



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript Episode 5: May 27th, 2020 How to Set Boundaries**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Teresa, Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor

**Marissa:** Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast, intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic.

This week our topic is How to Set Boundaries. We are your hosts, my name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate.

**Teresa:** And I'm Teresa, I am the Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor at The Women's Center. We are going to get started by talking about how to set boundaries. We are going to look at what do boundaries look like, and how do we enforce them in our life.

To start off, it's important to go into what exactly are boundaries. This is something that we hear people talk about a lot. If you have tuned into any of our other podcasts, this is definitely something that we've addressed in those as well, but this is a really crucial thing to talk about when we are talking about our overall well-being and our overall emotional health. Boundaries are essentially guidelines, rules and limits that we set to identify what reasonable, safe and permissible ways are for others to behave around us, as well as how we respond when someone steps over those limits that we set for ourselves and others. This is really essential for creating a healthy self. This not only allows us to recognize our space and what we need to hold, what we need to let go of, but it allows us to recognize what is within our power and what we have no control over. Especially right now, this is a really great conversation to be having because there is so much that feels like that it's outside of our control right now.

When we're having this conversation about setting boundaries it's not just setting boundaries with other people. This is really recognizing what your boundaries are for yourself as well. And lastly this helps us determine our own personal outcomes. Addressing what our boundaries are for ourselves is addressing what is appropriate and necessary for our own well-being and for us to get through each day.

**Marissa:** What do these boundaries actually look like? For a lot of folks, myself included, it really helps to think about our boundaries as literally a line around ourselves, or you know, sort of a box of sorts. Healthy boundaries might look like some set lines but also room for things that we cannot control. Maybe a dashed line around ourselves.

There are some examples of unhealthy boundaries. There are limited, non-existent boundaries. That's going to look like pretty much the corners of a box and nothing else. It allows for anything and everyone. When people feel like a lot is out of their control, they may have boundaries that look like this.

Going off of that, some folks might have some loose or porous boundaries. That's going to look like somewhere in between that first and second example that I was talking about. Somebody might have set boundaries but they might not stick to them. They may be easily persuaded into doing something that they might have said no to originally.

The fourth example that I want to briefly talk about are rigid boundaries. Think of this as a completely closed box around yourself or a wall. A lot of people talk about this is having their walls put up, or being in a bubble. When situations arise that aren't in our control, we may feel like we're unable to handle it. These sort of rigid boundaries don't allow us to build healthy relationships either. These are just a couple of examples of what people's starting points might look like in this conversation.

**Teresa:** When we are talking about setting boundaries and critical boundaries for ourselves, it's also important you think about this, like Marissa had kind of visualized for you in that box setting, which I think is a really great visual representation of what someone's boundaries might look like. This can be done when thinking about four different circles. Kind of overlapping with each other like a Venn-diagram if you're familiar with that. Thinking about beliefs, blending into your desires, blending into your needs and blending into this intuition that you have, this gut feeling. This is really what we talk about when establishing those critical boundaries for yourself because it's a blend of all four of these things: your beliefs, your desires, your needs, and that gut feeling that you have for yourself.

An activity that can be really helpful if you are struggling with identifying where your boundaries are, or if you are struggling with identifying what one of the four boundaries that Marissa was just talking about, where you fall in that, a good question to ask yourself is “Which area do you struggle in the most to set boundaries with those around you? And which area you struggle with with yourself to set boundaries?” After that, asking yourself the question “What makes this a difficult boundary to set?” Whether that is spending time with people and saying no to spending time alone, or spending time with others, is that a boundary that you're having a difficult time with? Why is that difficult to set? Another question to ask too, is what three boundaries would you like to set in that category? Then lastly, how can you stick to these boundaries?

So, an activity to think about doing if you're having a hard time establishing what boundaries you fall into, or things that you were struggling with setting boundaries in, is asking yourself a few different questions. The first question to ask yourself is: “Which area do you struggle to set boundaries with those around you the most? What areas do you struggle to set boundaries with yourself?” Another question to ask is: “Why is this a difficult boundary to set?” Whether with other people, or whether with yourself. Third question to ask yourself is: “What are three boundaries that you would like to set in that category?” And lastly, how can you stick to these boundaries? Just taking some time to reflect on those questions can give you a really good idea where you're really good at setting those boundaries for yourself, or areas that you want to work on improving with setting boundaries with other people and/or yourself.

**Marissa:** Another really important conversation to have, is the difference between boundaries and expectations. A lot of these points are cited from [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org). They have a really amazing article on this topic. If you are interested in reading further, feel free to check out Love is Respect.

Boundaries, again, are our personal comfort levels, and they serve as guidelines for protection and direct us on how to respond to others. These things look different from relationship to relationship, and oftentimes even situation to situation, our boundaries are meant to be sort of fluid over time and again, between relationships.

Expectations on the other hand, shape how we believe things should go, how people should act, and what others expect of us. These are based on assumptions, so assuming that we know what our partner is thinking, and vice-versa, how we expect things to go when just engage in an interaction with another person.

**Teresa:** Boundaries and expectations go together. They really go hand-in-hand. We can't talk about boundaries without setting those expectations for ourselves. Expectations help us think about what our boundaries will look like, what we are

expecting of other people to do, and what we ourselves are expecting ourselves to respond to. They essentially help us know what to expect within that relationship, whether that is boundaries with a friend or family member, or maybe that is the boundaries with a partner. You have those certain expectations that allow you to uphold those boundaries. This gives us a layer of security in relationships when we communicate and agree upon boundaries and expectations. Knowing our own boundaries and expectations help us recognize those unhealthy behaviors in our relationships, or it can also help us recognize the healthy behaviors in relationships.

**Marissa:** Totally. So, to continue that conversation, knowing our values, means knowing all the different types of boundaries that we have. We have so many different kinds. We have physical boundaries, so that looks like our boundaries related to personal space and physical touch. It's that awareness of what's appropriate, and with what others are comfortable with. Whereas one person may be comfortable hugging all of their friends, someone else might not be. Those are the different boundaries that people hold.

Folks can have intellectual boundaries. That's respect for others ideas and thoughts. This one can be violated when somebody dismisses or belittles another person's thoughts or makes them feel lower in any sort of way. Emotional boundaries are acknowledging when or when not to share, for what reason more or less. These can be violated when somebody criticizes, belittles or invalidates another person's feelings. One of the boundaries that we often hear a lot about, and it goes hand-in-hand with physical boundaries, are sexual boundaries. That is mutual understanding, respecting of limitations of what goes on when we're being intimate with others. This really comes down to consent, when we affirm that we want to continue with a certain activity, or when we firmly say: "No we're not interested in this".

**Teresa:** Two other types of boundaries that are important to talk about are material boundaries, and boundaries related to time. Material boundaries are pretty much what it sounds like: money and possessions that we might have. Setting those material boundaries look like setting limits on what you'll share and with whom you'll share it with. For example, you might feel comfortable lending a car to a family member to go run errands that you trust. This was someone that you had this established relationship with, there are trust and expectations that allow you to set healthy boundaries with them. But maybe this is not something that you would feel comfortable asserting with a friend that you don't know too well. This can be violated when someone either steals or damages your possessions, or when you are pressured to lend something to someone.

The last type of boundary that's really important to talk about, especially right now in the midst of everything that we're going through, is going to be time. This is when a

person determines how they want to use their time. We all have different things that we need to do throughout the day, especially now. Maybe part of it is just making sure you're setting enough time aside to homeschool kiddos if that's something that you're dealing with. And then, setting aside enough time to make sure that you are taking care of yourself. It's really important to look at each facet of your life that you are having to tend to on a day-to-day basis, and trying to achieve some balance between work, life, family, friends and maybe school right now with your kids or yourself. This is one that can be really difficult to do, especially since we are confined to an environment right now that maybe isn't safe or maybe isn't as comfortable as we are used to having it be. This can be violated when another individual demands too much of another person's time. This is a really big one too because only you know how much time you need to give to yourself, or a give to other facets of your life. \*This goes back to that conversation, setting those critical boundaries for yourself, and having those gut reactions or that intuition when you feel really drained and know that you need to practice some more self-care. Looking at prioritizing time between work, home and life right now to ensure that there is a balance between all three of those different areas as much as there can be.

**Marissa:** I really want to echo that point of you knowing best where your boundaries are and what that feeling is for you. With that in mind, I think it's important to go over some signs of ignored boundaries, some of the things we may be feeling when we've had our boundaries crossed a number of times. The first one is over enmeshment. That is the expectation to follow the rule that you and another person must do everything together or that everyone thinks, feels and acts the same way. That might be more common if your boundaries are being violated repeatedly by one other person and you start to believe that you have to do everything together or they are forcing that expectation on you.

Another sign of ignored boundaries is dissociation, which I know we've talked about in other podcasts as well. That is blanking out during stressful, emotional events. Really coming out of the present moment and it prevents you from being in touch with your emotions and boundaries. We often dissociate when the present is a little, either too stressful, painful or traumatic.

Another sign is excessive detachment. That, to go back to the example I was using previously, this may be more common for folks who have those rigid boundaries, those walls up. That person may be feeling totally independent from everyone else and they may also feel that nothing is holding them together in a healthy union. Everything around them is so out of control that it's just them against the world and they feel like they've got no one to rely on.

Another common sign of ignored boundaries is either victimhood or martyrdom. A martyr is somebody who suffers greatly at the hands of someone else. This person may feel their identity is rooted in being a victim. They may become hyper-vigilant to avoid further victimization or they may continue to knowingly be victimized, and let others know of their martyrdom. That might be, you find you're telling folks "Fine, just one more thing to add to the list, thank you". All of those kinds of feelings, that sort of empathy towards being victimized, that that definitely can be a sign of ignored boundaries.

**Teresa:** Some other signs of ignored boundaries could look like having a chip on your shoulder. And this could be due to someone violating your boundaries in the past and there is still some of that unresolved anger and resentment there, which is valid, but this is also a sign of ignored boundaries because you might be saying "Hey, go ahead and try to cross that boundary". Almost daring someone to try and cross the boundary that you're attempting to set for yourself. This might also look like invisibility. You might be preventing others from knowing how you are truly feeling and not wanting to be seen or heard so that your boundaries won't be violated. This goes back to adapting and protecting yourself based on the environment that you had been in, or still currently in. There was a protective factor that you maybe had to be invisible for at some point, but is this something that you need to carry over right now?

Another example of ignored boundaries is going to be aloofness or shyness. You might find yourself rejecting others before they reject you. And maybe keeping inward, not being willing to open up or having to set those boundaries with other people. If you don't open up, then you don't have to set those boundaries, therefore you are protecting yourself in that way.

Lastly, you might be feeling cold or distant. This again, is going to be a defense mechanism, and it's going to be similar to that aloofness or that shyness I just talked about. Really all of these signs of ignored boundaries could be learned behaviors that we picked up in those relationships. Knowing that they've had a purpose is totally valid, and this is just a few signs that you could be experiencing, or maybe it's a good check in for you to say "Hey, am I still ignoring those boundaries?" or "Wow this really is resonating with me."

**Marissa:** Yeah. And you may also feel smothered when your boundaries have been ignored. You may feel that others are overly intrusive into your space and boundaries. That can be really overwhelming, and that can make folks feel that they lack freedom. On that same note, you may feel like you have privacy as well. That nothing you think, feel or do is your own, that you must share everything with others or a partner and that nothing is special for you. And I know a lot of folks may especially be feeling that right

now, when we're spending more time at home with everyone in our family and not having those defined lines of "I'm going to work", "My kids are going to school", "My partner is also at work". Whatever the boundaries that you had previously set in place, they might have been shaken up right now. You may feel that your boundaries have been ignored during this time, and that lack of privacy bit that's super common right now.

**Teresa:** How do we even begin to talk about setting boundaries for ourselves? This can feel really overwhelming, especially if this is a new concept or you are allowing yourself to take up space and to really tap into what you need, and what you expect of both yourself and other people. If this is the first time that you're doing this in a while, it might feel really difficult or it might feel really scary. We're going to go through five different things that you can do to determine how to set those boundaries for yourself.

The first one is going to be re-examining your values for yourself. We're going to look at learning how to say no, both to others and when you need to say no to yourself. Third, we're going to look at taking care of yourself, something that we definitely have talked about before in other podcasts. Fourth, we're going to talk about how you are only responsible for yourself and not for other people. And lastly, we're going to talk about how to follow through with those things.

**Marissa:** Sounds great, let's start rebuilding! Let's start by re-examining our values. So, what is your foundation? What are you comfortable with? Or conversely, what are you not comfortable with? Where do you start to get that uncomfy feeling in your stomach that might be your boundary? What are some of the values, principles or standards that you hold high? For example, that can be things such as honesty, respect, loyalty, open-mindedness, so on and so forth. Having that clear understanding of what's important to us will help when we're faced with challenging situations and decisions. And again, these might change over time. That is okay, we change over time. We are fluid and so our boundaries should also be fluid, that is okay.

It's really important to take that time periodically to re-evaluate where we're at, because we are changing. Especially during healing. We want to re-evaluate where our values are so we can have that inform everything else on this lovely list.

**Teresa:** Learning how to say no is also a really crucial part of rebuilding your boundaries. Ultimately, you do have the right to say no to things and people that you are not comfortable with. This may feel really selfish, but you are actually setting healthy boundaries for yourself when you are deciding to say no to things, or even if it's that voice inside of yourself saying "You know I'm really tapped out today, I'm going to have to say no to that phone call, or no to video chatting with a friend". You don't have to over-explain why, because saying no is just as important as recognizing what we end up

saying yes to in our lives. If we're saying yes to things, opportunities, or maybe right now too, it's saying yes to every opportunity to connect with a friend or family member. That's awesome if that's what fills you up, but if that's something that is draining you, if you are feeling like you're going, going, going, and not having an opportunity to slow down, and you're feeling that pressure to say yes, ultimately you're making that decision to say no to maybe something that could fill you up, or no to taking that time for yourself.

This might feel like an uphill battle, but you know the more that you start to say the more that you start to say no to others and things that don't feel good for you, the more that you're going to be okay with saying yes to things and boundaries that you need to set for yourself.

**Marissa:** And to the point of filling yourself up, what are the things that we need to do to take care of ourselves and our needs? This may be difficult at first to allow yourself the space. Again, it may feel a bit selfish and ultimately, it's not. We know that you can't pour from an empty cup. That is, if you are interested in holding space for others and you feel like you get joy from being there for others and helping others, you have to make sure that you're doing okay first. You're the only one that ultimately can look after you.

An important question to ask yourself is, "What do I need to feel more balanced, energized or fulfilled?" What are the things that bring you joy, what are the things that I can do right now that'll help, even if it's just for a little bit, even if it's just for five minutes you might feel the littlest bit better. Those things truly do add up.

And of course, we'll sound like a broken record, but self-care is super important, and this step in rebuilding your boundaries. If you're unfamiliar with self-care and how it can apply to you, would definitely suggest checking out our last podcast on self-care and emotional safety planning. We've got a lot of excellent tips, tricks and tools to help define self-care for us.

**Teresa:** So, the fourth point that we want to talk about when we are talking about rebuilding boundaries, is that you are not responsible for other people and their emotions. This is really easy to say out loud, or to hear someone talk about, but to believe this is another thing. It is certainly not your job to contain, or to hold, or to solve someone else's problems or emotions. The only responsibility you have to yourself is you. Your reactions, your responses, and the emotions that are attached to those. For example, if you are feeling drained after having a conversation with a friend over the phone, think about establishing those boundaries when you can answer, or when you can be present without it affecting you. Is this someone that you talk to on the way home

from work typically, and you just feel really drained by the time you get home? Is there a better time of the day to give them a call? Something that you can control or respond to you.

**Marissa:** And lastly, one of the most important steps to rebuilding boundaries is the follow-through. Of course, establishing and asserting boundaries may feel uncomfortable at first, but it is a practice and practice makes perfect. I feel like we're all practicing our boundaries all the time. When you are starting out, guilt, shame and selfishness might arise. You may feel those feelings, that's natural, you're putting yourself first, perhaps for the first time. Those are natural feelings, but you are doing the right thing. You are looking after yourself and that is worth celebrating. Remember to be consistent, patient and recognize that this is a process too. So many of us are in a state of renegotiating our boundaries and working on enforcing them. You're not alone in this process, and you're doing great, I promise you that.

**Teresa:** A way to think about creating these boundaries that we've been talking about is through something called a three-part boundary statement. This is a really great template that you can use to set boundaries for unsafe, unacceptable and inappropriate behavior using these three beginning phrases.

The first part of this statement is making a statement that says: "If you...", and then describing the behavior that you're not okay with. After stating that, then you want to say: "I will", and you will describe what action that you'll take in order to protect or take care of yourself in the event that someone violates and that boundary that you're setting. And that last part of the three part boundary statement, is going to be ending it with describing what steps you'll take to protect that boundary you have set, through an "if you continue..." statement. This, for example, might look like "If you continue to yell at me, I will leave the room". "If you continue to break plans with me by not showing up or calling me, I will let you know about those behaviors and tell you how I feel. If you continue, I'm going to have to reset a boundary, reset plans with you." These are really easy statements to kind of put in, depending on your own situation and what's safe for you to do so.

This might work for some people, all three parts might be really great, and might be very clear to set those boundaries or make a statement with a partner or a friend or family member that is crossing boundaries that we're setting. But what if we're living with an abuser and it's not safe for us to say these three things? That's where we talk about the first two, if you feel safe and comfortable enough to assert a boundary in that way. This may not be safe or necessary to share that third part, just based on your situation. What's important is that you know your safety level, you know the scenario that you're living in right now, and what's going to feel safe and comfortable to you. So, this is

something that you can modify depending on where you're currently at. But just an overall, really great template to give you an idea how to communicate this, because it can feel really large overall.

**Marissa:** Ultimately setting boundaries is about drawing the line and figuring out where is that line is for you, and what would be crossing that line. It's important to establish that boundary and stick to it; or find someone who will help hold you accountable to sticking to your boundary.

Again, you're not alone in this, and if you feel comfortable reaching out to supports and telling them about some of the things that make you uncomfortable, not even things relating to them, they can help as an accountability partner and make sure that you're sticking to you and your values.

**Teresa:** Remember that you are the only one that can set your own boundaries. You're only responsible for the boundaries that you're setting, the responses and reactions that you're having, and the emotions that you're experiencing. Ultimately, asserting these boundaries is a form of self-care and taking up that space, and allowing yourself to communicate what you're okay with and what you're not okay with.

And again, we are going to sound like a broken record when we say this, but be patient with yourself. This does not happen overnight, and it may take a few different tries of asserting those boundaries for it to feel natural or comfortable. Just keep being patient with yourself and know that this too might take some time.

**Marissa:** There is a really great video on YouTube that can help explain some of these points further, it's called "Good Boundaries Free You" by Sarri Gilman. S, a, r, r, i, g, i, l, m, a, n. We also will be posting a couple of resources that can help you map out what your boundaries look like. So, look for those underneath this podcast on our website.

**Teresa:** Thank you for joining us to learn more about How to Set Boundaries. Our next session will be about Understanding Your Values.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call or 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org). Thank you and be well.