

Boundary Issues

© 2012 Devin J. Starlanyl

This information may be freely copied and distributed only if unaltered,
with complete original content including: © Devin Starlanyl, 2012.

A number of people have asked me to write about boundary issues. Many people without FM have problems with keeping healthy boundaries, but from what I have been told anecdotally, it sometimes may seem as if some of us with FM turn boundary issues into an art form. I haven't read anything about this in the scientific literature, and I have been unable to find any research on it in connection with FM. I have noticed it, and many care providers and patients have as well. Patients tell me that others say they have boundary problems, but they don't understand what that means. It helps to understand something if you want to change it. I'm no authority on boundary issues. I turned to the book "Boundary Power: How I Treat You, How I Let You Treat Me, How I Treat Myself," by Miles S. O'Neil and Charles E. Newbold. The title is an explanation in itself. Quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from that book. When someone trespasses our boundaries, they are trying to control our feelings, attitudes, behaviors, choices, and/or values. It's all about control, and can feel very manipulative. We are often unaware that we are doing it.

Boundary issues can develop young in life, especially if you are raised with a low sense of self-esteem or have to assume responsibilities that should not be yours. Boundary violations come with misunderstanding of sense of self. Some of us are doormats, and we let others walk all over us. We may have been victims of a wide variety of abuse. We may have grown up bullied. We fail to learn what "...thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are appropriate to have toward others in relationships." This includes the way we talk about ourselves or others.

Normally, after we are first born, we have no differentiation between mother and self. We first learn that there is a "me" and "mine." Then we learn the meaning of "No." Then we mature and realize we are all interdependent. If we grow up.

After the first three years of life, a healthy person learns:

1. The ability to be emotionally attached to others, yet without giving up a sense of self and one's freedom to be apart.
2. The ability to say appropriate no's to others without fear of loss of love.
3. The ability to take appropriate no's from others without withdrawing emotionally." (Cloud H, Townsend J 1992. Boundaries: When to Say YES, When to Say No. Zondervan:Grand Rapids p 29.)

Boundary problems come in many forms. Some people will hurt themselves again and again tending others while insisting that they don't have time or energy to care for themselves. They help others move, help others paint their homes or do other heavy tasks, and then spend weeks recovering. They yo-yo between overdoing and collapsing, and may be unable to care for themselves properly. They'll tend other people's kids or animals and hurt themselves doing it, denying themselves the time and attention they need to care for their own needs. They often

don't pay attention to their own needs because they expect others to "fix" them. Yet they are always rescuing others. "There is a difference...between meeting the legitimate needs of others in our lives and feeling responsible for fixing them. It is not our place to fix others." We need healthy boundaries to defend ourselves against manipulation. "Persons with healthy boundaries do not allow themselves to be intruded upon." This can be very difficult in FM if we are a care provider as well as a patient and we understand the stresses that our patients are under. Keeping personal boundaries is difficult, and may seem impossible, at times, but it is critically necessary.

Abuse is also a boundary problem. In the book, they ask questions to determine if you fit into boundary issue categories, and this one includes "Do you often feel bad about yourself and put yourself down?" That is abuse of self, and also abuses those around you. "Boundaries and a sense of self go hand in hand." It's also about separation of those things that are your responsibility and what belongs to others. My t'ai chi chuan teacher says that to learn self-defense, you first need a self to defend, and you must accept that self is worth defending. Some of us never have a chance to learn that "sense of self."

We are often taught, in the home or religious setting, when not to laugh, when it is ok to cry (or not), and how not to question. We are often taught denial of self. We sometimes do such a good job that we wall ourselves out from knowing what we really feel. We have pain that others can't see, but we try to live up to their expectations anyway. That is what Travell and Simons call "the good sport syndrome." Some of us with FM have what I call "The good extreme sport syndrome." FM amplifies everything, and that includes boundary issues.

Relationship problems are often boundary problems. Some of us may interrupt conversations of strangers, and may assume that they know what others want or need. Others take offense at the slightest interruptions, although in some cultures it is common communication for women to slightly step over each other's conversations to show support. Others may take liberties with possessions or thoughts of others, or the rights of others. They will put words into the mouths of others, or the minds of others, misinterpreting other's words or thoughts and inserting their own needs instead, assuming they know what others want. Some of us do have a degree of empathy, but we must always respect other's rights without letting others abuse us. We need to ask and check with others to ensure we are interpreting correctly. That can be a challenge. "Boundaries tell us what is our business and what is not our business. It is our business what we think of ourselves and what we think of other people, but it is none of our business what others think of us (unless we have violated their boundaries and owe them amends).

People with boundary issues can be hyper sensitive, believing that everyone is against them. Some may look for an excuse to prove that you don't really care about them. If you disagree with something they say, they may take offense and cut you off entirely from the relationship. This can be very difficult in a situation where each person in a relationship remembers things slightly differently. Some people with FM have rapid anger response, or other rapid emotional overload. They can over-react with tears, screams, or other manipulatory mechanisms because that is what they have always seen or always done. "Healthy boundaries empower us to say no when we need to say no and yes when we really want to say yes."

People with boundary problems may constantly need reassuring that they are worth living. When they are not helping others, they may be in despair and need to be rescued themselves. People with boundary issues may have trouble defining what their needs are from what their wants are, and may have problems prioritizing. “Persons with healthy boundaries know how to assert themselves at appropriate times in order to stay out of the victim role.” This can be difficult when the medical care system and many other systems often contrive to victimize the chronic pain patient, but it is necessary if we are ever to rise above victimhood. We must not allow ourselves to be victimized, nor to accept the role of victim. We may often become “...unable to distinguish our own extreme or inappropriate behavior.” If someone else calls it to our attention, we may turn to ingrained manipulative behaviors, acting out inappropriately. We may punish ourselves or others, have a distorted view of how the rest of the world views us, pretend to agree when we disagree just to “get along,” or try to push our feelings on others. “We may decline to do things we really want to do for fear that we won’t do it right.”

In t’ai chi, we learn that we must be selfish to be self-less. The monk goes to the mountain to put himself in order, so that he can help humanity. In Christianity, we are told to love others as ourselves, but we often aren’t taught to love ourselves. That is an implied first step, and yet it is often looked upon as a shameful attitude. Shame is another intrusion of boundaries. Negativity also violates ourselves and those around us. “We violate ourselves by having unrealistic expectations of others.” We also violate ourselves when we have an unrealistic expectation of ourselves. Co-dependency and triangulation are examples of boundary dysfunction. “Triangulation occurs in a relationship when one person sends a message to another person through a third party, involving that third party in a situation that is clearly none of his or her business. This violates the boundaries of the third person.” We need to actively learn to accept responsibility for our own actions and feelings, and to decline to accept responsibility for others.

“A violation of emotional boundaries occurs when authorities think they have the right to say or do anything they want.” As this is being written, I can’t help but think of the presidential election and the negative attack ads. Perfect examples. “A violation of emotional boundaries occurs when we overprotect and, thereby, shame the individuality of the one being overly protected.” Wow. Think about that one. I want my books and my writings and support groups to be about empowerment. I want to give my readers the tools that they need. My readers have the responsibility to use them, and use them well. I accept that I can’t fix anybody but myself.