

Boundaries & De-Escalating Hostility

Description:	This session introduces balanced personal boundaries, tactics for de-escalating hostility, and skills needed to maintain a safe, welcoming atmosphere for all who attend a community program, including guests, volunteers, staff, and neighbours.
Key Terms:	Personal Boundary, Disassociation, Anger, Hostility, De-Escalation

Biblical Reflection

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the assembly of Israelites whom Cyrus the Great had allowed to return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. They were a traumatized community, still under considerable threat, characterized internally by grave disparities in wealth and status – but who were nevertheless sincerely pious and assuming that prayer and fasting would convince God to secure their future. As with all the prophets, Isaiah’s message brings with it an invitation to discomforting practices of justice that lead to greater intimacy with God and others, especially those who have been pushed to the edge of society.

Isaiah 58: 9-12 (*The Message*)

“If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people’s sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again.

Isaiah assures us that God will give us *firm muscles* and *strong bones*. As we go through today’s session, consider how your boundaries and de-escalation skills need to be strengthened so you experience *a full life in the emptiest of places*.

Boundaries 101

A personal boundary is a physical space or a conceptual limit between you and another person. Our boundaries help us know where we end and others begin. Boundaries are a crucial aspect of

mental health and well-being. They can be physical, intellectual, spiritual, sexual, or emotional. They can range from being loose to rigid, with balanced boundaries often falling somewhere in between.

Boundaries help to:

- **Define identity** – we become clear and confident with what we need and want, and help communicate to others what to expect from us
- **Protect from violations** – boundaries let in what is good and keep out what is bad, so we remain safe and able to express our true selves
- **Bring order** – without boundaries, we are unable to regulate demands, ideas, dreams, responsibilities, opportunities, pleasures, and activities, and then life can become chaotic
- **Build trust** – leaders and employers know that if individuals have good boundaries, they can be trusted to state clearly what they can and cannot do, and they welcome input and work passionately without burnout
- **Protect ourselves from other's lack of boundaries** – having clear boundaries makes it difficult for others to control us, and makes it easier for us to say no when necessary
- **Preserve our purpose and mission** – once identified, boundaries save us for the relationships and opportunities that best fit who we are
- **Protect our personal assets** – boundaries honour our knowledge, body, skills, abilities, purpose, and mission
- **Satisfy our need for self-confirmation** – by defining you and your personality¹

Ignored Boundaries

Ignored boundaries are always followed by defense mechanisms that to help protect us from future pain and suffering (See **Mental Health Module**). We can tell boundaries are being ignored if we experience one or more of the following challenges:

- **Over enmeshment** – enmeshment requires everyone do everything together, and to think, feel and act in the same way. Deviating from the family or group norms is discouraged. Uniqueness, autonomy, and idiosyncratic or unusual behaviors are unwelcome.
- **Alloofness or Disassociation** – this is a result of insecurity from real or perceived experiences of being ignored or rejected. Someone might come across as being reserved, when in actuality they are numbing their feelings to protect their from addition pain or discomfort. We feel our physical and/or emotional space is violated, but we tell ourselves it does not matter, or that if we ignore the problem, it will go away. This can result in being out of touch with our feelings about what happened, and or unable to remember what happened.
- **Detachment** – occurs when someone (or even a whole group) is distant or cannot establish connection to others. There is nothing to hold people together in healthy union. This can



¹Source: Black, J. & Enns, G. (1997) Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life. Oakland, CA. Raincoast Books

result in building walls or barriers to ensure that others do not permeate or invade emotional or physical space.

- **Victimhood or martyrdom** – with this, we identify ourselves as a violated victim and become defensive as we attempt to ward off further violation. Additionally, once we accept our victimization, we continue to feel knowingly victimized and then let others know of your martyrdom.
- **Invisibility** – this involves us pulling in or over-controlling so that others (and even ourselves), never know how we are really feeling or what we are thinking. Our goal is not to be seen or heard so that our boundaries are not violated.
- **Smothering** – we feel smothered when another is overly solicitous of our needs and interests. This cloying interest is intrusive of our emotional and physical space.
- **Lack of Privacy** – Is present when it seems to us that nothing we think, feel, or do is our own business. We are expected to report to others in our family or group all details and content of your feelings, reactions, opinions, relationships and dealings with the outside world. We begin to feel that nothing we experience can be kept in the privacy of our own domain. We begin to believe we do not have a private domain or our own space into which you can escape.²

Reasons for Not Setting Boundaries

Often, we struggle with setting boundaries because of how we attach or detach from others. If we grew up with healthy relationships, we know that boundaries are part of relating to others. If we were taught at a young age that when we said “no” we would lose connection or support from our care givers or authorities, then it is safer to always say “yes” to requests. If setting boundaries meant that we would not get some of the things that you needed like support, validation, or love, we would learn to hold other people’s real or perceived needs above our own.

This often leads to:

- Fear of hurting the others' feelings
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of losing closeness with the other person because of disapproval
- Fear of the other person's anger
- Fear that I am being selfish
- Fear of being punished by the other person

These are valid reasons to not set or hold boundaries, but living without adequate limits is exhausting, ineffective, and unsustainable. While it might feel backwards, the best way to take care of someone else is to take care of ourselves first, much like when we are on an airplane and are advised to put on our breathing mask before we help someone else.³

Building Balanced Boundaries

While these steps look simple, they are not easy and require practice.

² <http://www.livestrong.com/article/14718-building-healthy-boundaries/>

³ <https://dayspringwv.com/setting-boundaries.html>

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1. **Decide what you want-** Take time to identify your values, needs, and capacities. Use them to guide your boundary setting.
2. **Be firm (it gets easier with practice)-** Using your values, needs and capacities as your guide, be firm when you set a boundary and stick to it, even if it is uncomfortable. Giving a reason can be helpful but is not always necessary.
3. **Understand you are not responsible for the other person's reactions-** The individual to whom you must say "no" may react in all sorts of ways. You are not responsible for any of those. You are responsible for your reactions. That person is responsible for theirs.⁴

"No is a complete sentence."
-Anne Lamott

Supportive Practices for Setting Boundaries

- **Breath** – deep breathes focus us, give us a minute to think, and stop us from reacting to what is in front of us.
- **Practice saying "no"** – putting up boundaries is hard, so start small, with safe people, and grow.
- **Assemble a team** – make a list of dependable relatives, friends, colleagues, or other people you can call to help talk through challenging decisions or experiences, lend a hand with day-to-day tasks, or simply listen as you vent.
- **Practice saying "yes" to help** – try a group exercise where one person offers to do something for the other (i.e., tie their shoe, get a cup of coffee, give a hand massage, etc.), and the other practices saying "yes," and then accept the gesture.
- **Be your own caregiver** – make a list of things that you need to take care of for yourself.
- **Mindfulness practices** – these practices assist in learning how to be present in this moment and release our worries about the future or past. Search "mindfulness" on YouTube or try apps like Headspace⁵ or Calm⁶.
- **Find an outlet** – it may seem self-indulgent to take up a hobby when faced with another's needs and demands, but outlets of self-expression like writing, gardening, playing music, building, baking, or drawing, help release complicated emotions and express things you cannot say in conversations.
- **Explore tools that will help you uncover what you need** – personality tests like Myers-Briggs⁷ or personal motivation theories like the Enneagram⁸ can help learn about our capacity and how we can support others.
- **Journal** - free writing, a gratitude journal, or the daily Examine practice⁹ can help us process our experiences.

⁴ <https://dayspringwv.com/setting-boundaries.html>

⁵ <https://www.headspace.com/>

⁶ <https://www.calm.com/>

⁷ <https://www.myersbriggs.org/>

⁸ <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-descriptions>

⁹ <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

- **Make a mantra.** A short, repeated phrase can remind us of our choices, values and commitments in stressful moments. Some examples of this are "Choose discomfort over resentment" or "I am brave and safe".
- **Rehearse. Rehearse. Rehearse.** Setting and keeping boundaries is a skill. Practice saying phrases like "I can't take that on" or "My plate is full" so that you have something else to say instead of "yes".

De-Escalating Hostility

De-escalating is the act of transferring your sense of calms and genuine interest in what an agitated person wants by using respectful, clear communication and actions.¹⁰ De-escalating hostility is a skill that can be developed and includes:

- Verbal and non-verbal techniques
- Empathy, curiosity, open questions, reframing, reflective listening
- Times for assertive communication

One key to supporting individuals who are upset is to understand that anger is not the same as hostility.

- **Anger** is an emotion, often arising when one's boundaries are crossed, or needs are not met.
 - Anger can be an expression of emotional dysregulation when someone experiences more than one emotion at a time but cannot decipher one from another and feels overwhelmed
 - All people need our emotions to be validated (even hard emotions) not have someone tell us to not feel as we do.
- **Hostility** is acting on feelings like anger in a violent way.
 - While we act with as much grace and patience as possible, we prioritize a **safe setting for all** over one individual (and thus it may be necessary to ban or bar an individual from a program).
 - We cannot allow hostility or violence in a program.

Tools for De-Escalation

- **Modulate tone of voice** – Speak with a calm, cooperative, or neutral tone, the agitated person will usually mirror this response
- **Neutrality** – use calm facial expressions and relaxed body posture
- **Non-defensive posture** – hold hands in front of body, open, and relaxed
- **Minimize gesturing, pacing, and fidgeting** – these signs of nervousness can increase agitation in others
- **Eye level** – try to converse when eye level, not standing over someone, but do not force eye contact
- **Proximity**- ensure that space is given both for their comfort as well as remaining safe incase of lashing out.

¹⁰ <http://paetc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/De-escalation-PACE.pdf>

- **Show concern-** reflect empathy and compassionate care (**See Hospitality Module**)



Caring for Ourselves in Stressful Moments

If we become stressed or agitated ourselves, we can make a stressful situation worse. To care for ourselves:

- **Take time to breath** – do not just react to a stressful situation
- **Be transparent** – there are times when it is appropriate to admit we are feeling frustrated and need a minute to think
- **Get help** – engage a supervisor, co-worker, or experienced volunteer if the situation feels difficult, or you feel triggered into losing your ability to stay calm
- **Reflect** – be clear on what our responsibility is and what other's responsibilities are
- **Take a break** – take a few minutes, or even a day away from the program to decompress

Caring for Agitated individuals in Stressful Moments

When we feel threatened or triggered into strong emotion, we may react through a fight-flight response. To engage well, we must be thoughtful and caring in our response. Time and space are some of the keyways that emotions can be regulated. Below are a couple of specific ways to do this with another individual.

- **Allow space for feelings-** Giving people time to feel what they are feeling, and validate feelings if appropriate
- **Same for everyone-** Remind everyone that the rules are the same for everyone and be consistent in upholding those rules
- **Give a fair warning-** for natural consequence
- **Stand firm-** Safety must remain a priority for everyone
- **Distract and avoid-** too many confrontations with questions or noticing's that can take away from the conflict
- **Give space** – watch that the agitated individual does not feel like they are ganged up on
- **Do not feed into challenging behaviors-** Do not match their tone or level
- **Affirm your relationship-** Reminding them that you still care for them and that they will not be cut off from accessing services
- **Follow up later-** When appropriate, follow up about the situation at a later time

Organizational Responses to Stressful Situations

It is always better to be proactive, rather than reactive when caring for communities. As staff and volunteers, we are responsible for knowing the programs expectations and policies, and for alerting our supervisors when training or a new policy is needed.

Best practices for programs:

- Create policies and hold everyone to them (community agreements, schedules and signage)

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- Provide clear and consistent information to community members, volunteers and staff (i.e. Clear and visible code of conduct signage, directional signage, process signage etc.)
- Hold regular debrief with volunteers and staff to get feedback on what can be improved
- Hold everyone to the same basic expectations
- Pay attention to each other and offer support as needed

Reflect & Review

1. What are some boundaries that you find challenging to uphold?

2. What practices can you start to support yourself in boundary setting?

3. What one or two practices can you start to look at in your program to better support boundary setting or de-escalating behaviours?

Learn More

Read:	Burnout: The Secret of Unlocking the Stress Cycle- Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski The Gifts of Imperfection- Brené Brown The Body Keeps the Score- Bessel van der Kolk Try Softer- A Fresh Approach to move us out of Anxiety, stress and survival Mode and Into a Life of Connection and Joy- Aundi Kolber
Watch:	Sarri Gilman- Good Boundaries free us Brene Brown- Work of the people-“Boundaries” Brene Brown- Empathy Simon Sinek- intensity vs consistency
Listen:	On Being- Brené Brown- Strong back, soft front, wild heart The Happiness Lab- Dr. Laurie Santos- Caring What You’re Sharing TED podcast- Brené Brown and Adam Grant- Taken for Granted: Vulnerability minus boundaries is not vulnerability

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Contact churchrelations@ugm.ca to explore these ideas further.