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A Partner's Guide to Setting Boundaries Part 4

How to Communicate Boundaries

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Boundaries are something that we hear about and want to maintain in a healthy way in our relationships. But we often feel lost when it comes time to actually communicate our boundaries and enforce them. People sometimes fear hurting another's feelings in the process of setting a boundary with them. In other cases, people may clearly state their boundaries, but lack the ability to enforce any consequences when their boundaries are not respected. For partners of sex addicts, boundaries are a method of ensuring safety during the initial stages of recovery. Both partners and addicts have a right to set boundaries. This process can feel new and foreign, and may become confusing. Here is a helpful guide to give you some ideas about how and when to set boundaries.

1. How and when to set your boundary.

The phrasing, tone and timing of your boundary communication is abundantly important. When letting someone know that you need to set a specific boundary, you want to be able to tell them during a calm time without becoming angry or upset. Boundaries are, in essence, requests for safety, and asking for them in anger may make the receiver of your request reluctant to honor it. Find a time when you and the other person can both be open to having a conversation about your need for a boundary. Give them some background about why you feel you need the boundary, just take an accusatory tone as that may put the other person on the defensive. One way to avoid this is to use "I" statements.

2. Speak softly and carry a big stick.

Have you ever heard someone complain that they feel like a broken record? They keep communicating their boundaries, but their boundaries are continuously violated. What are they doing wrong? Well, this is often an indication that either there are no consequences for the violation of boundaries, or the consequences that are in place are not being enforced. You shouldn't have to feel like a broken record and you shouldn't have to feel compelled to raise your voice to have your needs heard. Determine what the consequences will be if one of your boundaries is violated and enforce it consistently. Make sure it is a feasible and realistic consequence that can be enforced at any time (i.e. sleeping in separate rooms for some time, cutting off access to social media, no physical touch until you feel safe again, etc.). If you are consistently enforcing your consequences to boundary violations, you will not have to repeat yourself or raise your voice. You will be able to communicate your boundary calmly one time and receive compliance. When you get into a habit of repeating yourself and not following through with your

consequences, you risk not being taken seriously and having your request dismissed. Much like the boy who cried “wolf”.

3. The both/and dilemma.

Just because you are requesting a boundary, does not mean you do not love the person you are setting the boundary with. You can love someone and have a boundary with them at the same time. This is sometimes difficult for the receiver of the boundary to understand. People may feel rejected or pushed away if you try to set a boundary with them, but this is their own fragility speaking. If you are communicating your boundaries in a calm and loving way, the receiver of your boundaries should be able to manage their own neediness and respect or honor your request. It is not your job to take care of their sensitive emotions at the expense of you feeling safe with them. So remember, you can be firm and loving, and you can be both at the same time.

4. A sample script.

Here is a sample script for you to use when communicating your boundaries in a loving way:

I feel __ (negative feeling) _____ when you __ (behavior) _____ because __ (reason) _____, and I would like to feel __ (positive feeling) __ with you instead. In order for me to get there, I need __ (boundary) _____ from you. If you cannot do this, I will feel unsafe and I will need ____ (consequence) _____ until I am able to feel safe again.

Example: I feel unsafe and uncomfortable when you look at other women in a sexualized way because it reminds me of how you used to act around potential acting out partners and it triggers me. I would like to feel safe and connected with you when we go out in public instead. In order for me to get there, I need you to minimize how much you look around at other women when we go out. If you cannot do this, I will feel unsafe and I will need you to sleep in a separate room from me and not watch me undress until I am able to feel safe again.

Practice developing your own script here. Remember, you can have more than one boundary:

I feel _____ when you _____
because _____. I
would like to feel _____ with you instead. In order for me to
get there, I need _____
_____ from you. If you cannot do this, I will feel unsafe and I will need _____ until I am
able to feel safe again.

5. Revisit your boundaries regularly.

As you spend more time in recovery, your needs and boundaries may change. This is normal. Revisit your boundary list on a regular basis with your spouse/partner and discuss how you feel you are doing with each one. You may want to keep a boundary in place, edit it, make it broader, narrow it down, or eliminate it altogether if you feel a certain behavior has disappeared or if you are no longer triggered by it. Much like an addict's 3 circles are constantly evolving, so should your boundaries be based on the progress you are making. You can also use your boundaries and how you are feeling about them as a check-in with your spouse/partner. Talk about the ones that are being respected and express how that makes you feel, and discuss how you can feel safer in certain areas by communicating new needs or boundaries in other areas.

6. Both partners and addicts have a right to set boundaries

Many addicts find themselves feeling like they have to tolerate whatever type of treatment they receive from their partners after their partners discover their sex addictions. While an addict has a lot of repair work to do to regain your trust, they have the right to not be dehumanized, humiliated, or abused. As painful as betrayal trauma is, it does not buy anyone the right to be abusive. The addict behaved in a secretive and hurtful manner, but they are still a human being and they have the right to be treated with respect. An addict can request a boundary from a partner to not be abused by asking their partner to not engage in name calling, cussing, physical violence, or humiliation in the form of public disclosure of the addict's addiction to all of the addict's acquaintances. Disclaimer: This right is not to be abused by the addict to silence the partner or to avoid important or difficult conversations as the partner is already hurt by their actions and may have been manipulated in this way while the addict was active in his/her addiction.

If you are having a difficult communicating, setting, or maintaining boundaries in your relationship, or if your boundaries are consistently being violated, consider addressing this in a couples therapy session with a qualified and experienced therapist. Another helpful tip is to have a list of activities or behaviors that promote feelings of safety and closeness to engage in with your spouse/partner so that this process does not feel too restrictive. Keep in mind that boundaries are a necessary part of a healthy relationship. For couples who are in recovery from sex addiction, boundaries are not only necessary for the relationship to be healthy but they are a crucial element of rebuilding trust and safety.