



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Boundaries Within A Family Dynamic

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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 Boundaries Within a Family Dynamic. We are your hosts: my name is Marissa, I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here at The Women's Center.

KRYSTAL: My name is Krystal. I am the Director of Advocacy and Support Services. I have been at the Women's Center for eight and a half years, and my role is to not only work with clients, but also to supervise all of the wonderful advocates you've been listening through, through your time here on our podcast, and this is my first ever podcast. So I'm, I'm excited to do this and also a little nervous.

MARISSA: Very, very exciting indeed. And to those who have stuck with us for our first two seasons, thank you for that, and thank you for joining us today.

Why are we talking about this, why are we bringing up family dynamics? First, family dynamics are the patterns of interactions that we have with family members. This involves boundaries, communication styles, family hierarchies, rules, or norms. Healthy family dynamics give us a sense of safety within the family unit, and unhealthy or even abusive dynamics may cause harm from a young age into adulthood. We will be going more into specific dynamics later on here.

Most families have some periods of time where functioning is impaired by stressful circumstances, such as a death in the family, serious illness, other things like that. With the holidays approaching, you may be thinking more about the dynamics of your family as you prepare for the season. This may be the first time you've seen family in a while, or

if you're feeling a little less than safe to make contact, you may be experiencing some pressures to reconnect. With the COVID-19 pandemic, many families are considering their options and what they consider to be safe boundaries both physically and emotionally.

KRYSTAL: So, what does make up the qualities of a healthy family dynamic? There's a belief in a sense of commitment towards promoting the well-being of individual family members, and the whole family unit; this instills feelings of value and connectedness. There's appreciation for the small and large things that individual family members do well and encouragement to do better. This allows for individuality and encouragement to pursue interests. There's a sense of purpose in both good and bad times; feelings are important and it's safe to express them within the family. [There is an] agreement on value and importance of assigning time and energy to meet the needs of the family. [This] is an effort to spend time with one another to do things together.

There are clear set of family rules, values, and there's set expectations about what is acceptable. Boundaries then are established and honored because they use open communication, which we know is the fundamental building block of any healthy relationship, whether that's intimate partner or family dynamics. Coping strategies then promote a positive solution, so this allows for the healthy relationships that are being developed as children grow into adults.

MARISSA: Absolutely. And on the flip side of that, some qualities of an unhealthy family dynamic might be the fact that conversations about feelings or conflict are off-limits, and there's that refusal to acknowledge problems within the family. This limits the ability to express feelings and boundaries, and it may impact the ability to create and maintain healthy relationships into adulthood.

There may be a lack of encouragement towards individual family members, and/or little effort put into spending time together. Family members might start developing low self-esteem or feel that their needs are not important. There may also be some inconsistency in rules and expectations, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, the feeling of "I can't do anything right here," and possible favoritism between family members, which can create a very uncomfortable dynamic.

Some possible signs of an abusive family dynamic might look like one or more caregivers using the threat or application of physical violence as a means of primary control. Someone in this family may witness violence, be forced to participate, or generally live in fear. One or more caregivers might exploit the children, and treat them as possessions whose primary purpose is to respond to the physical and/or emotional needs of the adults. This may lead a child to protecting the caregiver, cheering them up when they're depressed, the child almost taking another parental role in the relationship.

An abusive family dynamic might also look like one or more caregivers being unable to provide, or they may threaten to withdraw care for the children, providing a failure to provide that emotional support and/or physical safety or financial needs. Another aspect of a possibly abusive family dynamic is that one or more caregivers may exert strong authoritarian control over the children. They may rigidly adhere to personal beliefs with consequences if you do not comply with them.

KRYSTAL: So, what are the results of these patterns? One of the things is it's inhibiting the person's ability to develop trust. Individuals find it difficult to trust the behavior and the words of others, because those who often support and protect us when we are in that developmental stage, they have failed us, they have failed the child to develop. They also create a normalizing pattern. "No, that wasn't considered abusive. My parent wasn't violent, it's just their way of showing and expressing themselves, that isn't deemed abusive." Often, we misinterpret ourselves and develop negative self-concepts, right? "I had it coming. I was I was a horrible child, I deserve to have that happened to me. If I wouldn't have done this, then they wouldn't have had to react in this way."

When we're creating this normalizing self-talk, we turn to these survival behaviors. So, what does that mean? Survival behaviors are finely tuned empathy for others, and hypersensitivity to negative emotions. They're achievement oriented; survival behaviors also emphasize the need of others, not acknowledging the importance of their own personal needs to be to be adhered to. And there's a breakdown of communication during conflict due to fear of consequences, and oftentimes, conflict is avoided entirely, which we know can be harmful in any type of healthy relationship.

MARISSA: Something that's called intergenerational trauma might be another result here of these patterns. This means that these behaviors might be carried from generation to generation unintentionally. We wanted to go through the results of these patterns because learning about them, identifying them in your own life, and finding some more sustainable coping tools can help break this cycle, this harmful pattern that Krystal was mentioning.

And then so with this, what are your choices here? We're going to be going into a couple of options that you may consider more specifically in the next few moments. But as a disclaimer, this podcast is not going to endorse a specific option, and you should take into consideration your safety, your lived experiences, and your goals. If you would like additional support and weighing your options from an advocate, reach out to your local agency hotline, whether that's us in the Greater Milwaukee area, the National hotline, or your local hotline or agency.

The choices we're going to be looking at here are 1. setting boundaries, 2. re-evaluating the relationship, or 3. reclaiming power. And again, we're not going to endorse a specific

option, you might choose a couple of these choices, none at all. Again, you are the expert here, and for additional support please feel free to reach out to a local hotline.

KRYSTAL: Thank you, Marissa. It is very important that we emphasize choices, so what works for one individual may not work for another, and it's just trying to determine what is best for your specific situation and being mindful of the safety component attached to it. But first and foremost, when we're talking about, number one, is what do boundaries look like? If you go back to The Women's Center's website, we'll provide an actual visual to help describe what boundaries mean.

So, the first image that we have here is what a healthy boundary looks like. There are set lines, but there's also room for things we cannot control. The second image is where there are no boundaries at all, it's limited or nonexistent. So what that means is it's allowing anything in every space, and there could be some things that we determine are boundary-setting, but then we're easily just throwing them away. The third image is when we start to set the boundaries, but don't necessarily stick to them. So we could be persuaded into doing things that you might have normally said no to, but you feel like you have to say yes. That just goes back to some of the conversation we had earlier about setting these, and why we are having these conversations now in regard to maybe upcoming family dynamics, but also upcoming family expectations within the holidays.

The last one is the very rigid example of what boundaries are. So complete walls put up, we are kept within this bubble, we are unable to handle situations that arise that are out of our control, and it does not allow for us to build healthy relationships because we are essentially stuck within the settings, within the walls that we created around ourselves. So, it is a dynamic that we as adults continuously have to build and work on, but if we set these expectations and these learning abilities in children, they will grow into being able to properly picture what healthy boundaries look like.

MARISSA: Absolutely, thank you for that. And all of this is to say that setting boundaries is about drawing that line. Where is that line for you, and what might be crossing that line? In terms of boundaries, we may feel pressure from others to continue these relationships for fear of isolation if we do not uphold them. To set boundaries, that will require you to say no to your family member, and assert what you need from that relationship.

So for example, you know, going back to family holidays or traditions, you might feel like you want to limit involvement or possibly not even attend as a boundary. That might look like saying, "I appreciate the invite, but I'm unable to attend this year." And you don't necessarily have to give a reason why if you don't want to, and this is just an example of a boundary that you might hold this time of year.

Another example, in the realm of childcare help: so let's say a family member is regularly asking you to watch the children, and you feel like you are unable to or you feel like you want to put up this boundary. This might look like finding alternative resources, setting specific drop-off or pick-up locations in a neutral or safe space. We may say something like, "I'm glad that you feel safe to allow me to watch your children, but I will need advance notice before agreeing to watch them. If this does not work out, I can help you brainstorm other babysitters," things like that.

And something to note, these examples of boundaries involve I-statements. So you're talking about how you feel and what you would like to see for a boundary going forward, which is really important. And it helps the boundary more or less stick, because it's not accusatory in any way.

Another example of a boundary you might want to hold is contact with an abuser through others. So you might have a family member who is regularly telling you and updating you about what your abuser is up to, and you might feel like you don't want to be involved in that topic of conversation, or you don't want to be informed about anything involving that person. An example of what you might say could look like, "I understand that you're trying to be helpful, but it causes me harm when I hear how my abuser is doing. In the future, I'd prefer not to know about this." So then all of this is to say, this is about drawing that line and figuring out what would be crossing the line. And you don't have to take up any of these boundaries that I gave examples of if that's not sustainable for you, but these are just a couple of examples of what setting healthy boundaries might look like.

KRYSTAL: Thank you, and the second choice we are going to visit today is talking about re-evaluating the relationship. So as adults, we recognize that family members are just people, but they're also not necessarily healthy people at times. So, we need to take a step back and ask ourselves, "if these people weren't my immediate family, my biological family (however you identify as family), would I choose for them to be a part of my life? In contrast, are there others that I've chosen to be in my life that feel more like family?" Again, family is how you label it: that's not the same for everybody.

This prompts us to consider the role these family members play in our life, and whether this relationship is sustainable. It is not selfish to have very strict boundaries with family, and it isn't selfish to decide to take a break from that relationship, or potentially walking away from it entirely. You may have been told that you have to commit to a sense of loyalty within your family, regardless if they have harmed you or not. Sharing DNA does not come with an entitlement to cause harm. Your needs and emotional well-being are important, and you have a choice in the relationship you hold. But it's very important to consider your safety and well-being in making this decision. Is it safe to do so? Will stepping away decrease your quality of life? For example, if you step away from family, will your essential needs be met still? You know your situation the best and you

ultimately will have to make the best choice for yourself during this time of re-evaluation.

MARISSA: And the third option here, and ultimately I feel like this encompasses what we've been talking about already, is reclaiming power. It is not your job nor is it possible to “fix” your family members, but you do have the power to mend, heal, assert boundaries within family, and ultimately choose who you consider to be family. It is within your right to forgive those who have hurt you, but it is not a requirement, and forgiveness does not mean you condone the behaviors and or the harm that was done to you. Forgiveness can be a bit of a release for yourself if that's something that you feel applies, but again, it is within your right to forgive and it is within your right to not forgive as well.

Again, you can decide as an adult who is a part of your life and who is not. And this is difficult, right? But this is an empowering choice to make for yourself as well. And if you are a child at this time, you still do have the right to say no to things that are harmful to you. None of this diminishes you as a person, it does not make you weak if you forgive, and it does not make you cruel if you choose not to forgive either. So again, all of this is about reclaiming your own power, right, and making the choices for yourself that you feel comfortable in, and realizing that you have a voice within all of your relationships, even family.

KRYSTAL: And the key to all of this—whether you're choosing one of the three options we've provided to you, or just taking a minute to reflect on your family and your family dynamic and where you fit in—is patience. So take the time to identify and express emotions appropriately. Don't neglect sensitivity to yourself. Develop healthy ways to express these emotions. Coping skills are an asset to individuals, and you will have to determine what's best for yourself. Feel angry: that is definitely a normal emotion, but place responsibility for what has happened, where it belongs. If you are taking personal responsibility for feeling anger, then use those I-statements. If it's not something that is attributed to you to feel angry, it's okay to continue to use those I-statements, but to say “I feel angry because...”

Self-care: take the time you need for yourself, and more so than ever. You cannot pour from an empty cup. It's going to take some time but begin the work of trusting others, recognize others' limitations, accepting whatever support they can offer. You have the ability to set those boundaries and how you begin to trust others and practice healthy communication. So again, I said it earlier and I'm going to say it again: healthy communication, communication in general, is the fundamental building block for any healthy relationship.

Most importantly, reach out for help. Outside support offers an objective perspective and affirmation so you can trust your own reactions. But no matter what you decide to

do regarding the relationships within the family, be kind to yourself and know that it will take time to make a decision, then to move forward with it, and then to heal from the trauma.

MARISSA: Absolutely and once again, thank you Krystal for joining me today to talk more on this. Reminder to the folks listening here, we will be including that visual of the different types of boundaries, and we're also going to include what's called a relationship spectrum. We've brought it up before in the context of intimate relationships, but this is one that we adapted to further display what healthy or unhealthy, even abusive relationships might look like for family.

Thank you so much for joining us to learn more about Boundaries Within A Family Dynamic. Our next session will be about Wintertime Self-Care, with our Director of Shelter and Transitional Living, Jessi.

The Women's Center welcomes and serves survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration status, recognizing that their unique experience informs the perspective of each person.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org

Thank you and be well.