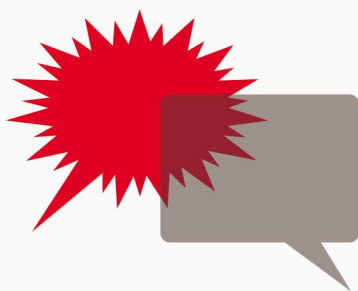


HOW TO HAVE *THAT* **DIFFICULT** **CONVERSATION**

GAINING THE SKILLS *for* HONEST
and MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION



Previously Titled *Boundaries Face to Face*

DR. HENRY CLOUD
DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

Authors of the *New York Times* bestseller *Boundaries*

ZONDERVAN

How to Have That Difficult Conversation

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

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PART I

WHY YOU NEED
to HAVE That
DIFFICULT
CONVERSATION

The Talk Can Change Your Life

As we speak around the country at conferences on relationships, we will often hear some version of the following story.

A man will come up and say, “Thanks for your materials on setting limits and boundaries. They have changed my life and my marriage.”

We will say, “Thank you, too. So what book did you read?”

“I didn’t read a book,” the man will say. “My wife did!”

He will go on to explain: “I was a crummy communicator with my wife. I controlled her, I had some bad habits, and I had no spiritual life to speak of. Then she read *Boundaries*, and she started applying the principles. That’s when things started changing for both of us. It took some time and effort, but I’m really different now. We are closer, and we have more respect for each other and more freedom in the relationship. I’m doing a lot better with those bad habits, and I’m waking up to my relationship with God.”

You would normally expect someone to talk about a book he has actually read. However, this man’s unexpected response illustrates a reality: The person who has the problem in a relationship often isn’t taking responsibility for his problem. This was bad news for the man’s wife. She wanted to see change, but he either didn’t see a problem, thought it wasn’t a big issue, or thought his wife was overreacting. This can leave the wife who cares for her husband feeling helpless, discouraged, and less able to feel love in her heart for him.

YOU CAN CHANGE THE RELATIONSHIP ALONE

But there is good news. Though the person with the problem may not be taking responsibility for, or “owning,” the problem, the person affected by the problem can change things. You may be the motivated one, the one who is concerned, sees the problem, and feels discomfort from it, whether it be a bad attitude or a bad behavior. In fact, you may be feeling more pain and discomfort than the other person. In our example, the wife, before confronting her husband, most likely had to deal with isolation, lack of freedom, his bad habits, and the emptiness of not having a spiritual partner.

Things can change when the person experiencing the effects of the problem takes the initiative to resolve it. This wife took the first step. She became aware that her husband’s ways weren’t good for either of them and that nothing would change unless she did something herself.

That first step is often a conversation, a talk, a face-to-face confrontation with the other person. It is a conversation in which the

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two people discuss the problem and what can be done about it. It is a talk of truth. That single conversation may be all that’s needed. But more likely, it will be the beginning of a series of conversations and events, as it was with the marriage in our example.

We want to affirm and validate your decision to have “the conversation you have been avoiding.” How to have that conversation is the core need this book addresses. *You need a caring yet honest and effective way to confront someone in your life.* The Bible teaches—and research supports the idea—that you can develop the skills and tools to be able to confront well.

WHAT IS A BOUNDARY?

Before we go further, however, we need to define a term that will come up a lot in this book: *boundary*.

Simply put, a boundary is your personal “property line.” It defines who you are, where you end, and where others begin. It refers to the truth, to reality, to what is. When you confront someone about a problem, you are setting a boundary. You can set a boundary with your words when you are honest and when you establish a consequence for another’s hurtful actions.

Boundaries help define who we are in our relationships. When we know what we want and do not want, what we are for and against, what we love and hate, what is “me” and what is “not me,” we are setting boundaries. People with good boundaries are clear about their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes—in the way that Jesus taught: “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matt. 5:37). People without clear boundaries are unsure of their opinions, feelings, and beliefs. They find themselves easily controlled by the demands of others because they feel unsure of themselves when they need to take a stand.

Boundaries also help protect us from injury and harm. By setting boundaries we can take responsibility for the lives and gifts God has given us: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23). Boundaries protect our values, feelings, time, energy, and attitudes. When a person says to another, “I want you to stop criticizing me in public,” he is setting a protective boundary.

God himself has boundaries. He designed them and lives them out. He is clear on who he is, what he is for, and what he is against. He is for relationship, truth, love, and honesty, and he is against oppression, injustice, sin, and evil: “For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity” (Isa. 61:8). (For more information on boundaries, please refer to our books *Boundaries*, *Boundaries in Marriage*, *Boundaries with Kids*, and *Boundaries in Dating*.)

In this book we deal with one specific aspect of boundaries: We tell you how to set them by having a helpful and effective “talk” with another person. We will sometimes refer to that confrontation as a *boundary conversation*, that is, a talk with someone in which you confront a problem you want to resolve with the person.

HAVING “THE TALK”

The last time someone said to you, “I need to talk to you,” how did that strike you? Did you think, *Maybe she needs to tell me how much she appreciates me*. More likely you thought, *I’m in trouble*. When we consider having “the talk” with someone, it may create much anxiety and throw up many red flags. It may signal conflict, criticism, and even the end of the relationship.

Many of us live in two worlds when it comes to relationships. In one world we have friendly conversations in which we avoid all disagreements; in the other we have major conflict-type conversations that tear everybody and everything up. In the first world

we have connection without truth, and in the second we have truth without connection.

Many of us live in two worlds when it comes to relationships. In one we have connection without truth; in the other we have truth without connection.

God did not design us to live in these two worlds, having these two types of relationships. He wants us to live in the one world, where he lives and where truth and love coexist as allies, not adversaries. Our connections are best when they are truthful, and our truth

is best when we are connected. The Bible calls this *truth in love*: “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Eph. 4:15). Conversations work best when people both care for each other and tell the truth to each other. Good things happen. People get along, resolve issues, and still maintain the connection they need.

When people have had enough bad experiences in relationships, they begin avoiding conflict and confrontation altogether. They withdraw from truthful conversations. They fear the following things:

- **Losing the relationship:** They fear that the person will withdraw either emotionally or physically from them.
- **Being the object of anger:** They don't want to receive someone's rage or blame about being confronted.
- **Being hurtful:** They are concerned about wounding the person and hurting their feelings.
- **Being perceived as bad:** They want to be seen as a nice person, and they fear they will be seen as unloving and unkind.

These fears often prevent people from sitting down and having the necessary talks that would solve problems. If you identify with any of these fears, it would be worth your while to learn where they come from and how to resolve them. We don't have space to go into that topic now, but our book *Boundaries* is a good source for this information.

Right now we want to talk more about the major benefits of confronting others with whom you have a problem. Becoming aware of the benefits and advantages of a loving and balanced conversation will help you to get past the fear and have that talk. That is the goal of the next chapter.

The Benefits of a Good Conversation

I (John) often think about all the people who have helped me grow in significant ways over the years. When they come to mind, I reflect on the many ways they gave me compassion, understanding, encouragement, and guidance. Not only that, but I am also thankful for these people's honesty, confrontations, and directness, which pretty much saved my life in many ways. I am the grateful recipient of the benefits of good confrontation.

For example, I remember years ago when I took on too many work responsibilities, and life started fraying at the fringes. I enjoyed all the things I was doing, and they were meaningful, so that's how I justified going too hard. An old friend, Carl, however, got my attention over lunch during that time when he said, "It's getting so that I don't know if I really know you anymore."

"What are you talking about? Of course you know me," I replied.

Carl proceeded to gently tick off several things he had been observing in me lately: self-preoccupation, a lack of emotional presence with others, distractedness, and unavailability.

I couldn't ignore his words, for I knew he wasn't bashing me. He really was concerned about my well-being. And his points truly resonated within me. That was a real turning point for me. I made some overdue adjustments in my work and relationships. Carl's confrontation may well have preserved me from some serious problems later.

We all need to know that the hard work of confrontation has a worthwhile payoff. In the rest of this book we will show the particulars of how to engage in a face-to-face conversation, and you will get examples, tips, and how-tos. But in this chapter we want you to see the seven benefits that come from “telling the truth,” and why God has designed things this way.

PRESERVING LOVE

Probably the most important benefit of a good confrontation is that it *preserves love* in a relationship. This may seem counterintuitive to you. You may think, *This doesn't make sense. When I confront someone, they will either get mad or leave the relationship.* This can and does happen. But confrontation was not designed to make someone angry or chase him or her away. In fact, it was designed to do the opposite.

The Latin term for confrontation means “to turn your face toward, to look at frontally.” It merely indicates that you are turning toward the relationship and the person. You are face-to-face, so to speak. In confrontation, people simply face the relationship and deal with an aspect of the connection that needs to be addressed. The intent is to make the relationship better, to deepen the intimacy, and to create more love and respect between two people.

That is why, to be an effective confronter, you need to understand that *confrontation works best when it serves love*. Boundary conversations are motivated and driven by love. They promote the purposes of love. They enhance a relationship, not end it.

How can confrontation preserve love? Basically by protecting the relationship from elements that would harm it. Love needs protection. It is like tending a garden. If you want your plants to survive and thrive, you need to do more than water and feed them. You also need to protect them from bad weather, insects, and disease.

In the same way, things like disconnection, defensiveness, control, immaturity, and selfishness have the power to infect an entire

relationship and contaminate it. Unchecked, they can harm or even end a connection.

When I was in graduate school, I waited tables at restaurants. At one point I moved to a different restaurant closer to home. Scott, a friend of mine and also a grad student, was working there as a senior waiter. In fact, he knew I was looking for another place, and he had told me about the position at his restaurant.

One night Scott asked me if we could talk. We sat down for a cup of coffee after work. When we had settled in, he leaned toward me and said, “Ever since you came to this restaurant, I’ve felt as if you were competing with me for the senior spot. I wanted to let you know that’s how it seems, and ask you what you think.”

I thought over what he had told me and said, “I think you’re right. I have been competing with you, and I haven’t even been aware of it. I’m really sorry, Scott.”

“No problem,” he said. “I just wanted to get this cleared up between us.”

I gave up competing with Scott and concentrated on doing my job. Scott’s early intervention helped prevent a huge tear in our relationship. We worked together for some time after that, and we have remained friends to this day. A good confrontation can preserve a relationship: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6).

RESOLVING ALIENATION

Healthy confrontations not only preserve relationships, but also bring disconnected people together. Think about someone in your life with whom you have an unspoken conflict or issue. Maybe he isn’t emotionally available to you. Maybe she is critical of you. Maybe he expects you to solve his problems for him. Whatever the case, when an existing conflict is not brought into the relationship, it hurts the relationship. It disconnects and alienates you from the other person. *The extent to which two people in a relationship can*

bring up and resolve issues is a critical marker of the soundness of the relationship.

Relationships are designed by God to be whole, and the more parts of you—such as strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, passions, desires, and failures—that are connected to the parts of the other person, the greater the closeness, depth, and meaning of the relationship. Paul made this appeal to the hearts of the people at Corinth: “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also” (2 Cor. 6:11–13).

Our hearts are to be open to each other. Where there is some unspoken, unaddressed, and unresolved area of conflict, our hearts can become closed. Many times in my marriage, my insensitivity or my not being there for Barbi has caused her to withdraw emotionally. The alienation I felt was painful. I wanted all of her to be with me, and part of her wasn’t there. For example, a few years back I made a financial decision without consulting Barbi. At the time, I thought it wasn’t important enough, but when I did tell her, she felt out of the loop, and she was hurt. For a time there was distance between us while she worked through her feelings about this.

Nothing is more miserable than to be in a relationship with someone, yet disconnected from her at the same time. It doesn’t feel right, because it isn’t right. God did not design us for disconnected relationships. It wasn’t a lot of fun when either Barbi or I would bring up a problem, but at least we were talking. We would work it out the best way we could; but most important, the alienation was gone.

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I cannot overstate the importance of this issue. It is at the heart of the way God designed relationship. Relationships are fundamentally about love, because God's relationship with us is fundamentally about love: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God" (1 John 4:7).

Two people meeting to have the talk is a first step toward ending alienation. *A boundary conversation is, in and of itself, a connection.* The two are bringing their differences to the light of relationship and seeing what can be done. This might not be pleasant, but it is far better than a relationship that is a living death, where feelings of hurt, anger, conflicted love, and sadness never go away. Not talking about strong feelings doesn't make them go away; in fact, they become more pronounced in our attempts to live as though they don't exist. The two people in this kind of relationship try to get along by skirting issues, their emotions, and ultimately their deep love for each other, and they end up with a shell of a relationship. But when the timing is right and when both people's hearts are in the right place, the shell can again be filled with love, joy, and fulfillment.

Often a couple will remark on how connected they feel after even a poorly done confrontation. Though they may have said some things wrong or handled things badly, they were still able to sense the presence of the other person, and presence was preferable to the polite absence they had been feeling.

EMPOWERING

Confrontation also brings empowerment, the ability to make choices and changes in your relationship. God created all of us to be change agents for each other. We have a responsibility to influence the people in our lives to be the best possible people they can be: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11).

When we encounter a long-lasting difficulty in a relationship, especially if we don't have the skills to confront, we feel helpless about seeing any change. We see the problem, we don't like what it's doing to the connection, but we don't know how to broach the issue or do anything about it.

This sense of helplessness often translates into resignation and passivity. We give up inside and accept that things will never change. You often see people who have been in a bad marriage for a long time take this stance: *He [or she] will never change, so I'll just have to live with it.*

While most would agree that we can't *make* someone change, it is also true that we can do much to *promote* change. When we learn to confront lovingly, directly, and effectively, we are often pleased in the change not only in our relationship but also in ourselves. We feel a sense of power that we can make changes and we have choices. We were designed to both connect and act. Confrontation puts the "act" into the connection.

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I saw a man transform into another person after confronting his controlling father. Though he was in his forties, he had never been able to stand up to his dad. Finally, after a lot of work and preparation, he had a very appropriate and healthy confrontation with his father. He was direct, uncondemning, and caring. Dad didn't handle it well. He was defensive and critical, but the son was ready for that. Within days, I saw this depressed, burdened, stoop-shouldered man begin standing taller, becoming more creative and energetic, and reaching out to others. The conversation helped him own and integrate his personal power.

Often we will hear a person express her powerlessness in this way: "I've tried everything and nothing works with him, so I'm giving up." However, when we investigate further, we find that "trying everything" is often "trying the wrong things." She may have tried

to confront, and either she was ignored or the conflict escalated. She did not know the best way to confront. When that person learns the tools she needs and employs them effectively, she will most likely gain a sense that she can be an agent of change in her relationship.

SOLVING A PROBLEM

Learning to have that conversation helps you solve problems. This seems obvious, but it's an important benefit of confrontation. Boundary conversations are geared toward addressing and resolving an issue that is keeping two people apart or is hurtful to someone. When things work well, a problem is solved and you can move on in the relationship. This can apply to all sorts of relational problems: your date's sexual advances, your wife's fiscal irresponsibility, or your boss's unrealistic demands.

The world just works this way. When you expose problems to the light of your relationship, it is far more likely that things will improve than when you ignore or deny them. Problems don't tend to go away by themselves over time. They often get worse. And that is the converse principle here: *What is ignored tends not to be solved.*

Alcoholics Anonymous has a great definition of how we change: *We change when the pain of remaining the same is greater than the pain of changing.* Confrontation can help solve a problem; avoiding confrontation can make a problem worse.

Part of the uniqueness of a boundary conversation is that it has a focus and an agenda. It is not generalized dissatisfaction with a person; rather, it points out some specific issue that is driving two people apart. People who confront well make a clear request for change from the other person: spend time with me, stop getting so angry, take responsibility for your addiction, and so on. The emphasis is not on renovating the entire person—which can be overwhelming—but on solving a specific problem.

A friend of mine has a son in high school. She knew her son was becoming more estranged and distant from her than was normal for a kid that age. She didn't know how to approach him. Then, by accident, she read an email he had written to a friend in which he had said some negative things about his relationship with her. She was upset.

My friend went to her son and told him what she had read. It was very difficult for both of them at first, but as it worked out, they both reached a greater awareness of the problems between them, and it gave them the focus and incentive to begin working on them. They are still in the process, but they are both good people, and I think their prospects for solving this relationship problem are high.

BUILDING GROWTH

Healthy confrontations help people grow emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. When you bring a problem to someone, something will probably change. Maybe you were wrong, and you will change. Or maybe the other person will change because of the conversation you had with him. But things will not stay the same. One or both of you gets stretched and helped to become a better person.

Good boundary conversations help us grow by making us aware of what we are doing and how our behavior affects others. This is often a springboard into looking at patterns and issues within ourselves that are a rich source of personal change and improvement.

You deliver the ingredients of growth to the people in your life. Part of the reason you are with whomever you are with is to provide those ingredients for those people. As the Bible says, you are an administrator of God's grace: "Each

one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

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Your confrontation may be the wakeup call someone needed. It may affirm something she knew in the back of her mind, but was afraid to admit. It may bring relief to someone who has been hiding a problem.

In fact, without caring confrontation, there is little real growth. When a relationship has love but no truth, it either keeps the people too comfortable or even makes them more immature. Often, for example, a mother who has an out-of-control teen will try to be positive and encouraging all the time, hoping her child will get better. What is more likely to happen is that while the teen does benefit from the love, he gets further out of control since no one is confronting him, establishing firm rules, or enforcing consequences. Kids, especially, grow when they experience truth as well as love.

CLARIFYING REALITY

Good confrontations also help people to see the other person for who they really are. Often, when you are afraid to tell the truth to someone, you avoid or withdraw from them. The lack of real, face-to-face confrontation increases the distortions in your mind about the negative qualities of that person. The distortions grow when they are not modified and corrected by reality. You perceive that person as more dangerous, out of control, and powerful than he or she really is. It then becomes a vicious circle: You were afraid to confront anyway, and the more you avoid the talk, the scarier the person becomes, which increases your avoidance.

When people learn to confront the right way, reality comes back into the picture, and they see themselves and the other person in a much clearer light. They realize that they themselves are grownups with choices and freedom and that the other person is just another person. It takes the power out of the fear of the other person's responses.

A man I was counseling described his wife as a rageaholic, fire-breathing dragon. He talked about how intense her anger was and

how out-of-control she was. I suggested he bring her to our next meeting so we could work on the marriage. He looked uncertain, but he brought her along the next week.

When his wife entered my office, I thought I was looking at the wrong woman. She was petite and soft-spoken — no scales and wings to be found. This wasn't to say that she didn't have an anger problem. He was right about that, and we did deal with it. But the more honest he became and the less he avoided confrontation, the less he saw her as a terrifying dragon. Good confrontations bring reality into the picture.

AVOIDING BEING PART OF THE PROBLEM

An old saying from the 1960s goes something like this: *If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.* There is a lot of truth to this in relationships. Not only are there clear benefits to having that talk, but there is also a responsibility to confront. Even though you may be in a relationship with a person who has a severe problem or behavior, you may be helping the problem continue and hindering the solution.

When modern psychiatric and psychological researchers began studying addictions, they realized that most of the time, the addict does not live in a vacuum. Instead, he lives in a system of relationships, some of which serve to enable his behavior; that is, someone unwittingly tries to keep the addict from the consequences and effects of his addiction. In an attempt to help, the enabler instead rescues the addict from the discomfort that would drive him to face and solve his problem. As the enabling person becomes aware of this and allows the addict to feel his pain, good things begin to happen.

For thousands of years the Bible has named these realities. For example, see what God says about dealing with a rageaholic: "A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will

have to do it again” (Prov. 19:19). Many people have experienced the frustration of finding the problem coming back the day after the rescue.

The Bible teaches that we have a duty to warn each other, that we are part of God’s means of helping one another stay in the path of growth. It goes further than that, however. Not only should we warn each other, but if we avoid doing so, we must bear some responsibility for this as well:

“When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself” (Ezek. 3:18–19).

Sobering words, but profoundly clear. When you confront a person the right way, she always has a choice, and she may ignore your warning. Sad as that might be, you will still know that you have done what you could and that you have not participated in that person’s self-destruction.

Sometimes all it takes is a little nudge. As a youth, I was a Boy Scout. Scouting was a big part of my life, and Troop 4 was a very active troop, with lots of camping and activities. During the latter years of my scouting experience, I was in my teens and getting close to earning my Eagle rank. As a teen, however, I was also experimenting with becoming an individual, which involved some rebellious attitudes. During one weekend campout, when we were putting up our tents, I used some pretty rough language to make my buddies laugh. It was the wrong time to do this, as our scoutmaster, Mr. DeKeyser—whom we called “DK”—was walking by.

DK pulled me aside, looked at me, and quietly said, “You’re too close. Don’t mess up.”

That was all it took.

DK's six words were enough. I knew what he meant. He knew I knew. No more was needed. He never brought it up again. From then on, I curbed my tongue—as much as a teenager can anyway—and stayed pretty much on track until I got the Eagle.

Six words were enough. I knew what he meant. He knew I knew.

Now, this wasn't about me being on drugs, being violent, or ditching school. My language wasn't a huge thing as problems go, but at the same time, it's very possible that eventually it could have been, had not DK said those six words to me. He helped me become aware of what I was doing and its possible effects. And he did it right: He was on my side, he was direct and noncondemning, and he let it go to see how I would handle it. I have always been grateful to DK for the little nudge of correction that helped keep me on the right path.

OUR OTHER MOTIVES

As you have read these benefits of confrontation, we hope you are more motivated than ever to learn the skills. At the same time, be aware of any darker motives you may feel about confronting someone, such as wanting to fix or change the person, or to punish and get revenge. Let those motives go, and stay on the higher road.

In the next section we will deal with the specific elements of all good confrontations.

PART II

The
ESSENTIALS
of a GOOD
CONVERSATION



Be Emotionally Present

Being emotionally present and connected while we are confronting another person is the first essential of a good conversation. It truly requires a work of grace in us.

Being present refers to being in touch and in tune with our own feelings as well as those of the other person. This is an important skill, because when we are “there”—that is, emotionally present—we are available to the other person. He is not shut off from us while we are telling him a difficult reality about himself and the relationship. It is hard for anyone to absorb a confrontation. Presence and connection help to make it tolerable.

A boundary conversation is very difficult because it feels unnatural—and it is unnatural, in that the natural person within us does not think this way. On our own, we seek to protect ourselves from discomfort because we are “weak in [our] natural selves” (Rom. 6:19). We don’t want to be vulnerable and emotional in a confrontation, as we might be hurt. That is why we need grace for this essential.

Also, when you are present and connected to the other person, you are doing something very important for the relationship: *You are providing what you are requesting.* You want the other person to be “there” with you. This is why you are confronting a problem in the first place; the issue has caused a rift in emotional presence. In the same way that God takes initiative to reach out to his alienated children, you are being with the person who is not with you.

Because you have taken the first step, this helps him be emotionally present with you.

Here are ways to help you “be there” in your boundary conversation.

Be Warm

Remember that although confrontations can be uncomfortable, this does not mean you need to be angry, detached, or distant from the other person. As much as you are able, be warm and available to him. What you say is highly colored by how you are with the person. If you are warm, he is much more likely to receive what you have to say. If you are not present, he can't be sure of your intent, motives, or your heart, and you run the risk of failure.

If you think you are too afraid to be present, don't have the talk yet. Take those feelings somewhere else before you get into the conversation and deal with them in a safe context. Better to do that than to come across as cold and distant.

Be in a Conversation, Not a Lecture

Being present also means allowing the other person to respond. You have a side to present, and so probably does she. Be there with her feelings as well as your own. Listen to her heart even when you don't agree with her stance.

In extreme circumstances the talk may be not a conversation, but an announcement, as in a formal intervention, for example. But even if you are doing an intervention, the more present you can be, the better your chances are of being received.

Connect Even with Differences

Staying present means being “there” not only when you agree with each other, but also when you disagree, when there is tension, and when you are confronting. We tend to connect when people are on our side and draw back when they are not. However, as much as

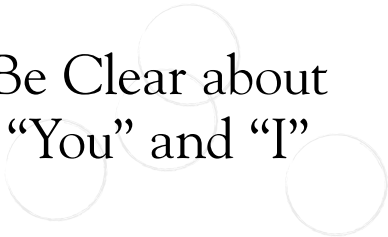
possible, be safe enough to be present with the person even when he resists or gets angry.

Discomfort versus Injury

We need to be willing to suffer discomfort—to a point. The limit here is the limit of injury. If you get in a bad situation with a person who can truly injure you because of where you are emotionally, or because of how powerful an influence she currently is with you, you will need to guard your heart (Prov. 4:23) to avoid having wounds that would set your spiritual growth back. Sometimes you may need to not let the person in too deeply, or even end the conversation until a better time to protect yourself. At the same time, if the talk is more discomforting than injurious, you may want to press on toward reconciliation.

Observe Yourself

Be aware of how present or absent you are in the talk. Monitor what makes you shut down and what makes you open up. When you are aware of yourself, you have more choices and options available. I remember one boundary conversation I was having with a friend. I thought I was pretty present until he said, “Look at your arms.” I looked down, and I had wrapped my arms around myself protectively. Some presence! That made for a more interesting talk that day.



Be Clear about “You” and “I”

Any good confrontation takes into account that two people are involved. This sounds obvious, but it really isn't, and it is an essential part of an effective boundary conversation.

One reason you have a problem in the first place is that you and the person you want to confront are not of one mind; you aren't the same person. You don't see things the same way nor feel the same way, and you have different ideas on what to do about it. This is not a bad thing, in and of itself. The differences between you can help both of you grow and enjoy life.

The problem arises when you don't clearly distinguish your feelings and opinions from the other person's, especially when having the talk. The process of problem solving and reconciliation can quickly get bogged down. You see this when people say things like “You need to change this” rather than “I need for you to change this.” There is an “I” who has a desire and a request, and there is a “you” who is being asked to change something. That is clear.

A friend of mine had great difficulty with this issue in her marriage. When she was tired of cooking and wanted to go out to dinner, she would say to her husband, “You haven't taken us out for a while,” or, “You probably need a night out to dinner.” Her husband was suspicious of these sorts of statements, because he would feel blamed or manipulated. When she said instead, “I don't want to cook tonight, and I would like to go out to dinner,” she clarified whose desire it was to go out to dinner, and he responded much better.

If you are not clear about “you” and “I” in your confrontation, the other person may feel controlled by you, you may assume feelings he doesn’t have, or he may balk at whatever you want. Here are some suggestions to clarify your communication.

Look at It Empathically

Reflect on how you don’t like it when people try to put their words in your mouth. Think about how you disconnect from another person when she tells you what you are feeling when it is really what she *wants* you to feel. Reflecting on your own experience will give you empathy for the other person’s situation and will help you be clearer about your own opinions and emotions. Remember that even though confronting is hard, so is receiving a confrontation. Therefore allow the other person the grace to have her own responses to your opinions.

Be Clear in Your Own Mind

The more clear you are *ahead of time* about what you want in this relationship and what you are asking the other person to do, the better things will go. Write out, or talk through with a friend, exactly what the “I” and “you” parts are. Then, when it is time for the conversation, you will have a road map in your head for what you want. I have seen many breakdowns happen when the person being confronted says, “So what do you really want?” and the confronter gets flustered. Have a specific answer for that question before you begin the conversation.

Speak from Your Need, Not His

Tell the other person, “I really need more commitment from you in our dating, or I don’t think I can move forward.” This is much better than “You need to be more committed to me.” He may not experience that need, and he is likely to resent you for telling him what he needs. Speaking from your own need helps you avoid being seen as the “parent” in the relationship, a position that never helps.

When people say, “We need to talk,” for example, they are confusing their wishes with those of the other person. It’s much better to say, “I need to talk to you.”

Deal with Any Fears of Separateness

Often, a person who avoids clearly saying “I need” and “I want” has a problem with experiencing herself as a separate person, with her own set of values, desires, dreams, and feelings. Saying what she needs and wants makes her feel very isolated and alone; her difficulty in expressing wants and needs indicates that she is not comfortable with being an individual.

If this is your situation, get some help from knowledgeable people on how to become more established in your own identity, so that you are not so afraid. (Our book *Boundaries* is a good resource for this process.)

Be Humble

You have no control over the person you are confronting. More than that, you are asking for something you need from him. This is a humble position, and it helps to accept it. Saying “I want” and “I need” is a way of letting the other person know that he is important to you, that you do need him, and that you are aware he might see things differently. While this is not a very comfortable position, it’s the best position, because the other person knows he is free to choose and he is not controlled by you. The Bible refers to God’s attitude toward this: “You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty” (Ps. 18:27).

As much as possible, stay away from the “we need to” and “you need to” traps. Speak from your own experience, your own heart, and your own needs. This increases the likelihood that your side will be heard, because it has been clearly identified as your side. No one likes to be told who he is or what he should think.



Clarify the Problem

In the previous chapter we urged you to be clear about what is yours and what is the other person's. Now we encourage you to be clear about the nature of your problem with the other person. Many people run into logjams when they attempt to confront, because they are not clear about the problem. Their inability to focus on the problem itself can end up in confusion, distance, alienation, and lack of resolution.

Don't lose focus and end up going over a whole list of offenses that overwhelms the person being confronted. Don't start with "It seems you don't pick up after yourself as regularly as you should" and end up with "What about the time you forgot the kids at the mall last year?" You may have so many unconfessed issues with the other person that in the momentum of the conversation, you bring up everything else you have a problem with. Holding problems inside in an isolated fashion makes this worse. In these cases, unburden yourself with some friends who can empathize with you and help you think through and process these problems. Then you can settle on the one subject you want to deal with in the problem relationship.

Let us look at the three important elements of the problem itself and what you would like to see happen.

Clarify the Nature of the Problem

Be clear and focused as to what the problem is really about. Make the issue as understandable as possible to the other person. You want to have your terms clear between you so that you are both on the same page and can work toward resolution together. Furthermore, the other person may be unaware of the problem, so you need to shoulder the responsibility of stating the problem clearly.

This step may have more than one level to it. For example, a husband might say to his mother, “Mom, I’ve noticed that you are pretty critical of Laurie’s cooking and parenting. You put her down a couple of times in front of everyone at the party last week. I don’t know what this is about, but it seems you are seldom pleased with how she does things.” Notice the two levels: the specifics, and then an observation about the nature of the specifics. This gives the other person clear information about what you are concerned about.

Clarify the Effects of the Problem

Include not only the facts and realities about the problem, but also what it does to you and the relationship. Obviously, it must affect you at some important level or you would not be bringing it up. It helps to talk about the effects for two reasons. First, the other person might not be aware of what he is doing to you, and becoming aware often helps him see how important the issue is. Second, talking about the effects lets him know that he is not being judged and criticized as an imperfect project you are working on, but that his behavior is hurting you.

The husband talking to his mother might say, “Laurie gets discouraged, because she knocks herself out for you. The kids are confused about why you are so mean to Mom. Dad is embarrassed because he feels caught in the middle. And you and I get disconnected, because even though I love you, Laurie is my wife, and she’s getting hurt. So it makes things worse for me, you, and all of us.”

Clarify Your Desire for Change

Avoid the mistake of stopping with the negative aspects of the problem. Doing that can make the person feel as though she just got dumped on, with no way to resolve the problem, or feel that there is no way to please you, that you are insatiably critical. Instead, let her know what you would like to see that would change the situation and solve the problem. This gives her hope, a structure, and a chance to do something to make the relationship better.

In our example, the husband might say, “Here’s what I would like you to do. If it’s a small matter, drop it. I don’t bring up little things you do. If it’s a big thing, pull Laurie aside quietly and tell her your concerns. She is very open to constructive feedback. And finally, notice the good things she does, and talk about them in front of everyone. I would really appreciate it. It would bring me closer to you, and I think the whole family would be happier.”

At the heart of the problem is usually a relationship that matters to you. As you keep the issues and your desires clear, you don’t attack or diminish the relationship and you preserve the connection.

Balance Grace and Truth

A successful confrontation will always involve balancing grace and truth. Grace is your being on the side of, or “for,” the other person as well as the relationship. Truth is the reality of whatever you need to say about the problem. This balancing combination is referred to as being *neutralized*.

Being *neutralized* doesn’t mean being *neutral* about the problem—not taking a side or expressing an opinion. In fact, the clearer you express your opinion, the better your chances of success. Instead, being neutralized means that having grace and truth together counters the bad effects of having one of these by itself. In other words, grace alone or truth alone can have a negative effect in a confrontation, but having the two together neutralizes the negatives.

Jesus was the perfect combination of these two elements of growth. Jesus’ approach was superior to that of the law of Moses: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). People need both grace and truth in relationships with God and with each other.

Think about a time when someone told you the truth without love. You probably felt attacked, judged, or condemned. No matter how accurate the truth, it hardly mattered, because the hurtful feelings erased the truth in the confrontation. In good boundary conversations, truth needs grace for the person to safely receive and digest the information.

Now reflect on a time you received grace without any truth. Grace comforts us and keeps us safe and loved, but it doesn't provide reality, structure, direction, or correction. You may have come away from that encounter feeling refreshed and encouraged, but without the path or insight to know what to do next. Truth neutralizes that problem and provides the way we need.

Here are some ways to keep both aspects in balance when you are having the talk.

Keep in Mind That the Other Person Needs Both Just as You Do

Remember that even though you might be upset with someone, his ability to take in truth will also require love and grace, just as yours does. Your intent is not to fix, straighten out, or punish. It is to provide enough amounts of truth and grace to reconcile and solve the problem.

Lead with Grace

It is always best to start with grace, as it sets the stage for the other person to be able to tolerate the truth. Tell the person, "Before we get into the topic, I want you to know I really care about you and about us. I want us to be better, and I want us to be on the same team. I hope I can convey that to you even when we talk about the problem." Don't assume that she automatically knows these things. In fact, in a confrontation the other person often needs more reassurance of the grace, because the situation may access her own unloved and condemned parts.

Keep Both Elements Present at the Same Time

Keep grace and truth integrated and woven together in your talk. As much as possible, avoid the tendency to have a "grace" part and then a "truth" part of the talk; otherwise, it could seem like two different, and even inconsistent, talks. When you are confronting,

sprinkle in your care. When you are caring, sprinkle in the truth. For example, you might say, “While I want us to be close again, this problem is getting in the way, and I need to resolve it between us. I can’t dance around it or ignore it. But it’s hard, because I don’t want this talk to distance us even more.”

Be Aware of Your Imbalances

None of us are totally in the middle here. Some of us lean toward grace and are too soft on the truth. Others may be very clear about an issue and can come across harsh and critical. Work on developing whichever part of grace and truth you are weak on, so that you can stay neutralized in the boundary conversation.

When in Doubt, Go for Grace

If you are unsure at a given point in the conversation, lean toward grace. The damage done by a lack of grace is more severe than the converse. With grace alone, you stand a chance of being able to have another conversation later. With truth alone, the judgment could possibly rupture the safety of the relationship so much that things fall apart.

For example, if the person resists your point, you may want to press it to see if there is another way he can receive it. However, if he becomes increasingly unresponsive, defensive, or angry, this is probably not the time to keep pressing home with truth. Back off, try to reestablish the connection with grace, and try again later. In our parenting book, *Raising Great Kids*, we refer to those times in which you are totally lost in a conflict with a kid. At those times, drop back to the relationship and get reattached. Otherwise, nothing good happens.

In your effort to stay neutralized, keep grace and truth friends with each other, not adversaries. Look to God and his example of keeping the two aspects of life together: “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10).

How to Have That Difficult Conversation

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By Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

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