



Emotional Self-Defense

**Protecting Your Wellbeing In A World That Manipulates,
Guilt-Trips, Gaslights, and Pushes Your Boundaries**

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The Problem & The Solution

The Problem

- You misunderstand what boundaries are.
- You have become disconnected from the signals of your nervous systems.
- Even when you try to set the boundary or stay in touch with your truth, you may fold on the boundary or give in on what you know to be true.
- Your reasons for this come from the same place: You are not willing to sit with your unhappy or uncomfortable emotions.

The Solution

1. Tune in (to your nervous system, your emotions, your body, your truth, your wants).
2. Sit with (your unhappy or uncomfortable emotions).
3. Communicate (your boundaries, your truth, your wants).

DEFINING KEY TERMS

Boundary

The communication of what you will or will not do
(This can be in response to the behavior of another person, to the other person not fulfilling your requests, or as a decision initiated by you.)

Key Characteristics of Boundaries

1. Boundaries are not limits you set on the behaviors of others (what they may or may not do).
2. They are chosen limits you set on yourself – that you communicate to others.
3. You cannot set a boundary around something you can't control.
4. No one can violate your boundaries.
5. However, you can fold on your own boundaries in the face of objections, upsetness, or guilt-tripping from the other person.
6. Boundaries don't "work" because they get the other person to change their behavior (although that can be a happy side effect). Boundaries work because they...
 - A. Prevent you from doing things or participating in things that you don't want
 - B. Keep you in touch with your own nervous system and wants
 - C. Support your own self-regulation.
7. Boundaries require no convincing. It is not your job to convince the other person of the merits or reasonableness of your boundary. Since you are only setting boundaries around things over which you have complete control, the other person does not need to be on board with your boundary. (In fact, spending time and energy trying to convince them often weakens your boundary.)
8. Holding vs. folding: Holding a boundary requires being willing to sit with and fully feel the uncomfortable emotions that may come up for you around the other person's reaction to your boundary.

Boundary Red Flags

1. "She won't let me..."
2. "He makes me..."

Request

The communication of what you would like from the other person

Key Characteristics of Requests

1. Anything can be requested.
2. You can request something over which you have no control.
3. The other person decides whether or not they will grant your request. (They can say "yes," they can say "no," or they can say "yes" but not actually fulfill the request.)
4. You can try to convince the other person to grant your request. (Unlike boundaries, requests do require the buy-in of the other person.)

Defensive

Anxious to challenge or avoid criticism

Argumentative, dismissive or hostile when you feel that your beliefs, actions, intentions, or character are being questioned or attacked

Key Characteristics of Defensiveness

1. When you are being defensive, you are trying to control and manage what the other person thinks (which you have no real power over.)
2. We'd all like to be understood or be seen favorably or accurately. Defensiveness comes when you need those things to feel okay.
3. Involves feelings of fear, anger, or tightness.
4. We often think: "Either I defend myself or I do nothing and let it stand." (These are not the only two choices.)

5. Comes from taking what was said personally.

- A. "I'm being unfairly targeted, picked on, or pushed around."
- B. "I'm being falsely or unjustly accused."
- C. "I'm being misunderstood."
- D. "I'm being called out or embarrassed or humiliated."
- E. "I'm being forced to do something that I don't want to do because I'm afraid that, if I don't do it, I will be disliked, judged, or made into 'the bad guy'."

Gaslighting

When someone repeatedly asserts a version of events that is at odds with your clear recollection and experience a way that so effectively reaches you that you question your own reality.

Key Characteristics of Gaslighting

People disagree about events that have occurred very frequently. This is not gaslighting. Gaslighting includes one or more the following on an ongoing basis:

1. The person questions your memory or forcefully encourages you to do so.
2. The person communicates that you are overly sensitive or unimportant.
3. The person denies statements, agreements, promises, or actions that you clearly remember.
4. The person says that something didn't happen that you clearly remember happening.
5. The person says that something did happen that you clearly remember not happening.
6. The person repeatedly insists that you did or said things that you have no memory of.
7. You feel confused, anxious, or isolated on a regular basis.
8. If you voice disagreement regarding their version of events, the person accuses you of doing something wrong, bad, mean, or delusional.

9. When you are around this person, you notice that you quickly change opinions or decisions that you previously got clear on when you were not in their presence.
10. The person ties relationship threats to you agreeing with their version of events.

The Quiz: Boundary or Request?

For each quotation below, please circle either "Boundary" or "Request."

1. "You're speaking rather loudly. I'm going to have to ask you to not the make noise in the library."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

2. "You can disagree with me, but you can't raise your voice to me. That's a boundary for me."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

3. "My experience is that you cut me off when I make suggestions in our meetings. So I will be leaving any meeting I'm in as soon as that happens."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

4. "My recollection is that I've paid for the last three dinners we've had. So I will only go to dinner with you tonight if you pay."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

5. "No one ever acknowledged my birthday growing up. So it is very important to me that you remember my birthday and write me a card."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

6. "You have every right to keep your house as you see fit, but I don't enjoy being in spaces that I see as cluttered and messy, so I won't be coming over. If you want to hang out, I'm happy to hang out at a restaurant or a park or at my house."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

The Quiz: Boundary or Request?

7. "Can you please take the car to get the oil changed?"

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

8. "I really don't like waiting around for you when we make plans. When we plan to meet up at a particular time, I'm going to have to insist that you come on time."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

9. "Of course, I can't stop you from being 45 minutes late, but I'll be leaving in five minutes."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

10. "When I have a feeling, thought, or want, I am going to say it without reservation, but you don't have to discuss it with me if you don't want to, though I would love it if you did."

Which is it? (Circle one.) **Boundary Request**

Sample Boundaries

- "You can call me as many times as you want per day, but I'm only going to pick up the phone between 8:00PM or 9:00PM."
- "I understand that you don't agree with what I'm saying happened, but I'm always going to say what I think happened, even if you disagree."
- "I'm no longer going to attending holiday family gatherings."
- "Since we arranged to go for a walk, that's what I'm going to do. I would love for you to come with me as we planned, but, either way, I'll be going."
- "You are welcome to email me with the other items you want to discuss. However, I will be running the meeting for exactly one hour, and we will only be discussing items that were put on the agenda yesterday."
- "You can cook whatever food you want, but I'm only going to be eating foods with no dairy."
- "Naturally, I can't stop you from asking me to stay late, but I will only be staying late when I've been given a week's notice - and never on Fridays."
- "I appreciate you asking, but I'm going to stay in tonight."
- "I only consider buying things for people that I've met in person and gone on a couple of dates with."
- "I did agree to help you move, and I know you just decided that you want to get an early start at 8:00AM, which you have every right to do, but, since it's the weekend, I am going to sleep in. You are free to start without me or wait until I arrive at noon to begin."
- "I will only buy a Lego set that costs \$50 or less. But you are welcome to talk about or ask for any Lego set you want, and I will listen, though I will still only buy a Lego set that costs \$50 or less."
- "I feel uncomfortable in this situation and want to leave, so that's what I'm going to do."

Examples of Folding

1. You tell your chronically-late friend that you are no longer going to make any plans with them. They tell you that that's a draconian overkill response, and you are being harsh and unreasonable, and how come everything is always on *your* timeline?? FOLD: You tell them that, fine, you won't stop making plans with them, but, really, it's very important that they be on time from now on. REASON: You are afraid that they will think ill of you.
2. You tell your child that they can't have the toy they want because you had a previous boundary with them that they could only get this thing if they cleaned up their room each week for a month, and they haven't done that. They cry and carry on and tell you that they really, really want it, that they need it for a friend's birthday party that's coming up this weekend, and you aren't being fair because you got their brother what he wanted, and they promise that they *will* clean up their room right now. FOLD: You say, "Okay, you can have it this time if you clean your room today." REASON: You don't want to feel guilty and like you are being a bad or strict mother/father.
3. Your boss calls you on Sunday, and you don't pick up, following a boundary you had set previously about not working on weekends. On Monday morning, he tells you that what he wanted to discuss with you was a very important. He thought you were a loyal and hardworking employee, and he is really disappointed in you. FOLD: You tell him that you are loyal and hardworking. You apologize for not being available and tell him that you will do your best to pick up next time as long as the weekend calls don't happen too often. REASON: You don't want your boss to think less of you.

Examples of Folding

4. Your partner starts raising their voice to you in an argument and starts calling you names. You walk out of the room, following an earlier boundary that you set about not being willing to participate in discussions where they are calling you names. They follow you and say, "Oh, so I have to be happy and perfect all the time? You won't allow space for all of me? I am never allowed to be angry around you?" FOLD: You stop walking away and try to convince them that your boundary is not that they have to be perfect and can't get angry. REASON: You feel like you are not hearing them out and not being a loving and supportive partner.
5. Your co-worker keeps leaving early and asking you to cover for them by taking on their end-of-day tasks. When you say no, they say, "I can't believe you won't help a fellow single parent. I am all alone and have no one, and I thought you of all people would be understanding." FOLD: You say that you are sorry and that you will cover for them this time - but no promises about next time. REASON: You don't want to be seen (or see yourself) as selfish and not understanding or compassionate.

Why You Fold

There are two main reasons why you might fold on a boundary or on sticking with something you know to be true:

1. You are afraid of the reactions or thoughts of others.
2. You tell yourself that you are bad/mean/selfish/making a big deal.

These reasons and all of their variations come from the same place: *You are not willing to sit with your own unhappy or uncomfortable emotions.*

If you were willing to sit with these emotions, you could hold the boundary or truth rather than fold on the boundary or truth. You might feel uncomfortable with maintaining what you want or what you believe in the face of someone else's reaction, emotion, opinion, or push-back, and that's totally okay. But, if you are seeking to avoid or get away from your discomfort, you will fold just to give yourself some relief.

When You Folded

Below, please write down a time when you folded, capitulated, or gave in either on a boundary or on a truth/belief you held.

[illegible]

Steps To Tuning In

1. Close your eyes.
2. Lengthen your breathing (longer breaths in, longer breaths out).
3. Pay attention to your body.
4. Notice any tension you might feel in any particular part of your body.
5. Focus in on that tension.
6. See if you can notice a push-pull sensation inside you. (This sensation comes from not doing (or saying) something that you want to do (or say) – or doing (or saying) something that you do not want to do (or say).)
7. Ask yourself: “What do I really want to do?” Or “What feels right for me to do?”
8. Relax, be patient, and don’t force or rush your answer.
9. Wait until an answer comes to you where you feel a sense of relief or a sensation of release from your nervous system.
10. Open your eyes.

Boundary/Gaslighting Issue

Below, please write down a person and situation where setting boundaries and/or speaking your truth chronically comes up for you.

After the first visualization, please write down your answer to the question: "What do I really want to do?" / "What feels right for me to do?"

After the second visualization, please write down your answer to the question: "What unhappy or uncomfortable emotion(s) came up for me?"

Sitting With Unhappy Or Uncomfortable Emotions

Key Characteristics of Emotions:

- Feeling the full range of your emotions (not just the happy ones) is completely natural and a vital aspect of the human experience and of our biological processes.
- Emotions serve important functions and cannot hurt you or others.
- You don't have to have an adversarial relationship with any of your emotions nor sort them into "good" and "bad," "toxic" and "healthy," "productive" and "unproductive," "negative" and "positive" categories.
- Unhappy emotions are messages from your nervous system.
 - Message: Something is out of whack, and there is something you would need to do, have, or pay attention to in order to get back in sync.
- When you truly make peace with your emotions, fully feel them, and completely embrace them, some amazing things can happen. Your emotions become your friends, their scariness dissipates, and even very unhappy emotions can simply move through you instead of burrowing inside you.

The key is to be willing to sit with your emotions without immediately trying to avoid, suppress, or alter them.

Sitting With Unhappy Or Uncomfortable Emotions

The Feeling Protocol: How to Sit with Your Emotions

1. Notice an unhappy or uncomfortable emotion – and name it.
2. Pause on your urge to get away from the emotion, change it, distract yourself from it, or “fix” it by doing or saying something.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Notice where you feel the emotion in your body.
5. Focus on that area.
6. Notice if the feeling in that area has a color, a texture, or any other attribute.
7. Hold your focus on that area.
8. Notice if the feeling expands, contracts, or moves.
9. Lengthen your breathing (longer breaths in, longer breaths out).
10. Open your eyes.

Responding to Push-Back

PUSH-BACK: "If you cared about me, you would... [fold on your boundary]"

RESPONSE: "I know that you feel that caring about you means doing what you want in this instance, but I am going to continue to show you that I care in ways other than doing what you're asking right now."

PUSH-BACK: "I've done so much for you over the years, and you can't do this small thing for me?"

RESPONSE: "You have done a lot for me, and I really appreciate it. there are things I'm happy to do to help you, but this isn't one of them."

PUSH-BACK: "Wow. I did not think you were the kind of person that would do that."

RESPONSE: "I really hear that you wish I would do X, but, as I said before, that's not something I'm willing to do."

PUSH-BACK: "I've always thought of you as such a loyal friend. I can't believe you won't... [fold on your boundary]."

RESPONSE: "Well, I hope that you will continue to think of me as a loyal friend, but I can't control if you change your mind about that. What I can control is whether I do X, and that's why I'm telling you that I will not do X."

PUSH-BACK: "Please. I'm really hurting right now, and I need your help."

RESPONSE: "I absolutely hear that you're hurting right now, and I can be helpful to you by doing X or Y, but, as I said before, I'm not going to do Z."

Responding to Push-Back

PUSH-BACK: "I never raised my voice to you."

RESPONSE: "As I perceive it, you did just raise your voice to me, and that's not something I'm going to change my mind about."

PUSH-BACK: "You are being so defensive. You can never admit when you're wrong."

RESPONSE: "That's not my experience, but you are entitled to yours. Anyway, I'm going to continue to do X."

PUSH-BACK: "Ever since you took that stupid Emotional Self-Defense course, you've been an uncompromising hardliner. Nobody likes it, least of all me. Can you go back to being your real self?"

RESPONSE: "This is the me you've got now. You don't have to agree with what I say or do, but I, like you, will keep doing what I think is best – and communicating with you about what that is."

Non-Defensive Communication

- **Benefits of Non-Defensive Communication**

- Enhanced mental and emotional wellbeing
- Increased experience of your own power
- Much greater chance that the other person will be open to, take in, and digest what you are trying to communicate

- **How to Be Non-Defensive on the Inside**

- Pause.
- Notice what you're feeling in your body (tightness in your stomach, chest, or throat) and what emotion you're feeling.
 1. Make sure you don't try to suppress these feelings. It's crucial to allow them.
 2. Say either out loud or to yourself: "I'm feeling defensive right now."
 3. Remind yourself that it's just discomfort. It can't hurt you. Sit with it rather than trying "fix" it by getting the other person to change.
- See if you can refrain from thinking about what it means or making stories about it.
- *See if you can prioritize staying in touch with your own nervous system and how you are communicating over being understood or seen or agreed with.*

Non-Defensive Communication

• How to Be Non-Defensive on the Outside

- You can check in with yourself in the moment or later regarding whether what the other person said is accurate.
- If YES ✓ You can own and acknowledge it (to yourself and to the other person).
 1. To yourself: "It's okay that I was like that. That's part of the whole of me. I can be angry or stingy or inconsiderate, and I can also be loving and generous and considerate. So I'm going to embrace this aspect of me."
 2. To the other person: "You're right. I did do that. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I'll work on that." Or "I hear you. I apologize for doing that. That's something I'm trying to get better at. Feel free to let me know if I do it again because I don't want to be that way with you."
- If NO ✗ You can be clear about what's true for you without trying to control what the other person thinks.
 1. To yourself: "I'm going to release control – since I don't have it, anyway. I'm going to survive and be okay if the other person thinks this inaccurate thing about me. I can still state clearly what I believe to be true."
 2. To the other person: "I see that differently." (Then say how you see it differently.) Or "Thank you for telling me that that's how you feel. Even though that's not how I see what happened, how you feel is important to me."
 3. Note: A non-defensive person only states their reality and point of view once per conversation (rather than repeating it) – particularly when the other person does not appear open to it. At the same time, saying it once (rather than not at all) can be helpful for you to remain clear about your own reality – and can be useful if the conversation is happening in public or in a group.

Non-Defensive Communication

- If MAYBE (i.e., you are not yet sure) Give yourself a day to truly consider it.
 1. To yourself: "I'm not 100% sure about this, so I want to remain open. Maybe it's true for me, maybe it's not, or maybe it's partially true for me. I don't have to have a thought-out response right now. I can take my time to consider."
 2. To the other person: "Hmm... that could be. Let me think about it." Or "I hear you. I'm not yet sure where I stand with that, but I will absolutely think about what you said." Or "You know what? Give me some time to process that. I want to really consider it."
- The quotes above, when communicated from a non-defensive place, will often defuse the other person's anger or sarcasm. And, if you have something to say, the statements above will maximize the chance of you being heard by the other person.
- See if you can be curious about the other person and about what's going on for them. You can say, "Tell me more about that." And then you can ask follow-up questions to see where their feelings and statements are coming from.