maybe you get hooked by the neediness and helplessness of your partner. You find yourself hooked when your partner gets into self-pity, “poor me” and “how tough life has been”. You find yourself weak when your relationship partners demonstrates an inability to solve personal problems. You find yourself wanting to teach and instruct, when your partner demonstrates or admits ignorance of how to solve problems. You find yourself hooked by verbal and non-verbal cues, which cry out to you to “help” your partner even though your partner has the competence to solve the problem on their own. You find yourself feeling warmth, caring, and nurturing feelings, which help you tear down any shred of boundaries you once had. These sad, weak, distraught, lost, confused and befuddled waifs are so needy that you lose all concepts of space and time as you begin to give and give and give. It feels so good.

The rational message needed here is: *“No one is helpless without first learning the advantages of being helpless. Helplessness is a learned behavior, which is used to manipulate me to give of my resources, energy, time, effort and money to fix. I am a good person if I do not try to fix and take care of my partners when my partners are acting helpless. I cannot establish healthy intimate relationships with my partners if I am trying to fix or take care of them all of the time. I need to put more energy into fixing and taking care of myself if I find myself being hooked by my partners’ helplessness”.*

6. Need to be Needed:

Maybe you get hooked by the *sense of being depended upon or needed by your relationship partners*. There is no reason to feel responsible for your partners if they let you know that they are dependent upon and need you for their life to be successful and fulfilled. This is over-dependency and it is unhealthy. It is impossible to have healthy intimacy with over-dependent people because there is no give and take. You get nothing in return except the “good feelings” of doing something for your partners. You get no real healthy nurturing; rather you feel the weight of your relationships partners on your shoulders, neck, and back.

The rational message needed here to unhook is: “*It is unhealthy for me to be so overly depended upon by my relationship partners who are adults. There is a need for me to be clear what I am willing and not willing to do for my partners. There is a need for my relationship partners to become more independent from me so that I can maintain my own sense of identity, worth, and personhood. It would be better for me to let go of my need to be needed than to allow my partners to continue to have such dependency on me. Giving of myself until there is nothing left to give is unhealthy for me*”.

7. Belief that Time Will Make it Better:

Maybe you get hooked by the belief that “*If I give it enough time things will change to be the way I want them to be*”. You have waited a long time to have healthy intimate relationships, you rationalize: “Don’t give up on them too soon”. Since you are not sure how to have them or how they feel, you rationalize that maybe what the relationship needs is more time to become more healthy and intimate. You find yourself giving more and more of yourself and waiting longer and longer for something good to happen and yet things never get better. What keeps hooking you are those fleeting moments when the relationship approximates what you would like it to be. These fleeting moments feel like centuries and they are sufficient to keep you holding on.

The rational message needed to establish healthy boundaries is: “*It is unhealthy for me to sacrifice large portions of my life, invested in relationships that are not going anywhere. It is unhealthy for me to hold on to the belief that things will change if they have not in 1 or more years. It is OK for me to set limits in my relationships, such as: if in 3 months or 6 months things do not get to be intimately healthier then I am getting out of them or we will need to seek professional help to work it out. It is OK for me to put time demands on my relationships so that I do not waste away my life waiting for something, which in all probability will never happen. It is NOT OK for me to blow out of proportion those fleeting moments in my relationships which make me believe that there is anything more in them than there really is*”.

8. Belief that “It Must Be ALL of My Fault that there are Problems in the Relationship”:

Maybe you get hooked by the belief that: “If I change myself more things will change to become more like I want them to be in my relationships”. You rationalize that maybe the reason things are not getting healthier and more intimate is because you need to change more to be the person your partner wants you to be. You feel blamed and pointed out by your partner as the reason why things are not healthier in the relationship. You find yourself with a mounting list of expectations given to you by your partner. You find yourself needing to change the ways you think, feel, act, dress, talk, look, eat, work, cook, entertain, have fun, socialize, etc before you will be “good enough” for your relationship to work. What keeps you hooked is the affirmation and reinforcement you get from your partners when you effect a small change. The only problem is that there is always something else identified which needs to be changed; a never-ending loop of needing to change.

The rational message needed is: *“I have to be real to myself and be the person I am rather than to be the person my partners want me to be. I is not healthy for me to give up my personhood and identity to please my partners just to maintain our relationships. I have a right to my own tastes, likes and dislikes, personal style, beliefs, values, attitudes, etc. I am in control of my own thinking, feelings and actions. I will not allow my relationship partners to take control of my basic rights”.*

9. Fear of Negative Outcomes of Relationship Partners:

Maybe you are hooked by the fear of the possible negative future outcome if you are not deeply involved in taking care of and fixing your relationship partners. You may be aware of the hooks that keep you boundary-less with your partners. Yet you are afraid to LET GO of the control you have with your partners for fear something very negative might happen to them. May be you fear that your partners would become: homeless, hungry, jobless, poor, lonely, scared, go to jail or worse yet die if you do not continue to fix and take care of their needs. You are being emotionally blackmailed and may even have heard threats of suicide if you say you want to change or get out of the relationships the way they are.

The rational message needed here is: *“I am only responsible for my life. No one can make me responsible for my partner’s life. I can choose to feel responsible for my partner’s life, but I cannot control or determine the outcome of their life no matter how hard I try. I am powerless to control other people, places, things and conditions. The only thing I can control is my own thinking, feeling and actions. It is OK for me to expect my partners to accept personal responsibility for their own lives. It is OK to require my relationship partners to accept the consequences for their own actions, choices, and decisions”.*

10. Idealism or Fantasy Thinking:

Maybe you are hooked by the **fantasy or ideal about how it is supposed to be**. You have an ideal, dream or image in your mind of how relationships are supposed to be or how they should be and you have a difficult time accepting them the way they really are. You work hard at making your relationships approximate your idealized fantasy. You put a great deal of time, energy and resources into making them become a reality. Unfortunately, the more you give and give, the fantasy never becomes a reality you are wishing for. You seem brainwashed into believing that it is possible even though all of your efforts have not made it happen, after years and years of effort on your part. You get hooked into waiting for the “big pay off” down the road if you just stick with your relationships.

The rational message needed here is: “I must accept reality the way it is rather than how I want it to be. I will give my support system permission to call me on it if I am hooked into fantasy relationships and lose myself in them. I will work hard to stay reality based and keep myself from losing my objectivity and contact with the way things really are. I am human and subject to making mistakes and failing and I will forgive myself if I make a mistake in my efforts to establish healthy intimate relationships with my relationship partners. Once I give up the delusion that things are the way they are supposed to be, I will work with my partners to try to correct the problems in our relationships”.