

Boundary & Relationship Self-Assessment

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One of the keys to a successful intimate relationship is establishing healthy boundaries. Boundaries are the limits that partners establish about how they will be treated and the expectations they set about how they will safeguard one another. Two crucial areas of boundary setting in intimate relationships involve establishing acceptable containment and protection boundaries (Real, 2007).

In setting containment boundaries, partners share expectations and forge agreements about how they will limit their negative reactivity (anger, contempt, righteousness, etc.) that compromises the closeness in their relationship. In setting protection boundaries, partners express their expectations and establish agreements about how they will assert themselves in the face of adverse expressions of disregard (putdowns, reprisals, shaming, etc.) that marginalize their respect for one another.

The containment dimension of boundary setting is a necessary requirement for closeness because without exercising restraint partners are at risk of imposing themselves and being invasive with one another. Similarly, the protective dimension is essential for individuality because it serves as a functional barrier to ensure that their core sense of self remains intact (Real, 2007).

In healthy relationships, partners flexibly adjust their boundaries to achieve the balance of individuality and intimacy they need in their relationship (Gottman, 1999). However, in unhealthy relationships, partners set their boundaries in a fixed manner so that they continuously struggle with under-involvement (sacrificing intimacy) or over-involvement (sacrificing individuality) in their interactions.

When partners rigidly take a one-up or one-down position in response to these struggles, it is most often associated with their own defenses and insecurities. The one-up position is exemplified by persistent self-centeredness where partners overinflate their self-worth; the one-down position is characterized by persistent self-deprecation where partners underinflate their self-worth (Real, 2007). Both types tend to be either too thick or too thin-skinned and rigidly set their boundaries so they are susceptible to being overly sensitive or insensitive in their conflictual interactions with one another.

1. Your boundary transgressions in conflicts with your partner typically involve: (*check all that apply*):
 - Yelling & Screaming
 - Name-Calling
 - Shaming or Humiliating
 - Telling Your Partner What He or She Should Do, Think, or Feel
 - Making Agreements and then Breaking Them
 - Making Up Fabrications to Justify My Position
 - Dismissing Your Partner's Interpretations

2. Place a “X” anywhere on the scale below that best represents how well you set your *containment boundaries* with your partner.



3. Place a “X” anywhere on the scale below that best represents how well you set your *protection boundaries* with your partner.



Losing Strategies

Partners with unhealthy boundaries typically find themselves in recurring power struggles repeating the same losing strategies over and over again. There are five major losing strategies that partners typically employ in their futile efforts to influence one another. These losing strategies consist of: (1) Needing to be Right, (2) Being Overly Controlling, (3) Expressing Unbridled Emotion, (4) Reacting with Retaliation, and (5) Engaging in Withdrawal (Real, 2007).

The losing strategy of Needing to be Right involves wanting to be correct above the desire to preserve the intimacy in the relationship. When this approach is taken, solutions to problems in relationships are sacrificed to preserve the ego needs of the partners. When their boundaries are the most rigid, being right for these people gets typically expressed in righteous indignation. Another related failing strategy to being right is Being Overly Controlling. When these partners are in control mode, they try to minimize the discrepancy between what they want and what they have by constantly trying to get their other partners to think and behave in a manner that is in line with their own interests.

When their boundaries are the most rigid, these people cajole and bully their way through relationships. In their efforts to be right and exert control, partners can also take a one-up and/or one-down position by expressing their rawest Unbridled Emotions toward one another. These partners tend to see the unfettered expression of their feelings—particularly their righteous feelings—as an inalienable right. At its extreme, they often impose their own emotional reactions onto their partners without regard for their feelings and sensitivities.

Identify the losing strategies you most typically employ in your relationship with your partner (*check all that apply*):

- Needing to be Right
- Being Overly Controlling
- Expressing Unbridled Emotion
- Reacting with Retaliation
- Engaging in Withdrawal

4. Identify which of the above losing strategies are the hardest on your partner:
5. There usually is a central negative core image (NCI) that you have about your partner (in which he or she is a control freak, selfish, approval junkie, worry wart, cold fish, etc.) that drives many of your adverse responses. Assuming this to be the case, specify the NCI you have for your partner.

Winning Strategies

A key to establishing healthy boundaries is replacing losing strategies with winning ones. Five major winning strategies in this regard are: (1) Focusing on Requests, (2) Speaking Out with Kindness, (3) Responding with Generosity, (4) Empowering your Partner, and (5) Cherishing the Relationship. The first two of these winning strategies focus on partners securing more of what they want from one another and the second two strategies concentrate on partners being more responsive to one another's needs. The last winning strategy involves both partners actively working to enrich their intimate relationship (Real, 2007).

Instead of focusing on what goes wrong, shifting to Focusing on Requests invokes partners to concentrate on what they want to go right. While tempting, providing a critique of what goes wrong more often than not bogs the partners down in a criticize-defend downward cycle of interaction that inevitably leads them into gridlock. The prevalence and futility of this dysfunctional pattern are well-documented in the couple therapy literature (Gurman, Lebow, & Snyder, 2015). In addition, a closely allied strategy is Speaking Out with Kindness. This second strategy involves partners clearly making their needs known in a respectful manner, providing constructive feedback and engaging in damage repair when things go wrong, and letting go of the outcomes when it doesn't go their way. All of these behaviors require partners to be assertive, patient, and forgiving.

Responding with Generosity entails partners making sure they give one another the benefit of the doubt. At the behavioral level, this means that partners engage in empathetic listening, make every effort to acknowledge the truth of what they have heard, and take responsibility for whatever role they may have played in contributing to the disconnections that take place in their relationship. A highly complementary aspect of these efforts is the winning strategy of Empowering Your Partner. Essentially, this strategy consists of partners efforts to provide ongoing caring and appreciation for one another. The implementation of these last two strategies highlight the premier importance of their attachment and they provide powerful disincentives to taking one-up or one-down positions with one another.

Finally, Cherishing the Relationship is an all-encompassing strategy that keeps the primacy of the relationship at center stage. In this strategy, the partners continuously work to check their egotistical needs to be right over their generative needs to be together. By implementing this strategy, it's not that they end up sacrificing their autonomy to maintain their togetherness; it's that they set their boundaries in such a manner that they can cooperate with one another to enrich their relationship so they can both get what they need.

6. The winning strategies you would most like to implement in your relationship with your partner are:
(check all that apply):
- Focusing on Requests
 Speaking Out with Kindness
 Responding with Generosity
 Empowering your Partner
 Cherishing the Relationship
7. Identify which of the above winning strategies provide you the most satisfaction in your relationship with partner?

References

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