

Taking the Same-As Position: Setting Healthy Boundaries in Intimate Relationships

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Fueled by the groundbreaking research in communications and relationships, the field of couple and family therapy played a major role in establishing the relational basis of mental health (Gurman, 2015). As part of this emphasis on relationships, couple and family therapists focused on establishing healthy boundaries as a means of maintaining personal and interpersonal well being. This article discusses the boundary model that couple therapist Terry Real (2007) has developed and how it provides a useful means for understanding and enhancing intimate relationships.

What are Boundaries?

At the most abstract systemic level, boundaries are simply the borders that distinguish any system from its environment (Flood & Carson, 1988). At the human level, just as the skin serves as the physical border that demarks individuals from their surrounding environment, so do the unique identities of individuals function as the psychological borders that distinguish themselves from others in their environment. At the functional level, these borders serve as the means by which humans differentiate themselves in their relationships with others (Bowen, 1978).

Real's Model of Boundaries

Just as a good fence serves as barrier to both contain what's inside it and to protect against what's outside it, Real (2007) posits that healthy psychological boundaries enable partners in intimate relationships to better contain their impulses and to preserve the core sense of themselves in their interactions with one another. Containment boundaries help partners regulate the negative reactivity (rage, contempt, righteousness, etc.) that compromises their closeness; protection boundaries help partners shield themselves from the negative influences (demands, reprisals, shaming, etc.) that undermine their autonomy in the relationship. Real contends that the containment dimension of these boundaries is a necessary requirement for closeness because without exercising restraint intimate partners are at risk of imposing themselves and being invasive with one another. Similarly, he argues that the protective dimension of these boundaries is also essential for autonomy because it serves as a functional barrier to ensuring that their core sense of self remains intact.

Real further proposes that self-esteem, a central component of psychological identity, is a major driver in determining the degree to which partners set containment and protection boundaries. He defines self-esteem as the capacity of people to recognize their inherent self-worth despite their flaws and limitations. When partners possess this capacity, he contends they are able to take a same-as position with one another in that they can assert themselves and represent their core self while still treating their partners as emotional equals. He argues that partners who lack this capacity are not only unable to recognize their own inherent self-worth, but they are also unable to acknowledge it in their mates as well. He also points out these

deficits are typically accompanied by rigid boundaries that are either diffused or closed such that their self-esteem is subject to aggrandizement or diminishment.

Boundaries that are rigid don't fluctuate as they do in healthy relationships. In healthy relationships, partners flexibly adjust their boundaries to achieve the requisite levels of autonomy and intimacy they need in their relationship. 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 autonomy) in their interactions. Real's insight is that rigidity in intimate relationships is directly connected to the self-esteem of the partners when it becomes aggrandized or diminished. Aggrandized self-esteem is exemplified by persistent self-centeredness where partners overinflate their self-worth; diminished self-esteem is characterized by persistent self-deprecation where partners underinflate their self-worth. These partners tend to be too thick- or thin-skinned and rigidly set their boundaries so they are susceptible to being overly sensitive or insensitive in their interactions with one another.

According to Real, intimate partners are able to function optimally when they possess secure self-esteem and set firm boundaries. When partners function in this capacity, they are able to set their boundaries so that they maintain both their self-worth and intimacy without sacrificing one for the other. When their functioning becomes impaired, partners tend to be insecure in their self-esteem and they function with either too diffused or closed boundaries. Depending on their particular boundary configuration, partners seeking to improve their relationship need to examine their insecurities and the dysfunctional means by which they consistently take one-up (aggrandized) and one-down (diminished) positions with one another. These insecurities are typically the product of a number of unresolved psychological problems that become reinforced by what Real refers to as "losing strategies" that keep partners in one-up and/or one-down positions with one another.

Real advocates that if intimate partners are going to improve their relationships, they must come to terms with the insecure perceptions and fears that undermine their capacity to rely on the secure parts of themselves. In addition, they must refrain from engaging in the losing strategies that keep them stuck in the one-up and one-down positions they often take with one another. Various psychological forms of mental health treatment can serve as a useful means for better managing the fears and defenses related to these insecurities, but Real proposes that understanding and correcting the losing strategies that propagate them can also be an effective means of moving forward in intimate relationships.

Losing Strategies

Real identifies five major losing strategies in intimate relationships: (1) needing to be right, (2) being overly controlling, (3) expressing unbridled emotion, (4) reacting with retaliation, and (5) engaging in withdrawal. The losing strategy of being right involves the need to be correct above the need to preserve an intimate 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. A closely 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 and unbridled frustrations toward one another. These people tend to see the unfettered expression of their feelings—particularly their righteous feelings—as an inalienable right. At its extreme, these partners often impose their own emotional reactions onto their partners without regard for their feelings and sensitivities.

Often partners turn to retaliation and withdrawal after the first three losing strategies don't work. Both of these behaviors are tit-for-tat losing strategies that are opposite sides of the same coin. In retaliation, partners make sure their disappointment and upset with one another are directly avenged in some manner. Their motto is "If you hit me, I'll hit you back twice as hard." In withdrawal, partners certainly retaliate, but they do so in an indirect and more passive-aggressive manner. Their motto is "If you hurt me, I'll disengage from you." Interesting enough, like the other losing strategies, each one of these stances can be implemented from either a one-up or one-down position. When their boundaries are particularly rigid, one of the one-down retaliatory strategies partners most often take is avenging from the victim position. As Real (2007) observes, "Whenever you offend from the victim position, you [can] wind up... being a perpetrator who feels like he's being victimized even as he attacks" (p. 52). In the case of withdrawal, while this behavior has its passive-aggressive features, it is often implemented from a one-up position where the withdrawn partner takes the stance of the superior one in the relationship.

Winning Strategies

Enhancing intimate relationships for Real is not just about partners facing their insecurities and refraining from engaging in losing strategies, it is also about replacing those losing strategies with winning ones. He advocates the following five strategies in this regard: (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 intimate partners getting more of what they want and the second two concentrate on being more responsive and giving to what partners need from one another. The last winning strategy involves partners actively working to enrich their intimate relationships. Real stresses that these five strategies are most successfully carried out when they are undertaken from a secure position with firm boundaries.

Shifting from complaints to requests is one of the most basic problem solving strategies in Real's successful relationship playbook. Instead of focusing on what goes wrong, this strategy 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 by such researchers as Gottman (1999). In addition, a closely allied strategy to this first one is speaking out with kindness. This second strategy involves partners clearly making their needs known in a respectful manner, proving constructive feedback and repairs 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 while taking the same-as position with one another.

According to Real, 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 the other partner. Essentially, this strategy consists of partners being responsive to one another's bids for connection and providing 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.

Summary

Real's model stresses the vital importance of setting healthy boundaries in intimate relationships. This capacity requires that both partners establish firm limits that serve to contain their insecure impulses and to protect their core sense of self-worth. Consistent failures to do so are typically the result of diffused and closed boundaries that lead partners to take one-up or one-down positions where they aggrandize or diminish themselves in their relationships. Moreover, it is by addressing their insecurities and by letting go of their losing strategies and adopting the winning ones that partners can establish same-as positions—positions of emotional equality that enable them to achieve a balance between autonomy and togetherness in their relationship.

References

- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Aronson.
- Flood, R., & Carson, E. (1988). *Dealing with complexity: An introduction to the theory and applications of systems science*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Real, T. (2007). *The new rules of marriage*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Boundary Assessment

Name _____

Date _____

Instructions: Please assess the boundaries you typically set and the ensuing patterns of interaction you engage in with your partner. There are no right or wrong answers in this assessment. Try to be as honest and thoughtful as you can.

- Place a “X” anywhere on the scale below that best represents where you set your containment boundaries with your partner.

I-----I-----I
 Diffused Firm Closed

- Place a “X” anywhere on the scale below that best represents where you set your protection boundaries with your partner.

I-----I-----I
 Diffused Firm Closed

- Identify the losing interaction 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

Identify which ones of these losing interaction strategies cause you the most dissatisfaction in your relationship:

- Identify the winning interaction strategies you most typically employ in your relationship with your partner (check all that apply):

- Focusing on Requests
- Speaking Out with Kindness
- Responding with Generosity
- Empowering your Partner
- Cherishing the Relationship

Identify which ones of the above winning interaction strategies cause you the most satisfaction in your relationship:

- What changes do you believe you need to make in the ways in which you interact and set boundaries so you can be more in a same-as position with your partner? Be as specific as you can.

6. Place an "X" anywhere on the scale below that best represents the extent to which you think your partner disagrees or agrees with the responses you have provided in this assessment.

I-----I-----I
Disagrees Disagrees/Agrees Agrees