

# **Boundaries, Bottom Lines, and Threats: Knowing the Difference Can Empower Family Member Recovery**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

What's the difference between boundaries, bottom lines, and threats? Clarifying these concepts with definitions is a good start, but applying them gives them the most meaning.

## **Bottom Lines vs. Threats**

The bottom line is a tangible definition of what you will or will not tolerate. On the other hand, a threat is a declaration of expectations and consequences if those expectations are not met. The significant difference between bottom lines and threats is motivation.

When you communicate a bottom line, your motivation is to take responsibility for yourself. By developing awareness of your bottom line, you know what you are willing to have in your life and what you aren't willing to tolerate. Taking responsibility for your own growth, development, recovery, welfare, and happiness means guarding it fiercely. To do this, you set and maintain limits on how much you allow others to impede your growth, recovery, and welfare. For example, you may have a friend who is consistently negative and makes you the brunt of their humor despite your assertiveness with them. Ultimately, you get to decide if and how much investment you will make in that relationship. In communicating a bottom line, you are motivated to take care of your own life, taking full responsibility for your choices and your happiness or unhappiness.

You may use the exact words to communicate a bottom line as you would to make a threat, but they are not the same. Threats are motivated by the desire to change someone else. When you threaten, you attempt to get the other person to change. You may believe that what you are trying to get

them to do is best for them and you and that your intentions are about looking out for their welfare. However, in this process, you are trying to take responsibility for someone else's life, decisions, recovery, happiness, or misery.

### **Self-Responsibility and Power**

One of the first lessons in early recovery for family members is that we do not have power over other people in the way we would like to think. Trying to change someone else through threats shows a desperation for change in our lives without taking responsibility for ourselves. We are investing our efforts in an area where we have little power over their behavior and our outcomes. The only place we have control is over our behavior, attitudes, decisions, and happiness. For example, you may know that you cannot continue to live with someone in active addiction, and you cannot make them quit using drugs or even get help to quit. The power you have in this circumstance is to decide for yourself and your own well-being if you would be better off living amid active addiction and trying to detach with love or leaving the relationship.

### **The Feel of Communication**

Communicating bottom lines and threats feels different. When communicating a threat, there is often an underlying feeling of uneasiness and fear about the next step if the other person doesn't comply. The bottom line, however, feels solid as you decide what you are willing to have in your life and what you aren't. You know that you mean it. It is immutable. A threat feels uneasy and scary; any resolve to stick to it eventually yields opposition. Threats maintain the status quo, while the bottom line effect changes. The difference is in the motivation.

### **Boundaries and Their Importance**

Maintaining bottom lines is facilitated by setting boundaries. Boundaries are borders that delineate, separate, and protect us from the world. Setting protective limits might include denying others permission to use us, abuse us, take from us, or take us for granted. Boundaries are a demarcation of personal territory. They define where we begin and end. They represent areas of responsibility and power, our rights and limits in relationships as

citizens and human beings. Communicate these limits with assertiveness, self-confidence, and self-responsibility. They define a healthy detachment from what we are not responsible for and promote self-efficacy.

### **Promoting Recovery and Empowerment**

Identifying your bottom lines in relationships and maintaining them through communication of boundaries promotes recovery, self-esteem, and empowerment. Threats reinforce denial, maintain dysfunctional games, increase anxiety, and reduce self-esteem. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.**

### **Buiding Self Esteem: A Workbook By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Explore how understanding the differences between boundaries, bottom lines, and threats can empower personal growth in self-esteem with the "Building Self-Esteem: A Workbook." This workbook guides you through structured tasks and exercises that promote self-reflection the various aspects of self-perception and self-worth. By reflecting on your experiences, you can enhance your ability to be assertive, set boundaries, and make decisions about what you want or don't want in your life for your own well-being.



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