

Boundaries: With or Without?



Growing up without relationship boundaries can lead to problems in relationships later in life. (Eric Tucker/Getty Images)



I grew up in a home without boundaries. We had walls between the rooms, and locks on the bathroom doors, but there were no relational boundaries between us. With our consciousness overwhelmed by emotional and economic challenges, there was no space to consider notions of healthy relating. Survival at all costs was our daily mantra. Like wild animals, we were either huddled together for dear life, or fighting one another for scraps. Healthy boundaries were a subtle consideration, a luxury that we simply could not afford.

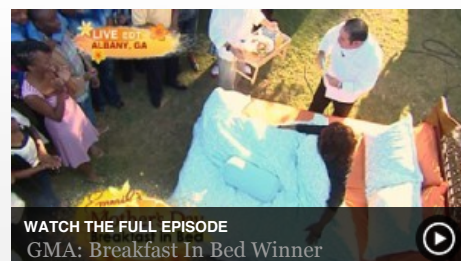
This imbalanced way of being carried forward to my intimate relationships. Either I codependently fused with my partners, or I put on my emotional armor and ran away. My habitual range of emotion. Not surprisingly, my methods of detachment were identical to what was modeled to me as a child. Moments of closeness were inevitably followed by intensity and conflict. Back and forth between enmeshment and war - what else did I know? And of course, conflict was far more than just habitual. It was also avoidant. There was no better way to avoid genuine vulnerability than being at war.

After 15 years of psychotherapy, I finally came to appreciate the profound significance of healthy boundaries in every area of life. As a general rule, if we are too rigid, we are over-boundaried. Imprisoned behind a wall of armor, there is no way for anything to touch us. But if we are too malleable, we are boundary-less. We are just a vessel for the world to fill.

People with healthy boundaries tend to live somewhere in between. They have found the sacred balance between assertiveness and receptivity. When they do move toward one polarity, they do so with intentionality. They choose to surrender, choose to assert. In all cases, their sense of self remains intact.



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This is particularly important in our relationship lives. If we don't know where we end and the other begins, we will have a difficult time establishing healthy connections. Those of us with weakly formed boundaries will be easily manipulated and influenced, often confusing our partner's feelings for our own. Those of us with hardened boundaries will have a hard time opening our hearts to love. Our walls are simply too hard to penetrate. The sacred balance is an alchemical blend of structure and fluidity, almost like an open heart with a sturdy gate at the opening. We don't let just anyone in. We selectively open, letting our boundaries down only when we know that it is healthy to do so.

Jeff Brown: Healthy Boundaries Significant

Healthy boundaries are also significant in our spiritual lives. On my Soulshaping journey, this has been my greatest area of confusion with boundary formation. For the longest time, I sought an experience of "all-oneness" that transcended the boundaried, separate self. I didn't want to be Jeff, I didn't want to be from my family, I didn't want to deal with my individual challenges.

This vision of possibility was fueled by certain experiences that I had on the meditation mat and in my emotional healing work. At times, I was able to tap into a vaster field of consciousness than my habitual sensibilities. This comforted me, both because it gave me a break from my anxious imaginings and because it provided me with a glimpse into a more unified way of being. A rare break from the madness of the world.

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Unfortunately, I misunderstood the nature of the interface between my separate self and unity consciousness. It is one thing to distinguish ourselves from limiting dualities, but quite another to eradicate the distinct self altogether. When taken too far, the quest for "All-One" can become a recipe for radical detachment and perilous self-avoidance. After some time floating away from life's challenges, I came crashing down to Earth. Without a self to come home to, my forays into unity were ultimately unsustainable. It seems I had forgotten to take care of my economic reality and to tend to my primary relationships. I was soon reminded. This is the nature of karmic gravity. If we don't ascend with both feet on the ground, reality will always bring us back to earth to remind us.

There is a sacred balance between our experience of unity consciousness and our connection to our individual path in the heart of it -- separate voices inextricably woven through a choir of unified light. The more deeply we grow in our individual spirituality, the more genuine is our experience of unity. To let go of duality, we must first establish our separateness. To truly taste from unity, we must learn where we end and the other begins. Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries. Don't leave home without them.

A former criminal lawyer and psychotherapist, Jeff Brown is the author of "Soulshaping: A Journey of Self-Creation," recently published by North Atlantic Books. Endorsed by authors Elizabeth Lesser and Ram Dass, "Soulshaping" is Brown's autobiography -- an inner travelogue of his journey from archetypal male warrior to a more surrendered path. You can connect with his work at www.soulshaping.com

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