



# DRAWING BOUNDARIES IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

INTERVIEW WITH HENRY CLOUD

The relationships I affectionately covet and admire most are those where the participants seem satisfied first as individuals. You know the ones. The mother who gives gently to her children by deliberate choice, not by compulsion or guilt. The marriage where mutual generosity seems almost frivolous. Or the friend who gives not from a dry well of affection, but instead from a copious source of strength. How do these people come to the relationship table already willing and able to give, live and love? “Healthy relationships,” says psychologist and author Henry Cloud, “stem from healthy individuals—those who have control of themselves and their lives.”



How then do we gain control of ourselves in order to build beautiful relationships? We asked Henry about the fundamental elements in healthy relationships with our spouses, children, friends, family, co-workers, and even God. He says the key is defined boundaries, which means knowing what we’re responsible for and what we’re not responsible for. Join our conversation with him as he explains how healthy boundaries enable us to better give, live, and love.

## **How do boundaries function in our lives and relationships?**

A boundary is simply a property line. For example, in

the material world, a landowner has a visible property line that distinguishes between what he owns and what he doesn’t. He can care for and maintain his yard, because he knows where his land ends and his neighbor’s begins.

But in the immaterial world, the world of our souls, it’s not as simple for us to see what we’re responsible for. As a result, we tend to overstep our boundaries, which the Bible calls trespassing. Or we do not draw our property lines large enough, disregarding certain responsibilities in our own spiritual yard.

## **What is in our yard? What are we responsible for?**

We are responsible for our own feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and all the elements of our souls which fall under them, like our thoughts, desires, talents, and loves.

## **The issue, then, is finding the balance between what is in our yard, which we must tend to, and that which is not our responsibility at all.**

Exactly. When we understand what we are responsible for, we have ownership of our lives, which gives us freedom. If I know what is mine, then I can take care of it. And when I know what belongs to you, I can let you take care of it.

Problems occur, however, when we try to get control of someone else, or lose control of ourselves. That’s why people get into unhealthy relationships. Controllers are on the lookout for someone to take care of them; they gravitate toward people with blurry boundaries who will naturally take on too much responsibility in the relationship. Compliants are



searching for someone to repair; this keeps them out of touch with their own needs. These types are drawn to each other.

When we are having boundary problems, we develop emotional problems; for example, controlling behavior, rage, an inability to say no to others, passive/aggressive behavior, and fear of intimacy.

The Bible provides some excellent wisdom in this area: It encourages self-control, but never “other” control.

Since we are designed to live in connection with others, boundary problems harm relationships with friends, family, co-workers, and God. Establishing boundaries helps us gain power over the elements of our souls and enable us to love and live freely.

**You mentioned loving and living freely, yet the word boundaries implies confinement. How do you reconcile the two?**

A more accurate word is limiting. Boundaries limit us to being ourselves and taking responsibility for ourselves. Boundaries also limit our ultimate wish—to be God. There is great freedom in not having to control the whole earth—we’re not big enough to handle it anyway.

Boundaries also establish our fundamental freedom from each other. When we live with healthy boundaries, we are free to love and serve one another by choice, and not compulsion.

**Many people do feel a compulsion to give and love instead of a freedom. Where does that come from?**

When we do not give freely, we do so either begrudgingly, or under compulsion. When we love begrudgingly, it’s because someone is pressuring us from the outside. We give, but also resent it. We don’t exercise our “no” muscle. When we give compulsively, the pressure comes from the inside. We feel like we should, or have to. That kind of guilt motivation gets us nowhere, and only leads to resentment.

A lot of the squabbles we see in relationships, in fact, have to do with someone feeling like they are not giving freely.

Our responses to those feelings are equally damaging. Sometimes we ignore the problem. If we feel out of control in a relationship, we may deny that there is a problem at all. Another avenue we take is to blame someone else. Other times we completely withdraw from the relationship or responsibility.

**How can we remedy those reactions, as well as misplaced boundaries?**

We need to come to a relationship with God, and with people who can help us build the self-control we need. Get connected to helping relationships, like a counselor, support group, a small circle of friends, or local Bible study. The important factor is that you meet with people who can give wisdom, accountability, and support. Oftentimes, we don’t know how to do that or we’re ashamed of the areas in which we’re out of control. We need a safe place where we can talk about the ways in which we’re feeling out of control.

Then admit that you’re not perfect, and that everyone, including yourself, needs to learn to have better boundaries. Ask yourself, “Where are the problems in the way I feel, the way I’m performing, and the way I relate to others?”

Next, identify the unmet need behind the boundary problem. For example, some people can’t say “no” because they have a lot of loneliness inside. If they were to say “no,” they fear their need for a relationship would go unmet. Find out your weaknesses by asking for feedback from others who know and love you. Be willing to take in the support of another who can strengthen you.

Then begin the process of forgiving the people who have injured your boundaries. Unforgiveness keeps you tied to unhealthy relationships. To forgive means to let go of and to cancel a debt. By letting someone off the hook, you are freed from their ability to control you.

Finally, take ownership of the problem, and then develop some needed skills for growth, such as defining who you are and who you aren’t, developing the “no” muscle, refraining from blaming others, learning to be honest, and persevering.

You may also want to anticipate failure. Trying something new is scary, and when you fail, it’s a message saying you’re in the process. It takes time to



grow. Return to step one if you make a mistake.

**You mentioned the Bible and God a few times—  
how do they relate to healthy boundaries?**

Our relationships with other people fall under Jesus' second greatest commandment: To love others as yourself. But our relationships with other people only work properly when we're connected to the first commandment: To love God with all of your heart, mind, strength, and soul. We are unable to orient our relationships with others correctly, without first of all having a relationship with God. Because God made us, He knows our needs and weaknesses and can help to change us from the inside out.

Only He can provide for our needs and make us strong enough to deal with the fears that keep us from setting good boundaries. He can also correct us and coach us along the right path. When we have a daily relationship with Him, God can tell us where we need to learn new skills, where we need support, and where we need to change. God also brings resources into our lives like people, new experiences, teaching, practice, the Bible, and His Spirit. He wants us to grow and develop our boundaries so we won't invite hurt again.

One of God's greatest agendas is to mature us, so that we can be healthy and strong, not abused and controlled by other people. He wants to make us strong enough to refuse evil and to love. Only God can provide the power for us to change.



*Clinical psychologist, Dr. Henry Cloud, co-hosts the nationally syndicated radio show "New Life Live." Along with Dr. John Townsend, Cloud founded the Cloud-Townsend Clinic and Cloud-Townsend Resources. His best-selling books include *Changes That Heal*, *Nine Things You Simply Must Do*, the *Boundaries* series and, most recently, *Integrity*.*