

## Setting Boundaries in Marriage

### By Debbie Preece

Below is a condensed list of steps recommended by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. Johnson Townsend, the authors of *Boundaries in Marriage*, in setting boundaries with a difficult spouse. These steps are very practical and will give you the help you need in making necessary changes in your marriage.

#### Make Soul Connections

Boundary setting is never easy. You are upsetting the status quo in your marriage and there is going to be resistance on the part of your spouse to the changes you are making. Therefore, you need allies in this process. Just as support groups such as Al-Anon help family members of alcoholics remain firm with loved ones, you need support outside of your marriage to help you stick with the process. Without this it will be easy to back down from your boundary setting when the going gets rough.

#### Grow and Own

Chances are that you have contributed in some way to the problems in your marriage. Through setting boundaries you are helping your spouse learn about love and responsibility, but you need to grow and learn this as well. Therefore, as you work on building safe and trusting relationships outside of your marriage, practice opening up with others, confessing your needs and faults. As you do this, you will grow spiritually and emotionally, and gain the understanding and skills to help your spouse grow as well.

#### Identify the Specific Issue

This step takes time and the ability to sort through many issues with a cool head. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What boundary of yours is being violated?
- How does it affect you and your love for your spouse?
- Is the problem an occasional event or a pattern that gets repeated?
- Why is it important to risk conflict over it?

Next, pick one or two issues to work on. You don't want to overwhelm and discourage your spouse (or yourself.)

#### Validate Your Spouse

Resistant spouses need to know that you understand their perspective and that you have their best interests in mind. If they only feel misunderstood and criticized, they will lose their motivation to change. Therefore, validate them, love them and appreciate them for the efforts they are making to change.

#### Create a Level Playing Field

You've heard this before – you can't change someone else, but only yourself. So work on yourself first. Look actively at how you may be contributing to the problem and make any necessary changes. Even if your spouse does not make changes, continue to make your own. Then pray for him/her, love him/her and set clear boundaries with him/her.

#### Request Change

You are responsible to state your request for change and the consequences for not changing.

### Give Your Spouse Time and Patience

Before following through with consequences, give your spouse time to make the change that you requested. This may be the first time you have approached him/her correctly about the particular issue and you are giving your spouse the chance to respond appropriately without needing consequences.

### Establish Appropriate Consequences

Keep the following points in mind when setting consequences:

- The consequences should be designed to help with reality and protect *you*, not to control your spouse.
- Be deliberate and don't act impulsively or in anger.
- The consequence needs to be appropriately severe, enforceable, immediate as possible and respectful of your spouse.
- Consequences can be modified as your spouse changes.

### Warn Your Spouse

If you have given your spouse time to fulfill your request and nothing changes, now is the time to let him/her know that you will begin setting limits.

### Follow Through With Consequences

Here's where the rubber meets the road. Follow through with the limit you have set. No nagging, just action. As you encounter problems, turn to your support system that can provide you honest feedback and help you remain firm with your spouse.

### Observe and Evaluate Over Time

Let time pass after you have enforced the consequences. Some spouses may begin to turn around after only a few times, while others may need more time. Adjust the consequences if necessary.

So there you have it in a nutshell. This is a very brief overview to give you an idea of what's involved in setting boundaries. However, if you are having serious problems in this area, I strongly encourage you to read the book. It's very readable and filled with wonderful examples. Most importantly, through reading the book you will come to understand how setting boundaries is the most loving thing you can do for your spouse and yourself.

For more resources and information go to [www.cloudtownsend.com](http://www.cloudtownsend.com).