Boundaries: Where you end and I begin

Personal boundaries are the limits we set in relationships that allow us to protect ourselves from being manipulated by, or enmeshed with, the emotional needs of others. These boundaries come from having a clear sense of self and a healthy sense of our own self-worth. Without our own understanding of self and what makes us unique, we have no way of knowing where we end and another person begins. Healthy boundaries make it possible for us to separate our own thoughts, feelings, opinions and values from those of others, and to take responsibility for what we think, feel and do.

Healthy boundaries are like semi-permeable membranes. They allow us to let in what is healthy and safe, and keep our distance from what may harm us. Boundaries help us take care of ourselves - protecting us from becoming engulfed in unhealthy relationships and setting the stage for us to achieve real intimacy and balance. We need a clear sense of who we are in order to effectively identify our needs and then communicate these to others. When we lack a sense of our own identity and the boundaries of the self that protect and define us as individuals, we tend to draw our identities from those around us.

Examples of actions that weaken emotional boundaries:
- Pretending to agree with others when we truly disagree
- Allowing others to answer for us or make decisions for us
- Repeatedly giving our energy and/or attention to others without it being reciprocated
- Hiding our true feelings
- Going along with activities that we really don't want to do
- Declining to join in with others when we really want to do
- Doing too much for others and/or ignoring our needs
- Working too hard or too long
- Not resting when tired
- Relying on drugs or compulsions as a way to cope

If we are currently in a relationship and can't imagine who we would be without that person in our life, chances are we grew up in a family with poorly defined personal boundaries. Unable to feel fulfilled and secure we seek this out in others and are willing to do anything to make a relationship work even if it means giving up our integrity, self-respect, friends, or independence. We may even endure physical, emotional, or sexual abuse to save a relationship.

A safer and healthier alternative is to discover who we are and what makes us unique. Learning that we have value and worth as a human being and that we can function well on our own is one of life's most important lessons. We will come to realize that our worth is not dependent on having a significant other, nor do attention, status, or material goods influence it. Attaining this sense of self-worth can be a challenging journey. The first step is to increase our level of self-awareness.   This means spending time identifying our current feelings, thoughts, values, and opinions and exploring their origins. Examining the boundaries in our present relationships with family and friends can often lead us back in time to early life experiences with boundary violations.

Another way to strengthen boundaries is to become re-acquainted with our body and our mind: learning to recognize the often ignored "gut feeling" that arises when a boundary is violated, paying attention to the energy drain when we give too much of ourselves, or zoning in on the negative self-talk that loops through our mind when we convince ourselves that our needs are less important than someone else's. Working with a psychologist can be very effective in guiding us through this challenging work. Becoming mindful and more self-aware will slowly allow the fog to clear so that we can begin to define our personal boundaries and become familiar with where we truly end and others begin.