



Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy When Boundaries Get Crossed

In the previous session we talked about boundaries, how to communicate them to others, and ways in which we can establish a framework to implement them in your own personal environment. In this session we will take a good look at what to do when those boundaries get crossed.



When dealing with a loved one who is either living with addiction, or in the early stages of recovery, personal boundaries are an important part of the journey we are on. As the family member, once we have established the boundaries, we have to be prepared for our limits to be tested.

It is often the case that this is where our problem lies. We don't want to "enforce" any violation of the "rules" we have put in place, and our emotions overtake the plan we had in place. Now we are reacting to our thoughts, instead of following through with the original intention.

While this creates conflict in the environment, it's important to understand where this inability to follow through originates. Typically it comes from a place of fear, not only of what might happen to them, but also fear of how we might feel should they reject our assertions.

This mostly stems from a belief system we have established within our own perception, a belief that for a number of reasons we cannot ask for the things we want. Below is a list of beliefs we keep in mind when establishing our healthy boundaries. These beliefs can actually support us in our actions, and build awareness in these areas:

I have the right:

- To ask for what I want
- To be respected by others
- To be happy
- To express my feelings
- Not to be responsible for my loved ones behaviours, actions or feelings
- To feel safe in my own home
- To be in a non-abusive environment
- To make decisions based on my feelings
- To follow my own values and standards

Remember why we make a boundary request; they are an effective way to say "this is important to me, please pay attention". Boundaries are not a way to punish people for unwanted behaviour.

With that being said, there is the need for motivation in order for an individual to change. If there is no reason to stop doing something then why stop doing it? However, that doesn't always mean we have to hand out punishment in order to achieve our goal.

There is something to be said for the psychological theory of positive and negative reinforcement. In the case of positive reinforcement this can be a number of different things given to the individual if a boundary is not crossed.

Open communication within the family unit can establish what this is, and obviously we do not want to step into the realms of bribery or enabling addictive behaviour here, but simple things of importance to everyone can be used to motivate an individual to change an unwanted behaviour, or even to come back inside a boundary once it has been crossed.



Negative reinforcement is often confused with punishment. In actual fact it is nothing to do with punishment at all. When we apply the concept of negative reinforcement we remove something from the equation in order to provide the required motivation.

For example, if little James does his homework in the requested time frame then he doesn't have to take out the garbage tonight. When we remove an action that an individual does not want to do, it can sometimes provide a higher level of motivation than offering something new.

If all else fails, and you can no longer come up with alternative solutions, then consequences can be used. We want to remember that loved ones will challenge your boundaries, particularly if you have a history of no follow through, so be prepared.



Leading by example is key; modelling the behaviour you are looking for is always a good idea. If you want your loved one to behave in a civilised manner then becoming irate, yelling and screaming, name calling or becoming physically threatening will only deepen the conflict further.

Ultimately setting boundaries and sticking to them can be a difficult task when dealing with a loved one. However, most behaviours are learned, and when the loved one resorts to an "adult temper tantrum" to get his or her way we have to ask ourselves "what part did I play in this" in order to be accountable for our own actions. In the next session we will discuss changing our enabling behaviours along with trust and forgiveness.