



# Toolkit

## Counseling Toolkit

### Building Better Boundaries

#### **What are Boundaries?**

Boundaries are the lines and limits you create between yourself and other people. They allow you to define what is acceptable and healthy for you in your life and relationships. In their book *Boundaries*, Cloud and Townsend summarize boundaries this way:

*Imagine your neighbor never waters his lawn. But whenever you turn on your sprinkler system, your water only falls on his lawn. Your grass is turning brown and dying but his grass is green and he thinks, “my yard is doing fine.” If you would define the property lines better, if you would fix the sprinkler system so that the water falls on your grass and if he didn’t water his own law, he would live in dirt. And he may not like that after a while. But your grass is watered and green.*

When we don’t have good boundaries, other people are irresponsible and happy and we are responsible and miserable. Having good boundaries means that their actions cause them problems—not you.

In a physical world, boundaries are easy to see—fences, signs, walls, lawns, hedges, etc. They give the same message: this is where my property begins, and I’m responsible for what happens on my property. In our relational world, boundaries are just as real but harder to see.

#### **Why are boundaries important?**

Boundaries define us—what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows us where we end and someone else begins. Boundaries mean knowing what we own and what we take responsibility for. God defines himself by saying who he is, what he feels and thinks. God designed us similarly; we inhabit our own souls, and we are responsible for the things that make up “us.” Prov. 4:23 says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance,

*for from it flow the springs of life.”* We are responsible to deal with what is in our own hearts, and boundaries help us to define what that is.

Oftentimes, our relationships confuse us about our parameters. We don’t have control over other people, but we spend a lot of energy trying to manage other people’s emotions, expectations, and demands. This can lead to codependency, letting someone else’s behavior affect our emotions, actions, and well-being. Maybe you’ve felt this way:

*“If my husband is happy, and I feel responsible for that, then I’m happy. If he’s upset, I feel responsible for that too. I’m anxious, uncomfortable and upset until he feels better. I try to make him feel better. I feel guilty if I can’t.”*

Many of us who struggle with boundaries have significant anxiety, stress, and even depression. Trying to meet the expectations and demands of those around us can create significant physical and mental health issues. So where do we start? Understanding what boundaries are and what we are responsible for is the first step in building better boundaries in our lives.

### **Examples of Boundaries:**

Boundaries don’t have to be communicated to exist.

-*Skin*: Keep the good in and the bad out, but we have a choice what goes into our bodies.

-*Words*: You are in control of you. Your words define your property for others—your likes, dislikes, intentions, and feelings.

-*Truth*: Living in accord with God’s truth helps us to define what we are responsible for.

-*Distance*: We have the power to remove ourselves physically from a situation. We can also remove ourselves emotionally and give your heart the space it needs to be safe.

-*Time*: We can take time off from a person or a hard situation. We can also give ourselves permission to communicate our valued time if someone is perpetually late or cancels.

-*Other people*: We need others to help us set and keep boundaries. Not being alone helps us to be stronger.

-*Consequences*: Cloud and Townsend call these “*barbs*” in the “*fence*,” letting people know the consequences if they cross a line. This can especially be true in parenting.

### **What is Within our Control?**

-*Feelings*: We own our feelings and we should be aware of them. Our feelings are our responsibility. We can change our feelings, and no one can make us “*feel*” anything.

-*Thoughts*: God calls us to active thinking and questioning and challenging distorted thinking is a way of owning our thoughts.

-*Attitudes and beliefs*: Along with feelings, we control our attitude (your orientation towards something) and your beliefs (what you accept as true).

-*Choices*: We are often led by our compulsions to do something like over-spending money, gossiping, losing our temper, or giving into temptation. But we have control over our choices.

-*Values*: What we value is what we love and assign importance to. We have to be able to say what is “*not us*” to define us.

-*Limits*: We can set limits on our own behavior, actions, responses and exposure to people who are behaving poorly. We can’t change them or make them behave right, but we can set limits that protect us from them.

-*Love*: Our ability to give and respond to love is our greatest gift.

### **What gets in the way of setting good boundaries?**

-*Compliance*: Indistinct boundaries melt into the demands of other people. You like the same restaurant just to get along because you fear hurting people’s feelings. Compliance is like “*saying yes to the bad.*”

-*Avoidance*: This is when you can’t ask for help or support. If you tend towards avoidance, you could be “*saying no to the good.*”

-*Control*: You can’t hear no versus not being able to say no. You use control to have others carry the load that is yours and you don’t respect other people’s boundaries.

-*Nonresponsive*: You are so absorbed in your own needs that you exclude others and can’t hear the needs of others.

### **Common Responses When We Set Boundaries**

-*Angry Reactions*: View their anger realistically–this is a feeling inside another person and it can't jump across the room and hurt you. It's important to stay separate when someone lashes out. Allow the person to be angry and then decide for yourself what you need to do. You can use physical and emotional distancing to enforce consequences: “*I won’t allow myself to be yelled at. I’m going to go into the other room until you can talk about this without attacking me.*”

-*Guilt Reactions*: We hear, “*How could you do this to me...?*” “*If you really loved me...?*” “*How could you abandon the family...?*” It's important to recognize the guilt message which often hides sadness and hurt.

But remember that no one has the power to make you feel guilty. If that feeling is on your property, you need to deal with it. Be assertive and interpret their message about their feelings: *"It sounds like you are angry that I chose not to come home for Thanksgiving."* Or, *"I realize this is disappointing you that I can't take you to the doctor."*

We must remember that we can only control our own thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Prov. 25:28 reminds us *"Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man without self-control."* Change can be hard, and boundaries separate you from what you have known through past behaviors. Have confidence in your ability to learn and change your ways! Paul tells us in 2 Cor. 5:17 that we are new creations in Christ, the old is gone and the new has come.

Consider what actions you need to implement in order to move your relationships in a healthier direction. Use the following prompts below to help you explore the changes you can take to have more freedom in your relationships.

The boundaries I need with \_\_\_\_\_.

Are \_\_\_\_\_.

I will communicate these boundaries by \_\_\_\_\_.

If my boundaries are not accepted I will \_\_\_\_\_.

Reach out to us if you want to explore your relationships and setting boundaries in your life. We would love to come alongside you in whatever season you find yourself. Email us at

[connect@barnabascenterhou.com](mailto:connect@barnabascenterhou.com) or visit our website [www.barnabascenterhou.com](http://www.barnabascenterhou.com) for more information on our counseling services. Also take a look at these books for further reading on Boundaries!

**Boundaries–Cloud and Townsend**

**Codependent No More–Beattie**

**Love is a Choice–Hemfelt, Minirth, Meier**

Leslie Peacock, MAC, LPC, Director of Counseling