

Setting Boundaries in Personal Relationships

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I still remember that Saturday. He grabbed me hard around my neck and shoved my head towards the kitchen floor so that I could see the dirt I had missed when cleaning it. Part of me inside was humiliated and part of me was numb. As usual, I found myself apologizing and saying I would clean it better if he would just let me go. My self-confidence was gone and there were days I thought about driving my car off a bridge. Running to my parents was out of the question because they had never liked my husband anyway. My friends thought I was crazy to stay with him. They didn't know about my fears or the good times. We had a baby boy and I just didn't think I could take care of him on my own. My husband repeatedly told me I had no motherly instincts and wasn't any good at it. I didn't want to believe him but when I heard it so often, I started to believe it. And then there were the good times. Sometimes he could be so loving and romantic. I was on a roller coaster of highs and lows, but after 4 years, I was mostly numb because I couldn't deal with life otherwise. Once I slipped out to my mother that sometimes I was afraid of my husband. She gave me a telephone number to a local battered women's shelter. I called. My husband and I went to counseling together. I was the one with the problem from his standpoint. If I would change to do things and be like he wanted, he would be happy. Unfortunately, he gave the first counselor his charming sales job. I didn't reveal very much because I didn't want him to stop coming or have him hurt me when we got home. I hoped she could see what was happening. She didn't. We quit.

Things only got worse. There was the incident with the gun, among others. I sought out a different counselor. Over time, I learned to stand up for myself and be assertive. The crowning incident was the time I was afraid he would hurt me again, so I ran to the bathroom, locked the door, and pulled out the drawers in case he got it unlocked. He pounded and pounded, demanding that I come out and talk with him. Finally, he broke the door in two and came after me. He was 6 feet, 4 inches tall and weighed 270 pounds. I was terrified. Somehow I gathered all my courage to use the assertive skills that I had been learning in counseling. I pretended that I wasn't scared and stood up to him. I said that I didn't deserve to be treated like that and told him I wouldn't take it any more. Silently inside, I hoped he wouldn't choke me, chicken wing me, or punch me like he had on other occasions. I was trapped and going out the small bathroom window wasn't an alternative. He must have been shocked at my new behavior. I had been gradually practicing assertiveness with him for a couple of months. In counseling, I had learned to recognize that my relationship was abusive, and I had worked on rebuilding my self-esteem. His reaction to my new behavior was to say he didn't like the new me, but he backed off. Shortly after that he moved out because I just wasn't the woman he fell in love with. Hallelujah! At that point in my life, I wasn't strong enough to leave him.

That was 1987. Since then I have grown tremendously. I now consider myself to be very assertive. In 1990, I decided to change careers from finance to counseling. I was an adjunct professor at UMKC for 5 years and oversaw the therapy for court-referred clients due to domestic violence. I have a private practice as a licensed professional

counselor and marriage and family therapist. Often the focus of my work is helping my clients learn to be assertive with their partners, children, colleagues, parents, and friends. In practicing assertive behavior rather than passive or aggressive reactions, my clients are setting boundaries or rules around their relationships. This is definitely taking a risk, because, making new moves in established relationships is usually scary. Also, when one person in a relationship changes his or her behavior, the relationship will change, but how it will change is somewhat unknown. But the rewards of transforming a disrespectful relationship into a mutually respectful one are better self-esteem, increased joy, more freedom, and increased caring.