

## **Boundaries**

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Boundaries is a common topic in the field of counseling psychology, and is a very important area of discussion in cult recovery. We include a session on boundaries at the AFF Cult Recovery Workshop in Colorado every year. A boundary, simply defined by Webster, is anything serving to indicate a limit or end. In human terms, a boundary could be defined as knowing where one person ends and the next person begins.

For many of us in the cult experience boundaries were deliberately and systematically removed. If one examines Lifton's criteria for thought reform, several include a breaking down of individual boundaries. Milieu control includes an eventual controlling of one's internal environment as well as external environment. The demand for purity and the need to constantly be monitoring oneself or be monitored, to match up to the group's standards, puts someone else in charge. Confession of sins, real or imagined, certainly blurs or eliminates the difference between private and public. Doctrine over person makes the group goal/control more important than the individual, so that the individual essentially dissolves. And then, of course, in dispensing of existence the person can dissolve completely! These are examples of one small portion of how Lifton's criteria apply to boundaries.

Having lost a basic sense of personhood or individuality makes it quite incredible that anyone ever leaves a cultic group. I have the utmost respect for anyone who has accomplished this! It is, in my mind, a tribute to the human spirit, that even a small piece of whom a person is or was pushes through. It is often a seemingly insurmountable task to rediscover oneself or rebuild oneself, yet we do it. Establishing boundaries is a large part of that process. As we move back into society, into the real world, one of the things that is quite overwhelming is just how much of it there is! Where we didn't have boundaries between us in the group, there was often a very firm boundary between the group and the outside world. And now there is none, nor do we have a very strong sense of self.

So, how does a person begin to have a separate sense of him or herself again? One tool I have found very useful is from Michael Langone, who draws several concentric circles, like a target. On the very outside of the circles are people who you don't know, you may never know, and you may not want to ever know. They have no need to know about you, nor do you need to know them. Then, in the outside circle might be people that you recognize, that you may get to know by name, like store clerks, mechanics, waiters, but they are distant acquaintances. You don't know much more than their name and they know about that much about you. Then, the next circle might include another level of acquaintances, like coworkers, neighbors. The next circle might move into people you would call friends. They might be family members, people you spend time with at work and have gotten to know, people you like and spend recreational time with. Then there might be a small circle of close friends. This might be just a handful of people in a lifetime. It might be family, spouses. Family might not be in the close circles, either! Then, in the middle is you. No one else. There are things the others don't know and may never know. There are things that you will only share with those in the inner circle if they prove worthy. There is a difference between private and secret also – private being things in your heart that need very special care, and secrets being things held in fear and shame. Hopefully, in time, the inner circle where you stand will only hold private things. Each of the circles is a boundary. And every other person has a similar set of circles. How you begin to find out who will be in which circle is like a dance, going back and forth slowly, seeing who will respect the boundary and who will not. You also get to demonstrate your trustworthiness by honoring

the other person's boundaries. As ex-cult members, we can tend to dump our whole life at someone's feet without having established trust and respect first, as we build a relationship through the levels of a person's boundaries. This way of considering boundaries applies to many situations of abuse, where boundaries have been broken.

Another very important consideration is to look at healthy and unhealthy boundaries. Mady Tobias and Janja Lalich outline this well in *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds*. In general, unhealthy boundaries have to do with lack of permission and respect. It might be that someone wants to be close when he or she hasn't earned that privilege through the dance of friendship first. It might be to the severity of physical or sexual abuse. It might be giving too much to someone else at one's own expense. Healthy boundaries would have to do with self respect and self knowledge. It takes time and practice! Healthy boundaries would be saying no to something you don't want or don't like. It would be checking to see if you feel safe with a person or situation. It would include giving if you have the energy to give, and if giving doesn't deplete you. It would include trusting your perceptions and acting on them. It would include accepting another as different, and even accepting that someone else may not like you.

Probably one of the best signs our boundaries are being restored, oddly enough, is that we can tolerate ambiguity. We are secure enough in ourselves to accept others, and don't need the world to be black and white anymore. Our boundaries become more like a picket fence, although at first they may have to be like a brick wall. Our ability to choose is restored. Our ability to be equal, not better than or less than, is in place.

There are many books on this subject in addition to *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds*. It is worth spending some time considering this to heal well from the cult experience.

***Nancy Miquelon*** is a licensed professional counselor in Colorado and a clinical mental health counselor in New Mexico. She has been practicing psychotherapy for nineteen years, specializing in the treatment of trauma. Nancy is a cofounder and current board member of reFOCUS, a former cult member referral and support network. She is also a regular workshop facilitator at the International Cultic Studies Association Recovery Workshop in Colorado. Nancy was a member the Emissaries of Divine Light for thirteen years. She now resides and works with her husband in Dulce, New Mexico, with the Jicarilla Apache Nation. She is currently a child and family counselor in the Dulce Middle School.

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