

BOUNDARY BOSS



THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO TALK TRUE, BE SEEN,
AND (FINALLY) LIVE FREE

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CHAPTER 1



From Boundary Disaster to Boundary Master

I WAS A BRIDESMAID EIGHT times in my twenties. *Eight.*

I should have politely declined at least half of those ugly-dress experiences, but I did not know how to say no. Or, “Hell, no,” or even, “I’d love to celebrate your true love and all, but I have an urgent situation to handle.” (Like, say, scraping the bottom of my change jar for subway fare since I was a broke 22-year-old trying to make it in New York City.) How could I afford to be in a wedding party with some gals I knew from waitressing back in the day? In truth, my fears of disappointing the brides-to-be were far greater than the reality of my paltry bank account balance. I didn’t want to be seen as rude, insensitive, or, worst of all, not “nice.” If I said no, I’d be rejecting the privilege of being chosen. Who was I to do *that*?

That fear alone spurred me to shell out thousands of dollars I didn’t have (hello, credit card debt) to participate in rituals for people who wouldn’t have even made the guest list for my housewarming party (if I’d had a house, that is). Not surprisingly, I felt burdened and resentful. These secretly held emotions would crop up at bachelorette parties, rehearsal dinners, or anytime I caught a glimpse of the teal green, poofy-shouldered ’80s dresses hanging in the back of my closet, all of which I definitely would *not* wear again. For what?

The “honor” of not being able to speak my truth. Looking back, all I can say is, “F that, people.”

My perpetual bridesmaid status was symptomatic of a larger problem that millions of women deal with: unhealthy boundaries. Yes, having difficulty establishing, enforcing, and communicating healthy limits in all areas of life is practically an epidemic. The cost of bad boundaries is immense. It leads to conflict-ridden, imbalanced relationships, a lack of agency over our own time, and general malaise. You got time for that drama, mama? No, you do not.

In the case of my disordered boundaries (and probably yours, too), my fear of disappointing others got in the way of basic common sense. I *could* have chosen differently. I *could* have set parameters around how I would spend my precious time and money. I *could* have said, “No, thank you. That dress is gross, and so is your fiancé.” (He hit on me at the engagement party!) Let’s just say, I had many options at my disposal, but there was one massive obstacle to flexing my boundary muscles: I didn’t even know I had a choice.

Wherever you might be in your life, you have choices, too.

For the last two decades, I have practiced as a licensed clinical therapist, treating predominantly female clients suffering an array of boundary issues. From erratic, to too flexible, to not flexible enough, their boundaries are *disordered* in some way. Some clients are so independent and self-sufficient that they never ask for or allow others to help them do anything. They will stop cab drivers from lifting their heavy suitcase into the trunk or grocery-store baggers from bagging their groceries (things that are, literally, *their job*). “I got it, thanks,” they’ll say. Others suffer from a compulsive need to please the people in their life at the expense of their own well-being. Or overextending themselves to stay in the good graces of everyone (even people they barely like). This can materialize as saying yes when they want to say no, like agreeing to run the PTO fundraiser (again) even though they are simultaneously slammed at work and trying to sell their house.

BACK TO YOU: How Do You Relate to Boundaries?

Below are some common boundary issues. See yourself in any?

- Do you ever say yes to requests, even though your gut is saying, “No, thanks”? “Yes, I’ll show up for you (*while completely abandoning myself*). Sounds great, can’t wait!”
- Do you inconvenience yourself for other people? “Sure, I’ll watch your cat for a week because you don’t want to pay a professional!” (*Even though staying in Brooklyn adds an hour to my commute, and your cat hates me. Okay, maybe it’s mutual.*)
- If you have an issue with a pal’s behavior, do you sidestep a tough conversation by casually avoiding them? “Oh, I’d love to see you, but work is so busy!” (*Even though my schedule is wide open for my drama-free pals.*)
- Do you engage in passive-aggressive expressions of anger instead of calmly expressing your feelings? “Whatever works for you. I changed my plans based on what you said originally, but it’s totally fine!” 😊
- Are you so self-sufficient that you do everything for yourself, by yourself? “I got this!” (*Even though I am exhausted, bitter, and currently running through a mental list of who should help me based on my past generosity.*)

If you recognize yourself in any of these examples of unhealthy boundaries, rest assured you are not alone. Right now, we are gathering information about the unique way you relate to boundaries. This will illuminate where to focus your efforts.

Or they'll invite their alcoholic cousin to their birthday party even though they know it will end badly. From my professional background and personal history, I really get how *no* seems like such a simple word to say. Yet for so many, it can also be the hardest.

No matter how many memes we see in our social media feeds, such as, "No is a complete sentence!" or "You got this, gurrrrrl!" the reality of knowing and expressing our true selves is much more complex when bad boundaries have been our historical norm.

Bad boundaries are exhausting. They create dramas that suck our time and energy. As you likely already know, it takes a lot of effort to keep putting out fires in our personal lives. When we're caught up in our bad boundaries, though, we often don't realize that we're the ones who are inadvertently lighting these fires. To stop these distracting disruptions, we have to go back to our earliest influences—the scene of the crime, so to speak—where the original injuries and learning occurred.

To illustrate this concept of how original injuries lead to unhealthy boundaries and self-created conflicts, let's take a walk down memory lane. I will share a snapshot of how I moved from being a Boundary Disaster to a Boundary Semi-Disaster and finally to a full-fledged Boundary Boss. My hope is that you will recognize glimpses of your own life in my story and feel confident that you can also make the journey into Boundary Boss-dom, your way.

Watch and Learn

In my young life, I learned everything about disordered boundaries and ineffective communication from two people who had almost no life experience before they started raising kids. My mother was nineteen years old and three months into her freshman year of college when she became pregnant with my eldest sister. She dropped out of school permanently and married my father in the back office of

a Presbyterian church in Glens Falls, New York. They proceeded to have three more daughters in less than six years. I'm the youngest.

Raising us in the New Jersey suburbs, my parents modeled traditional roles. My father was the provider, a white-collar upper-management type, who golfed on the weekends, drank too much (think: *Mad Men*-level martini consumption), and expected dinner on the table when he got home from work. My mother was a loving, compassionate, and protective stay-at-home mom, who raised us and all of our friends. My father made the money, and my mother handled everything else, including running the household and taking responsibility for our well-being.

Our family, like many families, was a perfect storm of covert communication and emotional dysfunction. My parents both came from families that avoided open discussions about anything painful or problematic. And there's the heart of the matter: ineffective communication skills lead to weak or disordered boundary skills.

Though my father wasn't violent or abusive, we all feared his disapproval. My mother was careful not to upset him. My sisters and I rarely heard his deep, rumbling voice unless there was a problem. All together I probably exchanged fewer than a hundred words with him before my parents got divorced when I was thirteen.

In general, his lack of communication translated to emotional unavailability. So even when he was there, he wasn't there to be with us. "Hey, sports fans!" was code for *I'm taking over the TV to watch golf now*. My sisters and I could have been engrossed in the last five minutes of *Grease* (picture it: right before Olivia Newton-John transforms from good girl to a butt-smoking, spandex-wearing vixen), but when we heard his "sports fans" cue, we knew there was only one acceptable response. "No problem. Byeeeeeee!" None of us actually *liked* the fact that we couldn't watch the end of our movie, yet we acted like we didn't mind one bit. Speaking truthfully was not an option.

Often, the most powerful rules in families are the ones that are not explicitly stated. For example, in my family, it was crystal clear that my parents had an unspoken agreement about how each would operate: Dad was the breadwinner, and Mom was the nurturer and family manager. Perhaps the most significant silent pact in our household, though, was to avoid expressing anger directly. Just as I could sense that my ever-chipper mom was fearful of rocking the boat with my dad, I instinctively knew that anger was taboo.

Humans, even little humans, are wired to minimize exposure to perceived danger. My childhood training taught me to automatically read people and scan situations to assess the threat level to avoid conflict. *Anyone's* anger could be threatening. I actively avoided upsetting my father. Like my sisters, I didn't express my genuine feelings either. But emotions don't just—poof!—disappear because they're inconvenient or unacceptable in our family systems. They go underground. And that's not good.

In our household, four teenage girls acted out their repressed anger with door slamming, shit talking, and if my parents were out, an occasional fistfight. My older sisters also vented their anger (and the veiled feelings of the entire family system) dramatically, if indirectly, by running away, having bad boyfriends, doing drugs, and drinking. In these situations, witnessing my father's disapproval and my mother's anguish made a strong impression on me. I vowed never to be the cause of either. Not that I didn't do most of those things. I did. I just made sure that I never got caught.

Consequently, I learned to bury my true feelings. Adaptively, I transmuted them into more allowable ones (anger became sadness, for example) and ignored my gut instincts. This strategy kept me safe from disapproval and eased my primal fear of being kicked out of the clan if I dared to upend the unspoken rules. By the time I left for college, my unhealthy communication style, disordered

boundaries, and questionable coping techniques were all I knew. I was a full-fledged Boundary Disaster.

BACK TO YOU: What Were Your Forbidden Feelings?

Check the boxes next to any emotions that were discouraged, punished, or forbidden in your childhood.

- Happiness: joy, satisfaction, a sense of well-being
- Sadness: disappointment, hopelessness, disinterest
- Fear: unsafe, threatened, activated fight-flight-freeze response
- Disgust: revulsion, disapproval, rejection
- Anger: hostility, agitation, frustration

To become a successful Boundary Boss, you must allow yourself to feel *all* of your feelings. This starts with becoming aware of the ones that you'd rather not experience.

On My Own

In adulthood, my unhealthy boundary patterns continued. I became a master of indirect communication, using sarcasm, eye-rolling, and the occasional hostile lie, such as, "I said, I'm *fine!*" (Sound familiar?) I also became skilled at covert manipulation; meaning, those I was manipulating (usually my boyfriends) never realized I had my own secret agenda operating behind my it's-all-good facade. Covert manipulation ensured that I would get approval, avoid confrontation,

and keep them happy. Meanwhile, I did whatever I wanted behind the scenes, such as spending time with old flames or clubbing in the city with my sisters (and “forgetting” to mention either). Attempting to control others and situations was a bid to feel safe. This strategy worked until it didn’t. It’s no coincidence that, after struggling with authentic expression throughout my childhood, I found my way to a therapist’s couch in college and have stayed for the past thirty years.

TRUE TALK *Ineffective communication skills lead to weak or disordered boundary skills.*

I hadn’t heard of the term *boundaries* when I entered therapy. Little did I know that my disordered relationship with limit-setting was affecting every area of my life, including how I socialized and how I communicated. Since college is a time when even non-alcoholics drink alcoholically, by my senior year, I had done my share of booze-induced puking, passing out, and blacking out. My father had set an example with his excessive drinking, which my fun-loving, out-of-control older sisters had followed. Starting at age fourteen, I was doing shots right along with them. By the time I got to college, I thought my booze-induced behavior was normal. My therapist, Bev, however, did not.

After weeks of my casually mentioning my alcohol-fueled exploits, Bev dropped a bomb on me. “If you do not seek help with a twelve-step program for your drinking, I will have to terminate our relationship,” she said. *Wait, what?* Was my therapist breaking up with me?

As shocked as I was by her ultimatum, I was even more surprised at my visceral reaction to the thought of getting help: a full-body exhale. I was relieved. So relieved. Deep down, I knew the truth in my body long before my mind would even consider putting down my Miller Lite for good (don’t judge! I was in college). Booze was hindering my growth and my happiness. My self-sabotaging behavior would continue as

long as I attempted to drink away feelings of anger, sadness, and fear. With three months left of my senior year, I quit drinking.

Wide Awake

Being sober opened my eyes to the concept of healthy internal boundaries. Internal boundaries refer to how well or how poorly you regulate your relationship with yourself (more on them in chapter 7). For example, do you listen to your own needs first? Are you responsible for your behavior? For the first time in my life, I actually examined how I related to myself. I didn't even know having a relationship with one's self was a *thing*.

I also didn't realize that to create healthy boundaries in any other relationship, I needed to be a master of my internal boundaries and my relationship with myself. Now that alcohol wasn't clouding my perspective, I started to ask myself some difficult questions, such as:

- Do I keep my word and follow through on the commitments I make to myself? (Not really.)
- Do I keep my word to others in my life and do what I say I will do? (Not always.)
- How is my self-discipline, time management, impulse control, and emotional self-regulation? (Needs work.)

I was 22 years old with a ton of work ahead of me, but I was clear-eyed for the first time in my life. Therapy had inspired the most profound epiphany to date: no matter what cards I'd been dealt in this life, I could not only request a new hand, I could create an entirely new game.

That realization fueled my imagination and my transformation.

Passionate about self-exploration and personal improvement, I continued to see my first therapist, Bev, for years after graduation.

Every Monday night, like clockwork, I caught the 7 p.m. commuter train out of Penn Station in New York to her small town in Long Island, getting back to my apartment around midnight. That weekly effort directly reflected my belief that if I stayed on the self-discovery, self-healing course, my life would continue to get better. Yes! I could *choose* to live my life in a more empowered way. Still, I had miles to go in grasping exactly what that meant on a daily basis.

Smoke and Mirrors

At 25, my first real career job was in the bright, shiny, and blurred-boundary world of entertainment, working as a talent agent. Um, not exactly a hotbed of mental health. The clear-cut rules of engagement of the regular business world did not exist there. Socializing and partying after hours with casting directors and clients was part of the job description, blurring the lines between personal and professional. Despite my sobriety and therapy, I was still a Boundary Semi-Disaster.

Nevertheless, I kept on asserting my wobbly limit-setting skills. “No, you can’t call me at three o’clock in the morning because someone forgot to put sparkling water in your dressing room.” What I was only starting to comprehend was that, in fact, I had choices about how I let people treat me, both at work and in my personal life.

My in-process boundary skills didn’t prevent me from fulfilling my ambitions, though. Steadily, I rose through the ranks, and five years later ended up running the New York operation for a bicoastal talent agency, negotiating five- and six-figure contracts for supermodels and celebrities. Amazing, right? Well, not exactly.

The reality behind my fancy title was painful. I had become a stressed-out workaholic, who often ate froyo for dinner and lit up one of my trusty Parliament 100s every time drama would erupt (pretty much all day long). In addition to managing the professional lives of clients, I often got involved in their personal dramas. I also