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3 – My Boundary was Violated, Now What?!

(A Guide for Partners)

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In previous blogs I've detailed when, why, and how to set boundaries, but are you prepared for if or when your partner violates your boundaries? Boundaries serve little purpose without consequences. Yet, setting and following through with consequences may be the hardest part of boundaries. If you have already outlined the boundaries that you need to feel emotionally and physically safe in your relationship with your partner, it is important to determine what you will do if those boundaries are violated.

What do I mean by consequences? Consequences are ideally what happen after boundaries are violated. In the case of sex addiction, these consequences are created and implemented by the partner of the sex addict. Consequences could be anything like: filing for divorce, moving out, your partner moving out, sleeping in separate bedrooms, not being sexually intimate for a certain period of time, telling more people about your situation, limiting one-on-one time with your partner, more monitoring of activities/devices, no longer having a smartphone, only talking to your spouse during certain parts of the day or, being asked to quit a job or activity where violation occurred.

Choose consequences equal to the offense. There are probably a lot of things you wish your partner was not doing, many of which are causing you to feel unsafe, but be careful to weigh how unsafe the boundary violation will make you feel when considering consequences. When non-negotiable boundaries are violated, for example, the addict acting out by doing an "inner-circle" behavior, it makes sense to choose a big consequence, such as a separation. When other boundaries are violated, for example, driving someone for the opposite sex home from work, the consequence may be something more like increased accountability, a tracking app, or increased therapy sessions.

Choose consequences you will be willing and able to follow. It is important to think about consequences that will help you to feel safe, but are also feasible for you to implement. Make sure you will actually be able to follow through on the consequence set. If you say, "X" will cause "Y", think about if you are financially and practically able to implement "Y". For example, maybe you or your spouse moving out after a boundary violation is not financially possible. But, could you do separate bedrooms instead? Or, maybe it would be possible if one partner could stay with a friend or family member for some length of time. Also, consider if you are actually willing to follow through with the consequence.

You could say if “X” then “divorce”, but is that something you are actually ready and willing to follow through with at this time? If not, that is okay, but I just recommend picking a different consequence from the start.

Follow through with the consequence set. Sometimes following through with consequences means big scary life changes need to be made. Other times it means inconvenient conversations need to be had or time-consuming things need to be done. Sometimes, you may not feel like “rocking the boat” or you may fear things getting worse if you follow through with consequences. You may be right, but what will happen if you don’t? You set the boundary to feel safe; minimizing your needs will be hurtful to you and your relationship in the long run. If consequences aren’t followed, then behaviors that are making you feel unsafe probably won’t change. **If you are concerned that implementing a consequence will put your physical safety at risk, before following through with your consequence, I recommend talking with a helping professional about a plan to keep you safe.**

Consider having multiple options for you to choose from for boundary violations. While “X” causes “Y” consequence is often helpful, you could also consider, if “X” then “A,B, or C” consequence, depending on how unsafe you are feeling. Or, another option is: if “X” then “I will decide a fitting consequence within 24 hours.” The last two options may be helpful in some situations, but it is still important to think about possible consequences ahead of time and even discuss them with your partner, so that there is an increased likelihood of you implementing a consequence that will help you feel safe. If you choose, either alternative option, I encourage you to process them through with a therapist or someone you trust to make sure that you have a place to sort through what you need to feel safe.

Be gracious with yourself. Setting boundaries and following through with consequences may take time! Often, you may think the boundaries you set are clear, but something will happen that you or your partner didn’t anticipate. Try to keep open communication about loopholes or unforeseen circumstances and adjust boundaries and consequences based on what makes you feel safe. If you realized you are unwilling or unable to follow through with a consequence, adjust and overtime with some work, you will be able to get better at setting and following through with consequences.

Following through with consequences doesn’t make you controlling. If your partner violates one of your boundaries, your partner essentially chose the associated consequence. Your partner is the one in control of his/her actions related to following your boundaries or not. All you are doing by giving a consequence, is following the plan in place to help you feel safe. Addicts, and even partners at times, feel like implementing consequences is too parental, but remember, boundaries with consequences serve as guidelines for helping to restore relationships that have been damaged by sex addiction and betrayed trust. Boundaries and consequences are a roadmap to healing and a trustworthy relationship.

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They are a gift, that you can give the addict you love, to help them to know how to help you rebuild your trust in them and your relationship.

Again, setting consequences and following through with consequences may be the most difficult part of boundary setting. Hang in there! We are here to help if you, if needed.