

## The Strength of Personal Boundaries

**NOTE:** *This information and resulting strategies is effective in support of an individual with functional cognitive ability<sup>1</sup>. Individuals with more limited or declining cognitive ability have significant difficulty with communication and causes this information to require significant modification to meet their needs.*

Healthy personal boundaries are an important Caregiver resource when the individual receiving support has significant mental health issues. Successful Caregivers draw on those resources when confronted with negative, uncooperative behavior so they can effectively continue a supportive role with the individual. Boundaries are defined in the concept known as the Drama Triangle developed by Steve Karpman<sup>2</sup>. In the Drama Triangle there are three roles: *Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim*.

Boundaries act as borders or limits between us and others. Boundaries can be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Examples of physical boundaries include our sense of personal space, privacy, safety, money, space, noise, time, etc. Mental and emotional boundaries concern our beliefs, feelings, choices, interests, relationships, respect, etc. Spiritual boundaries relate to religion and spiritual practices. Within these four domains, we have both receptive boundaries, which are self-protective, and expressive boundaries, which are respectful of others. For example, a receptive boundary belief could be "it's not ok for anyone to verbally abuse me," and an expressive boundary belief could be "it's not ok for me to verbally abuse others".

A boundary is like a wall around us. That wall may be high and built of strong boulders, with no doors or windows. At the other extreme, it may be low and weak and easily assaulted. Neither of these types of boundaries serves us well. While the first type ensures that no one can ever hurt us, it also keeps us isolated. The second leaves us vulnerable to abuse and manipulation. A more desirable wall might be made of bricks, have good windows and a gate with a good lock controlled by us. We can then decide how we will respond when others harm our boundaries.

All of us play each of the 3 roles of the Drama Triangle from time to time. When we play the role of either Persecutor or Rescuer, we violate others' boundaries. When we are in the Victim role, we feel someone has violated one of our boundaries. When we are on the Drama Triangle, we are vulnerable to emotional pain. The goal is to move off the Triangle altogether, to a frame of mind where we are clear about our boundaries to protect ourselves and about how to respect others boundaries.

Many of us can readily identify with the Victim role: someone hasn't respected an important boundary and we feel ignored, abused, or taken advantage of. The Victim's slogan is "poor me!" Others who are playing either the Persecutor or the Rescuer role need to have a Victim to keep their game going, and they will have little incentive to change their ways voluntarily.

To get off the Victim position, you must change your own behavior. Focus on clear problem solving. Think about your boundaries and how to enforce them in a professional manner. An effective strategy when confronted by an individual disregarding boundaries is to remain as neutral as possible in voice

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<sup>1</sup> Cognitive ability refers to general intelligence, memory ability, language skills, and problem solving.

<sup>2</sup> "The Drama Triangle" by Steve Karpman, [MH Today](http://www.mental-health-today.com), [www.mental-health-today.com](http://www.mental-health-today.com).



and manner. Listen carefully to the words of the individual and not the tone or forcefulness in which it is stated. Ignore extraneous comments such as "you never get this right" or "you always create problems for me". Respond to requests in an objective manner. Meet reasonable requests quietly and efficiently. Meet unreasonable ones with logical solutions in which the request is modified to be reasonable and feasible. Minimize verbal negotiation or discussion. Quietly explain what can be provided and move on to other tasks. Fulfill the modified request in as timely a manner as possible.

It's also easy to recognize the Rescuer in us. The Rescuer tends to put others' needs first with protecting and advising. The Rescuer feels responsible for others, not responsible to them. The Rescuer's logic (often unconscious) goes like this: if I can only help her/him enough by doing "x" for them, they will appreciate me. Unfortunately, the Rescuer needs a Victim to rescue. The Rescuer's words and actions are perceived by the recipient as implying weakness or inability: "here, let me do it for you, you poor thing!" The Rescuer's hidden message is that they know better than you what you need. The recipient will often eventually lash out in return. The Rescuer, now feeling like s/he is the Victim, usually says: "I was only trying to help."

If you recognize Rescuer tendencies in yourself, focus on acknowledging and respecting the other person's responsibility for their own life choices. To support individuals with adequate cognitive ability, show empathy and encouragement for any independence. Offer help if they ask for it and you are able to provide assistance. Trust that the other person has 'enough' to make it, and expect them to be responsible for themselves and to make their own choices and decisions.

Few of us easily recognize our own Persecutor tendencies. The Persecutor gives others subtle or not so subtle messages that say "you're no good" or "I'm better than you". Some Persecutors are physically abusive, others verbally or emotionally abusive, like an overly critical parent. Persecutors set unnecessarily strict limits, blame and oppress others. They are mobilized by anger. Their language may be all-inclusive ("you always...") or all exclusive ("you never..."). If you see Persecutor traits in yourself, you can eliminate these by setting clear guidelines for how you treat others.

It takes a bit (or a lot) of self-examination and determination to create appropriate boundaries for ourselves. In our work providing service to others in need, however, that it is one of the best ways to effectively reclaim satisfaction and happiness on the job. The bottom line is "you're worth it!"

