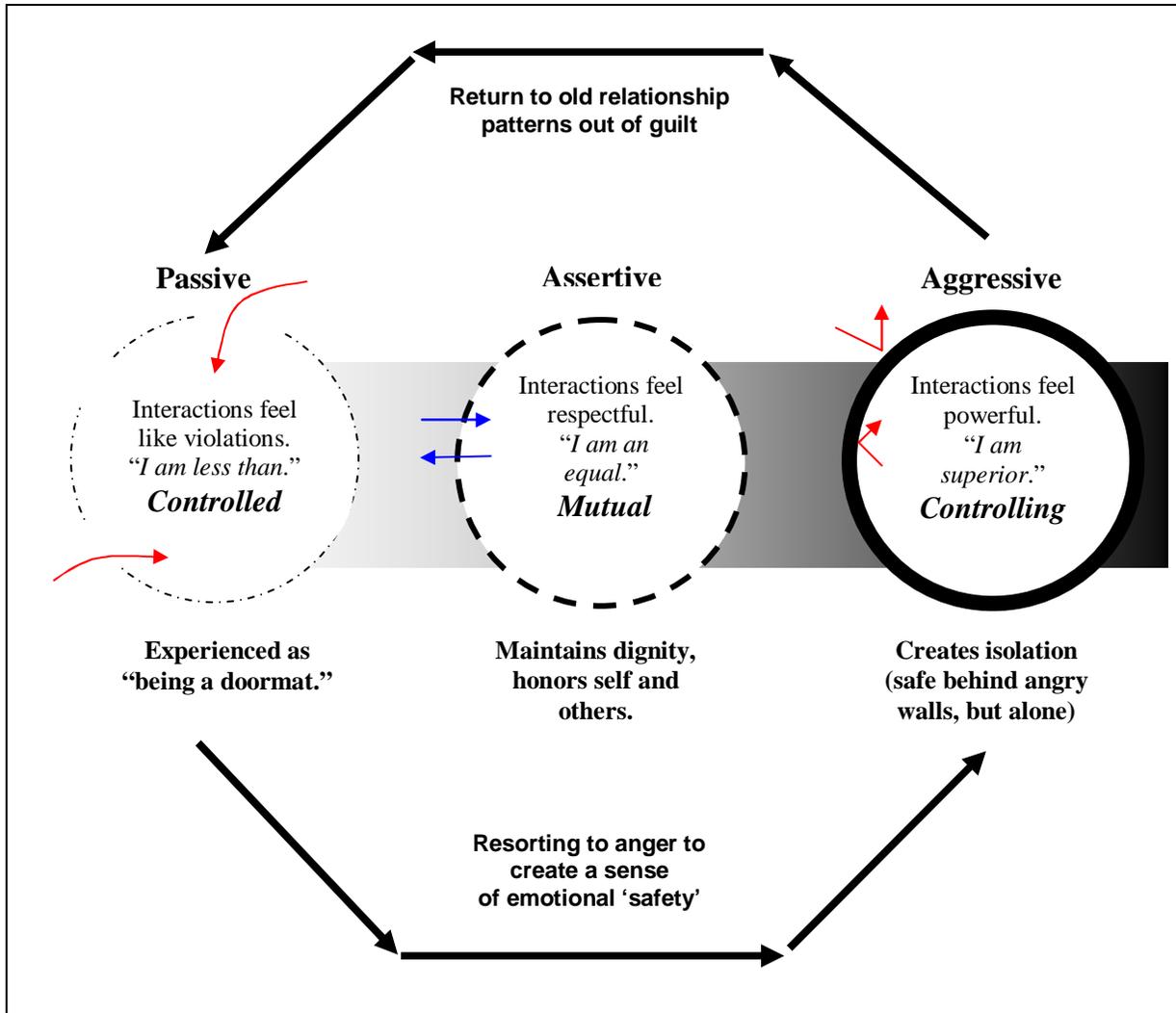


# Healthy Boundaries

**Boundaries.** We learn about boundaries beginning in our earliest years. Our families of origin set the stage for our adult lives and how we manage our boundaries. What are they? How do we express them? How are they set and, once set, how do we maintain them? Learning about healthy boundaries (external as well as internal boundaries) is central to restoring health to an unhealthy relationship.



**Non-Assertive-to-Overly-Assertive Cycle.** If a person is in a pattern of passive behavior it can soon begin to feel very violating and becomes intolerable. In an attempt to create more relational safety a passive person is likely to quickly flip into anger as noted by the lower arrows (in the above diagram). However, as a long term solution, anger and insult creates relational aloneness that eventually drives us out of our anger back to what we know to do—to give up our harsh boundaries for the well worn passive ones. The real solution is to discover how to quit cycling from one extreme to the other in our behavior and to learn to live more in the middle. For many, healthy assertiveness in a new experience that must be learned. If the relationship is too dangerous emotionally or otherwise to have assertive boundaries it may mean that the relationship is abusive and help is needed.

**Boundaries defined<sup>1</sup>:** "It's a property line." It defines what belongs to you and what you are responsible for. It is the line around the stuff inside you that makes you uniquely you (such as personal feelings and emotions, hopes and dreams, opinions and preferences, personal time, your physical body, values, morals) and marks it off as private property. Boundary lines help us to not cross into another person's business uninvited, and to recognize when someone is inappropriately crossing into ours.

<sup>1</sup> These notes are adapted from "Boundaries," John Townsend, Ph.D., an AACC audio interview.

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**Boundaries and relationship.** In unhealthy boundaries, there is a fear of saying 'no' because it would result in loss of relationship—the love goes away. You can only say 'yes' if you want to stay connected. If you say 'no' the connection is threatened or taken away. Healthy boundaries breathe, as represented by the dashed-line circle. They let expression out, and relational interactions in. Boundaries are the “skin” of how you relate. Skin allows us to go out into the world and be active there because the vital organs are protected by the skin. Toxic contaminants are not allowed in. Boundaries do the same job relationally. This is how we manage to stay in relationships and work on them. Are boundaries are our “suit” to go into troubling situations and go to work—safely.

**Purpose of boundaries in relationship.** Boundaries serve the purpose of protecting love and caring in relationship, freeing the person to express love, to serve someone, to give to someone without being taken advantage of or abused. Boundaries structure the relationship, setting up healthy and appropriate 'rules' (the guidelines and limits that keep *balance* in the relationship). Boundaries provide protection for the individual through safety in the relationship.

**Boundaries, what are the risks?** Why do we avoid healthy boundaries? It is usually because we have learned that others will punish us if we try to have healthy boundaries. This creates fears: (1) *Fear of loss of relationship.* Being abandoned when the other person withdraws, pulls away, disengages. (2) *Fear of being controlled by an angry person.* Being exposed to someone else's out-of-control anger or rage. (3) *Fear of guilt.* Feeling responsible for someone else's feelings to the point of being controlled by or “held hostage” by them emotionally.

**Boundaries, the cure for co-dependence,** giving too much to someone who doesn't need to be rescued, who in reality can do for themselves. Inappropriate limits when it comes to giving, and over-giving. Rescuing and caretaking out of guilt; resentfully giving. Boundaries promote freedom in relationship. “I can stay in the relationship, express who I am, and still be loved.”

**Boundary signals.** “*Signal anxiety,*” the manageable anxiety that tells us something is going wrong with our boundaries. It is the signal that tells us it is time to set and/or maintain our boundaries. Signal anxiety is different from flooding with anxiety. With signal anxiety we are still functioning pretty well, with flooding we are overwhelmed and unable to function well. “*Anger*” is sometimes the signal that our boundaries are in danger and it is time to fight for them. “*Fear*” is sometimes the signal that our boundaries are being violated and it is time to retreat. If we listen to these signals early, our relationships won't build up with unmanageable levels of stress and conflict quite so easily.

## (10) Practical Rules of Boundaries

- (1) *Behavioral ownership.* Take responsibility for behaviors and their consequences. Result, it builds an internal sense of control (as opposed to feeling out-of-control).
- (2) *Ownership of feelings.* “I'm not in charge of or responsible for your feelings.” I am responsible for my feelings in an adult to adult manor.
- (3) *Personal power.* I only have power over myself. I can't change someone else.
- (4) *Self-respect* teaches me to respect others' boundaries.
- (5) *Healthy motives* increase the freedom to say “no” (or “yes”) without guilt.
- (6) *Not all pain is bad pain.* (Sometimes healthy boundaries come with some pain).
- (7) *Be consistent. Mean business.* Reactive phases are normal when resetting boundaries but don't get stuck there.
- (8) *Boundaries reduce anger.* Lack of boundaries builds resentments.
- (9) *Assertive boundaries aren't secret,* they are expressed and practiced.
- (10) *Boundaries help us* to show up and stay present, and give voice to our needs and preferences.

**Summary:** “The least angry people are people with good boundaries.” Boundaries help cure anger. They help us feel safe from being controlled. Boundaries help us to stay structured (hold ourselves together and hang onto our grounding) during conflicts in relationships. Healthy resilient boundaries make for healthy resilient relationships.