



Self-care is about setting boundaries, letting go

"Some of us have so many voices in our heads, we could hold group therapy by ourselves," said Rokelle Lerner, a popular speaker and trainer on relationships, women's issues, and addicted family systems.

This internal chorus is often composed of voices from our family of origin, voices of critical teachers or bosses, voices from past relationships or current situations. Often these voices are drowned out by our own voicenagging, reprimanding, berating, but rarely praising us.

In times of stress or chaos, the voices grow louder and it's easy to go numb, Lerner recently told the audience at Hazelden's Women Healing Conference in Minneapolis. "We become estranged from our purpose and our passion. Our response is fear, and our reaction is an attempt at control." We frequently become children again during times of stress reverting to old and unhealthy patterns that were present in dysfunctional families or relationships. Our boss becomes our mother, the vindictive coworker becomes the childhood bully. Although we are adults, we feel like vulnerable children, and this vulnerability puts us at risk for depression, substance abuse, or other addictive behaviors.

"We need to 'grow ourselves up' when we feel little," said Lerner. Growing up is about setting appropriate boundaries and limits and turning from reactivity to creativity. "Without boundaries, we all react to the past and retreat to family patterns," said Lerner. Boundaries communicate "what I value I will protect, but what you value I will respect."

Lerner said that growing up is about maintaining dignity and integrity, and being "authentic" with ourselves -- a skill that takes practice and preparation. It's about learning how or whether you want to "show up" in a situation, how you want to communicate what you need or want to say, and then taking the consequences for what you say and do. It's also about listening attentively and with respect. When people communicate clearly, directly, honestly, and sensitively, they are learning to speak from the best part of themselves to the best part of others, said Lerner.

Healthy adults learn how to make appropriate requests, how to set limits, and how to take action, said Lerner. She gave an example of a skateboarder who taunted a woman by skating too close to her, knocking the newspaper she held out of her hands. The woman at first reacted explosively by yelling and calling the adolescent every derogatory name she could think of. He just laughed and walked away. Overcoming that first raw reaction, she called him back, this time explaining in a much calmer voice, "What I meant to say is that you scared me. I thought you were going to hurt me."

"If you can't identify your emotions right away, at least you can control your behavior," said Lerner. This "fake it 'til you make it" approach is one of the first things people recovering from addiction learn. It often requires counting to 10, breathing deeply, or excusing yourself until you feel more in control. Reacting reflectively rather than reflexively opens the door for honest interaction.

Boundaries differ for each individual and for each situation, but run along a continuum from "too intrusive" on one end to "too distant" on the other. The trick is to pay close attention to your instincts and feelings so you can strike a healthy balance in relationships that will honor your own boundaries. If an interaction feels inappropriate or uncomfortable, the chances are a personal boundary is being tested or crossed or a need is not getting met.

The more we practice sifting through all the voices in our heads, tuning into and trusting the one clear voice within that guides and protects us, the better we will get at identifying and respecting our own personal boundaries. We will also get better at developing strategies to take the best possible care of ourselves when we feel our boundaries are being violated. We discover how outlets like mutual-help

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groups, hot baths, long walks, and prayer or meditation feed our soul better than drugs or alcohol. We discover how good it feels to be a grown-up.

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