

Boundaries as a Recovery Concept

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

When you think of boundaries in the context of addiction, the first thing that often comes to mind is the family member trying to set boundaries with the person struggling with substance use about their drinking or drug use or expectations regarding recovery behavior. These are undoubtedly common boundary difficulties experienced in families dealing with addiction. However, there are other boundary issues as well. Non-addicted family members are expected to learn the new skills needed to communicate clear expectations to the loved one struggling with substance use.

People in early recovery also face the challenge of learning to identify, adhere to, and set boundaries. One of the most critical early recovery tasks is beginning the process of replacing the substance with healthy living skills. Many newly recovering individuals discover that old relationship patterns are no longer satisfying, effective, and sometimes outright painful. They must learn new relationship behaviors.

Although family systems seek to maintain their equilibrium, which often involves resisting any real change to the system, change is precisely what is needed. Family systems with addiction are all too familiar with boundary issues, such as enmeshment, disengagement, or cycling between these two extremes. Newly recovering individuals may begin to move away from these extremes. The skill set of setting and maintaining boundaries assists people in moving closer to a middle ground in relationship behavior, which can prove quite challenging.

It is often a mystery to newly recovering individuals what constitutes appropriate boundaries. Many people do not have a healthy sense of physical boundaries—what proximity to others is appropriate; social boundaries—what is the proper thing to say or do under various circumstances; and emotional boundaries—how to communicate their

feelings appropriately to others and how to respond to the communication of emotions by others.

Figuring out where the new recovery fits into the family is also an early recovery challenge. The person in recovery may be trying to determine what is and is not their responsibility. They may still assume that other people will take (or continue to take) responsibility for jobs that rightfully belong to them. They may want to resume their duties but fear challenging old family norms and roles. They may have difficulty communicating their desire and lack assertiveness skills for taking back their responsibilities. Power struggles and resentments may ensue. Or, they may take for granted that they can continue to behave as they did while in active addiction—only without the substance.

Ineffective ways of talking, sharing, and problem-solving are often a part of addiction in the family. These challenges will probably persist into early recovery, requiring new skill-building to change. There may be an apparent lack of common courtesy and regard. All family members may have hidden expectations that are not communicated or negotiated. Family members know they must deal with conflict when competing needs move into the foreground, creating hostility. If they don't know how to communicate and problem-solve effectively, efforts to resolve disputes won't be successful.

Relationships and family system roles, rules, structures, and functions typically must change in recovery. One of the first ways that family members and individuals in recovery realize that change in the system is necessary is by identifying the need for "boundaries." Setting and maintaining healthy boundaries is an early recovery concept and task for the family. A common developmental task for early recovery for all family members is to teach the other family members how to treat them in recovery, which is an excellent example of growth through boundaries.

Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2010 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.

Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries is a foundational aspect of early recovery, particularly within families affected by addiction. Clear and respectful boundaries help individuals and their loved ones navigate new dynamics and responsibilities, fostering a supportive environment for healing and growth. Effective communication and conflict resolution are vital for setting and maintaining boundaries and building supportive, healthy, and collaborative relationships. "Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson" is a simple, practical, step-by-step framework for conflict resolution. It offers an introductory guide to learning the art of collaboration and problem-solving. By changing how you communicate and problem-solve, you can foster harmonious, thriving relationships. Along the way, you'll practice essential skills like using "I statements," active listening, and de-escalation tools. This simple problem-solving model empowers you with the tools for fair, constructive conflict resolution.



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