

Chapter 1

This book grew from a workshop I created to explain how to form boundaries, what works and doesn't work, and the essential lessons for building boundaries. People who attended wanted to record the workshop and record their private sessions with me. I realized they needed a way to revisit the information.

I wrote this book to provide all of the foundational tools you will need. However, because of the dynamic nature of boundaries, it is not possible to learn everything all at once by reading this book or any other book about boundaries. This book is meant to be a place to visit as often as you need. It will help you develop your boundary skills to adapt to your situations and your relationships as you live.

I have an advantage in understanding boundaries because I've been a therapist since 1986. I have watched many people wrestle with issues related to boundaries. During the past twenty years, I have also led three different non-profit organizations. For seven of those years, I facilitated leadership development for professionals in business, government, and non-profits. Over time, I created a map in my head to help people navigate their boundary issues. I learned from the people I worked with, that five years, ten years and even twenty years later, the work we did on boundaries has stayed with them. The lessons stood the test of time. People reported back to me that the map I was using was very useful. I created the Transform Your Boundaries Workshop as a way to teach my map whole, all at once, and allow people to see the big picture. This book is another way to learn the same essential tools from the map that I have used again and again to reliably teach boundary building skills.

I am not just a passive observer of boundary work. I am engaged in it in my own life, my own struggles with boundaries, and have concluded that we are all "in process" in an ongoing way with our boundaries. As long as you are living, you are using whatever skills you have and if you do not have a complete toolset, you may find yourself in an exhausting struggle regarding your boundaries.

Having “good” boundaries is not a permanent state. It’s an achievement at a particular point in time when our skills are finally good enough to address the issues and relationships in life in a way that allows us to feel in balance. When someone says, “I have good boundaries”, it means she is not feeling out of balance, distraught over someone else, exhausted inside, or in some other way out of sorts. But at any time, a new challenge can arise and that very same person can lose her balance and feel torn inside about her boundaries. When you find yourself unsure about your role, uncertain about what you should do, how to help, or see yourself being drained by a situation, return to your boundary work. Return to this book. There will be something here to help you.

One of the things I've noticed is that we learn how to build boundaries in a particular order. The order is really important. You will find the order or structure presented in this book will guide you through the process. If you attempt to do boundary building without understanding what comes first and what comes next, you will find it much harder and may even think it is impossible.

I’ve also noticed that certain skills build upon each other. Like learning to play an instrument, or preparing to run a marathon, you don't start out playing at Carnegie Hall, and you don't run 26 miles on your first day. There are beginning steps to everything we master. The same is true for boundaries. There are steps that we must master before we can tackle the biggest boundary challenges.

I find that we all become distressed by the biggest of boundary challenges. I call these **extreme challenges**. People often come to therapy needing help with extreme challenges, such as living with someone who abuses them, a family member with severe mental health issues, addiction in their family, trauma, or other difficult things. Without the right tools, we are stuck with responses that don’t fit what we are dealing with. In moments like this, you may think the crazy difficult person you are dealing with is the problem. That is part of the problem, but not

really the whole thing. You are having a hard time because you don't have a working set of boundaries for a tough situation.

Imagine going into a dark room with absolutely no knowledge that the light switch is used to turn the light on. You walk into the dark room and you wonder if you jump on the floor, or if you push on the walls, or if you even try to drill holes in the ceiling, will it turn on the light? Then, someone comes in and explains that there is a button on the wall. Every time you want the light on, you push the button and the light will go on. Now you know exactly what to do.

The boundary tools in this book are like the light switch. You just need to know how they work and then you can decide how and when to use them.

To help people with the big boundary challenges, I always need to figure out what foundational boundary skills they have and what lessons they are missing. I've never met anyone who had mastery over extreme boundary challenges at all times. It takes tremendous focus and dedication to improve your boundaries. You have to **choose** this work.

I know you are one of the people who has recognized that this is important to you, maybe even life changing, because you picked up this book. You may have never been taught how to build boundaries. I meet many people who are suffering from the impact of not knowing how to set boundaries. It is not unusual or wrong that you don't really know how to do this. Most people don't know how to do this. It is the basis of many physical health problems, divorces, and even wars.

Let's each make a promise. I promise to give you the toolset you need to improve your boundaries. I want one promise from you. Promise me that you will not skip all the chapters and begin with Extreme Challenges. I know that certain situations and certain people are stressful, and we will work our way toward preparing you to be able to manage them better. The skills you need for extreme challenges are built in sequence. The order is important and

there is no shortcut to get there faster. You must have all the foundational skills in place to tackle extreme challenges.

Applying It- Start Here:

Keep a journal of thoughts and notes to yourself as you go through this book.

Begin your journal by writing down why you picked up this book. Be specific. What do you want to learn? Describe the situation where you most need to improve your boundaries.

Whenever I need to work on a boundary, I need to be clear in defining the situation where I need to do my work. Otherwise, it can escape from my attention and I will avoid it or ignore it. Writing it down is important because you can remind yourself to do your boundary work exactly where you know it is needed. In the future, every time you revisit this book, answer this question. This is always your starting point: define the issue.