

Women in Relationships: The Role of Boundaries

Boundaries are all about relationships. From the simplest to the most complex, the clues are found in what is learned in childhood. In our society, it is often taken for granted that women will take care of others, even as small children. Rewards in the form of praise or simply being noticed are given for helping others, for making someone proud, for not causing trouble, for not making demands or requests. Notice that none of these things help the child form an idea of who she is or how she is loved and valued in her own right.

What Defines Self?

Start with an attempt to define Self. Most women define themselves by their roles: wife, mother, daughter, etc. In varying degrees, it is also age, gender, and work-life. Most of these roles are things that shift and change. And when they do, many women struggle.

How Do We Define Boundaries:

The next step is to define Boundaries. Simply put, they are what separate us from the world. It is that place where a person stops and the other person begins. That place is formed in childhood and carried out into the world. It becomes such a pattern of thinking and behaving that most are not even aware of how it affects their lives.

Take a Look Deeper:

It calls for a closer look, this definition of Boundaries. What does it mean, “separates us from the world”? There is evidence that many people assume that the world owes them a living, or certain privileges, or to always treat them fairly. Where is the line of separation? What does it mean, “where a person stops and the other begins”? It means that a person can define themselves in their own terms – how they feel, what they think, and how they behave – outside of their relationships and roles.

The line between Self and the world, or Self and others is often blurred. The child is forced to look to others to mirror back to her a definition of who she is. Was that a “good girl”, a “nice

girl”, perhaps a “pretty girl”, a “bad girl”, or a “stupid girl”? It is easy to see how the picture comes together.

Two of the ways this can play out in a person’s life is by striking out at others or pulling inside. Either way, lifelong unhappiness can result. Nowhere is there firm ground. There is no place to stand with a sense of power, without always having to react to something. There is no pool of strength to draw from when life inevitably shifts and changes.

Consider that the pool has always been there and it has been covered over with conflicting messages. The mirror that many caregivers used was more about their issues than a statement of who the child was. With the innocence of a child, the story was believed. Now, however, the tools are available to write a new story:

Blueprint for Change

- With awareness of your stumbling blocks, you have an idea of where you need to focus efforts in your decision to make a change
- Know what your limits are and work within that as you gain strength
- Start with small steps in setting limits of what you can tolerate from others
- Congratulate yourself on small victories and be patient as you learn this new skill
- Get help from an impartial advocate for guidance and support

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