



## **1 – What ARE Boundaries?**

### **(A Guide for Addicts to Respect Your Partner's Boundaries)**

Dan Drake, LMFT, LPCC, CCPS-S, CSAT-S

Most of us, particularly if we've been in any kind of counseling, are used to hearing the word "boundaries". Boundaries may seem obvious, but they can so easily be misunderstood. Let's take a few minutes to look at what boundaries *really* are.

#### **1) Boundaries are for SAFETY, NOT PUNISHMENT**

It's crucial to keep in mind that the point of boundaries is to establish and maintain safety. Why do we have traffic rules and have restrictions for children? Is it because society or parents are mean and controlling? No, it's to protect people or things from being hurt.

In the same way, the boundaries your partner will be setting are for safety. They aren't meant to control you. You may have had your own history with boundaries being disrespected through neglect, over-indulgence, or abuse in your past. You may also not understand the full impact that your actions have had on your partner. Whatever your understanding of boundaries has been to this point, we want you to know that it's normal for partners to establish new boundaries for safety after sexual betrayal.

Imagine you were driving on a winding mountain road. Would you feel more comfortable driving on that road with guard rails or without them? Most of us would choose to drive those roads with the safety of a guard rail. Think of boundaries like a guard rail: Your partner is reeling from the impact of betrayal. The road she was driving on became unsafe, and she's finding new guard rails to help protect her and your relationship moving forward. And remember this: she's still moving! If she were out of the relationship right now she wouldn't be bothering with these protective guard rails. So you can do a lot to provide safety and protection for her moving forward by honoring her boundaries.

#### **2) Boundaries help relationships repair after rupture**

And speaking of providing safety and protection, you play a huge role in helping heal your relationship after sexual betrayal. Betrayal causes a breach of trust in the relationship. And trust needs to be repaired through safety. You can demonstrate safety by doing consistent trustworthy actions over time. And as you can imagine, honoring your partner's boundaries will show consistent trustworthy actions to

your partner – It shows that you care, that you respect what she’s needing for safety, and that you’re taking responsibility for the rupture you initiated in your relationship.

And if it helps to look at it this way, your partner’s boundary request is essentially a roadmap she’s giving you for how to begin repairing the relationship. She’s telling you what she needs right now, and if you consistently do what she’s asking for, you will help repair your relationship. It may seem simple, but it’s imperative if you want to rebuild trust to do what you say you’re going to do. Your partner will be looking to see if your words match with your actions, since that’s the way trust and safety are restored. And if you’re willing to do this work, you show yourself trustworthy.

This relational repair will also help your partner find safety. As she finds safety, her anger may very well start to dissipate, and your relationship will improve. As a result, these shifts will obviously have positive impacts on you as well. So remember that your respect of your partner’s boundaries will ultimately help everyone: Your partner, your relationship, and even YOU.

### **3) Boundaries live and breathe**

We all operate under some boundaries at all times (e.g., we all agree that murder is wrong, so societies set boundaries accordingly). Yet some boundaries may change over time depending on how the relationship progresses and how safety is restored in your relationship. So just know, that safety serves as a guard rail in your relationship for where it is right now. If you are newer in the recovery process after discovery / disclosure, you may find that you have more boundaries in place for safety. Yet years down the road, after you’ve done good work to repair your relationship after rupture, you’ll find that the boundaries will look differently.

So be patient. Know that what your partner needs right now may change over time, and you can have a huge part in helping that shift! If you choose to “forget,” push back on, or ignore the boundaries, you’ll find it difficult to rebuild safety and trust in your relationship. And as a result the boundaries may stay extreme for a long time. Yet if you do all that you can to demonstrate empathy, remorse, and respect of your partner, these boundaries will most likely shift with time.

Make sure to talk to your therapist, sponsor, accountability partner, and/or another member of your recovery team about how you can best honor your partner’s boundaries to help repair your relationship. And now that we’ve briefly talked about what boundaries are, let’s look at ways you can better respond to your partner’s specific boundaries.