

Adapted from courses on
Boundaries.me

A portrait of Dr. Henry Cloud, a middle-aged man with short brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a black leather jacket over a black t-shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a blurred green chalkboard.

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STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH TOXIC PEOPLE

WITH
DR. HENRY CLOUD

About Dr. Henry Cloud

Dr. Cloud is an acclaimed leadership expert, psychologist, and *New York Times* best-selling author. He draws on his extensive experience in clinical psychology and leadership development to impart practical and effective advice.

His 45 books, including the iconic *Boundaries*, have sold nearly 20 million copies worldwide. He devotes his time to consulting and coaching, spreading principles of hope and life-change through speaking, writing, and media.

Blending the disciplines of leadership and human functioning to help CEOs, teams, organizations, and family entities, Dr. Cloud combines clinical psychodynamic ego psychology and object relations theory with human performance.

“I wanted to create a service that felt like a university for the most important lessons in life so that people can get free from dysfunction.”

Dr. Henry Cloud

Dr. Cloud’s work has been featured and reviewed by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, *Los Angeles Times*, and many other publications. *Success Magazine* named Dr. Cloud among the top 25 most influential leaders in personal growth and development, alongside Oprah, Brene Brown, Seth Godin, and others. He is a frequent contributor to CNN, Fox News Channel, and other national media outlets.



Memberships available for as little as **\$9/month.**
Learn more at: boundaries.me

How to Use This Guide

Each strategy in this document will work like this:

Problem

We describe the problem and list an example scenario of where this problem might occur.

Solution

We give you the knowledge and tips you need to tackle the problem.

You can read this guide straight through and get a pretty thorough understanding of how to approach that issue in a variety of scenarios and relationships, or you can use the table of contents to go straight to the section that applies to you right now.

You can further support what you learn in this digital download by becoming a Boundaries.Me member and watch the courses that we recommend to learn more about each topic.

Let's get growing!

01 The Laws of Boundaries

Problem

You don't know what boundaries are, or you don't know how to set them, how to communicate them, or what to do about the fact that you're constantly feeling used, stepped on, and disrespected by people in your life.

Solution

Think of boundaries as property lines. You live inside your boundaries, and you are in control of what is allowed within your boundaries. Outside of your boundaries, you have no control over what happens. People have the freedom to do what they want and act however they want.

In the physical world, boundaries are easy to see. They send the message: This is where my property begins. The owner of the property is legally responsible for what happens on their property. Just as homeowners set physical property lines around their property, we need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives to help us distinguish what is our responsibility and what isn't.

A variety of things, including past hurts, poor models, and misunderstood teachings, result in weak boundaries or boundaries that don't exist at all. Boundaries define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows where each individual ends and someone else begins, leading each person to a sense of ownership and responsibility. Boundaries also protect us from unhealthy or damaging circumstances that would be detrimental to us.

All these things live within our boundaries:

feelings

behaviour

choices

values

desires

thoughts

limits

talents

love & trust

Knowing some basic rules about how boundaries work will help you get started. We call them the “**Laws of Boundaries,**” and they help keep things simple.

02 How to Say No

Problem

Someone asked you for a favor that you can't or don't want to do, or they've made a suggestion to you that you don't wish to take, or they've asked you to do something that goes against your values, or you want to say no, but you find it difficult to do that.

Solution

Saying no can feel difficult because saying "no" creates a cascading array of outcomes and consequences.

"No" is a muscle, and it must be exercised and nurtured. It comes down to our will, and we must have a strong will. The Greek word from which "will" is derived means "desire." We have to have strong desires for what is good and strong desires to protect against what is bad.

We must be able to say no to the bad and yes to the good.

We also need to understand why we say yes and why we say no. Sometimes we say yes because we are talking with someone who we feel that we need something, such as love or approval. Or we say yes because we are afraid of what will happen if we say no. We may feel afraid that we will be abandoned or that we will incur the wrath of the other person.

To resolve this, we must make sure that we are having our needs met in healthy ways and taking responsibility for meeting those needs. As we mature, we must learn to differentiate between the good and bad sources that we engage with to get our needs met.

Good: People who respect our boundaries; people who are “for” us and want what is best for us; activities, habits, and behaviors which contribute to our thriving.

Bad: People who use us merely to get what they need from us or what they are unwilling to do for themselves; people who deceive us and are dishonest about their intentions; people who ask us to compromise our values and deeply held convictions; activities, habits, and behaviors which push us away from thriving.

To be good at saying “no,” we need to have priorities. Priorities are things that come before something else (think about the word “prior”). When you decide what comes first (your faith, your family, your relationships, your dreams), it will become easier for you to say “no” to the things that get in the way of your priorities.

Let your priorities be the strategy that tells you when to say yes and when to say no. Say yes to people and activities that help you realize and fulfill the dreams, relationships, and pursuits that you have prioritized. Say no to the people and activities which push you further away.

Reflect on your reasons for saying yes and no concerning how secure you feel in having your personal needs met.

03

What Makes Someone An Unsafe Person?

Problem

Someone in your life regularly makes you feel bad, under threat, uncertain, and insecure, or thwarts your progress toward meeting your needs or realizing a goal that you wish to accomplish. You are not sure whether the problem is your fault, theirs, or somewhere in between.

Solution

Learn the difference between safe people and unsafe people. A safe person helps you become a better version of the person you were created to be. A safe person helps you become more connected, able to connect, and oriented to connecting with other safe people. Love begets love.

A safe person helps you draw closer to God, your higher power, and your sources of love, forgiveness, health, purpose, service, and talents. In short, they help you get closer to your sources of life-giving energy and fuel. Safe people help us become contributors.

They nurture our talents and abilities. They teach us. Unsafe people break our trust muscle. They erode our capacity to be able to invest in ourselves and others. Unsafe people tend to promote bondage. They try to oppress and own other people.

They are possessive and controlling and work against our God-given freedom. They take the steering wheel away from others and do not let them live their own lives. They invade our boundaries by attempting to take over our property.

Unsafe people damage our capacity to metabolize difficult parts of our lives. Take failure for example. Safe people will help you mend your wounds; they won't beat you up for failing. They identify with you. Unsafe people do the opposite.

They make going through that failure worse, or they may inflict that damage upon you. Unsafe people exploit our talents and gifts for their own ends.

There are many different types of unsafe people. A person being unsafe for you does not necessarily mean that they are a bad person; it just means that they are unsafe for you for reasons specific to your relationship and your characteristics, tendencies, priorities, and goals.

When you surround yourself with healthy people, your statistical chances of becoming healthier are much greater. The opposite is true as well, and this is why we need to recognize and identify those people who are safe and unsafe for us.

Reflect on a few significant relationships and determine the safe and unsafe characteristics of those relationships. Who are your safe people? Who is unsafe for you?

04 How and When to Remove an Unsafe Person From Your Life

Problem

You want to remove an unsafe person from your life, but you want to be sure this is the right thing to do and, if so, how to do it.

Solution

When we're talking about unsafe people, we could be talking about anyone, from a cranky neighbor to someone very dangerous. For that reason, this may not be something you should try without professional help.

Let's start with the most basic principle. Becoming a person who has had their senses trained. What we mean by this is that, as mature people, we have developed the ability to recognize and separate good from evil and be safe from the unsafe. We can't remove the lack of safety until we learn to recognize it.

If you invite an unsafe person into a safe family's home for dinner, the family's well-trained senses will likely help them recognize that there is something off about this person. Invite the same person to dinner with a dysfunctional family, and their lack of safety may go unrecognized.

Once you can recognize it, it becomes much easier to operate on. When it comes time to think about the "removal" aspect, we have a few tools:

Be honest. If someone is critical and used to getting their way, giving them honest feedback may elicit a strong reaction from them, which makes them feel uncomfortable and not accepted, and they may go away on their own. If someone is prone to controlling behavior, simply learn to frustrate them. They can try to control you, but if you put up resistance and **refuse to be**

controlled, they will go from being a controlling person to being a frustrated person. There's no such thing as a controlling person if they say "no."

The biggest way to remove unsafe people from your life is to be healthy, because dysfunction won't work on you. Unsafe people don't like it when you require safety. If this doesn't work, you may want to **get a third party involved**. Two people may be more persuasive than one.

Get yourself safe. Get yourself healthy. Those are the first steps to removing unsafe people from your life.

05

Understanding Gaslighting

Problem

Someone in your life is trying to manipulate your sense of what is real. They are invalidating your personal experiences to gain power over you.

Solution

Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation that someone deploys in a relationship to make another person question their reality. If you can get someone to question their reality, what does that give you the power to do? Manipulate them. Control them. Dominate them. Degrade them. Exploit them.

This happens frequently because a person has personality issues, such as extreme narcissism, which push them to try to control and manipulate others.

Here is where the danger begins. Your experience can tell you one thing, but someone, or some external forces, may invalidate your own experience and tell you a different story about what you are experiencing. It minimizes, invalidates, and confuses.

Gaslighting is always used by a person trying to gain the power to talk you out of the hurt that they are inflicting upon you. They want to control your reality of the relationship. Gaslighters will confuse you in ways that cause you to doubt yourself.

Gaslighters will make you feel isolated, will negate the truth, and will make you apologize to them for these distortions of reality.

What to do:

Watch for when someone invalidates your experience. Tune into your own experience and validate it. Ask yourself whether

what you are feeling feels solid and real. If it feels like there is a disconnect, pull back and get better data.

Talk to someone you can trust. Explain what is happening. Tell them what you said and what they said, and get their feedback. Who you talk to at this point is important. Make sure that the person doesn't have an agenda. You want them to be "for you," but you also want them to be real.

Keep a diary or journal. Keep a log of these events so that you can consult the historical record. This will protect you from going back and questioning yourself after the fact.

Set boundaries. You can't change the other person, but you can set boundaries that help you protect yourself, your experience, and the way that you respond to their provocations and interference.

Ask yourself:

What kind of danger am I in here? Sometimes you may need to have a safe person on speed dial. Sometimes you may need to have a deeper support system that you'll have a plan to utilize. That may include knowing what resources, such as a shelter, you may need to utilize if things escalate.

06

What to Do With Narcissists?

Problem

You have a narcissist in your life who makes you feel invisible, unimportant, and like an object to be used by them to get what they want. They demand special treatment and want all the attention.

Solution

Narcissism is a tricky subject because the term frequently gets used in cases where there has not been a specific diagnosis, and it is an issue that has certain diagnostic criteria.

Narcissistic people can be very attractive. Generally, you can't cultivate that kind of specialness unless you have some cards to play. But getting into a relationship with them can be difficult and even dangerous. If you are in a relationship with a narcissist, the first thing you should do is normalize your feelings.

You can't get strategic with your emotions until you label them appropriately. Your feeling is: disregarded, ignored, treated poorly, condescended to; somebody's acting like they're superior.

Because you are "normal," you expect other people to be "normal." When they're not, you'll react by thinking that something must be wrong with you. But just remember that that isn't the case. They're trying to make you feel not good enough because they need to feel better.

Remember: You can't expect empathy. You can't expect mutuality. You should expect them to be themselves. Normalize it so that you're not reacting so that you can be proactive. Next, have somebody else to talk to. If this is an important relationship to you, then you have to find someone who is a partner with you to help make the

relationship work. Sometimes a narcissistic person will respond to fair and kind treatment by acting in some pretty ugly ways.

In those cases, you need to focus on creating safety for yourself and setting the appropriate level of limits to protect that safety. Some patterns need to end for the relationship to thrive. Sometimes some relationships have to end for you to thrive.

07

How to Handle Controlling Relationships

Problem

Someone in your life tends to try to control you. They are only happy when you act the way that they want you to act and when you do what they want you to do the way they want you to do it. You feel powerless and want to break the pattern.

Solution

Generally speaking, the only way a person can control us is if we give them control. There are times, of course, that involve force and various unsafe means. Those situations are different, and if that is what is happening, you should speak with an authority figure to make sure that you are safe. Usually in relationships, however, we hand people that power over us.

They wield our need to gain power over us. This may come by imposing guilt, fear, anger, emotional manipulation, withdrawing love or approval, criticism, and gaslighting, among other tactics. The point is that they control the resource that you need, but it originates within us.

We tend to give away the freedom that we have because holding on to it costs something that we don't want to pay for, like rejection or somebody being in a good mood and feeling happy with us. The first step is to figure out what it is that you need from that person and to go and get it somewhere else, or to repair the aspects of the relationship that are broken so that your needs can be met more healthily.

A therapist can help you figure out what your needs are and how to go about resolving them. Build out the necessary elements within a support system that exists outside of the context of your controlling relationship so that you can get your needs met elsewhere.

The next step is to convert the controlling person into a frustrated person. We do this by setting boundaries. When you let someone know what your limits are, and when they have asked you for something that goes beyond the limits that you have set, they will no longer be able to control you.

“I understand that you want that. I want you to get what you want, but I’m not able to do that for you right now. Here is what I would like to do.”

“No, I don’t think I want to do that. Sorry. I hope you understand, but this is something that I would be willing to do instead.”

Boundaries should be in the service of the relationship. We set them so that love can grow and thrive. You are not setting this boundary so that you can cut them out. You are setting this boundary so that the relationship can improve.

Boundaries are not intended to be used to end a relationship. Relationships end when setting boundaries doesn’t work. You start with diplomacy. Not war. Relationships require a progression of learning, and that includes learning how to set boundaries to preserve love.

08

Protect Your Boundaries Against Entitlement

Problem

Someone in your life takes and takes and takes until you've got nothing left to give. You find yourself worn down and emotionally spent, feeling like you could never give them enough to make them happy.

Solution

Entitlement is the source of many issues in relationships. If you're in a relationship with someone who exhibits entitled behavior, you know what it feels like to be asked to give more than you have.

There is a difference between someone who is entitled and someone who has a genuine need. When someone has a genuine need, we can give out of love. Love responds to a person who cannot provide for themselves. A non-entitled person will feel gratitude for your giving. They will be grateful for what you offer.

Entitled people are different. They feel like they are owed something. They step onto the property within our boundaries and demand something from us. When you give in to an entitled person, it doesn't profit you or them because they will always ask for more.

If an entitled person knows that the other person will continue to fulfill their expectations, they'll continue to request that those expectations be met. They have not been told "no," so they have no reason to expect to have their request declined.

Setting clear boundaries on what you will and will not do well not only resolves the problem of entitlement when you say no, but they can also diagnose what the problem is.

By articulating what you will and won't be willing to do, you can create the space to have a conversation about what they want from you and why they expect you to give it to them.

Setting these boundaries will increase the freedom that you both have. You cannot control the other person or make them change, but you can offer them a choice.

When you give someone a choice, you're giving them the freedom to make a decision.

Reflect on some different ways that people in your life have responded to your “no.” Reflect on the patterns that exist in your life that may have set the example for the entitled person to feel like they should expect you to meet their demands.

09

How to Deal With The Victim Mentality

Problem

Someone in your life constantly needs to be rescued and bailed out of the problems that they have created for themselves. As a loving person, you want to help, but you feel like your help may not be helping.

Solution

Victimhood and entitlement are different sides of the same coin. If I believe that I'm a victim and that I'm powerless, I feel entitled to you rescuing me.

One of the issues that plenty of loving people have when dealing with someone with a victim mentality is the over-identification of that person's pain and struggles. This often leads to codependency.

You'll hear things like:

"I don't feel well; I don't have the energy to do this myself."

"Mom always loved you better."

"I didn't have the advantages that you have."

Whatever the excuse is, victimhood is an excuse factory. It's always going to externalize ability, externalize power, blame someone else for where they are, and blame someone else for someone else not bringing the solution to them. And when you do offer help, they will thwart it.

Everything you try to suggest, they resist. Their resistance makes you feel powerless. This process is called projective identification. The way it works is that if I am a person with a victim mentality and I have a feeling state that I can't deal with and I feel powerless,

then what I am going to do to feel powerful is to transfer that powerless to you.

You've come to help me, but I'm not going to let you help me. I'm going to thwart you, and now I've got control of you.

You feel powerless, and I feel better. When a victim starts to gain control over us, we call that the Tyranny of the Weak. They have put you into a double bind. They are telling you that every suggestion that you give them is not going to work.

Here is what you should say in this situation:

“Hmm . . . you know, I've given you all I've got. I'm out of bullets here. I don't have anything else to offer. But you know, if you do want to try one of those things I suggested again, I could help you with that.”

Your role is not to get caught up in the game. You offer help and choices, but each one requires them to take action on their behalf.

10

Hoping vs Wishing

Problem

Someone in your life is stringing you along and promising to change, but it just doesn't happen. They keep digging the hole deeper, and the problems only become more entrenched. It's taking a heavy emotional toll on you, and you feel demoralized and don't know what to do next.

Solution

Hope spends time, and time's underbelly is energy. What does that mean? If I have hope for something working, I am going to spend time and energy on that. Whatever it is. If you have a relationship that has problems, you'll spend time and energy to solve those problems as long as you've got hope. We invest when we have hope.

Here's the problem. A lot of times, because of a lack of boundaries, among other things, we're spending time and energy hoping that something is going to get better, but there is no real reason to have hope. It's not hope; it's a wish.

When you're looking at a relationship and they're promising to change or that this time will be different, you need to have some objective reasons if you're going to have hope.

**Are they going to go get some help? Are they in counseling?
Are they actively developing their relationship skills?**

Now let's turn it around. We've said it's great to have hope, but you know what else is great?

Hopelessness:

Sometimes we have to wave the white flag and realize that this is not going to pan out.

Ask yourself, where am I having hope that I need to get to fantastic, resounding hopelessness?

Once you are hopeless, you will know that you must establish boundaries and structures that will require definite changes and renewed action to restore hope.

What is Boundaries.Me?

Created by Dr. Henry Cloud, this powerful online resource helps people learn essential mental health and relationship skills. We offer **daily coaching videos** that support your growth by getting you started on the right foot each day. Every video is intended to help you make one, small, very achievable step forward.

We also offer **more than 100 video courses** on essential topics like anxiety, depression, codependency, dealing with narcissists, dating, building a strong family, meeting your needs, spiritual growth, setting boundaries, parenting, caregiver burnout, and so much more.

Our easy category filters, search engine, and assessments will help you choose a **personalized learning path**. We also have a members-only online community where you can share and connect with your fellow Boundaries.Me members who will cheer you on.

We also offer special workshops throughout the year focussing on topics such as:

- Overcoming Depression
- Outsmart Your Anxiety
- Recover Well From Divorce
- When Family Hurts
- Restoring Your Brokenness, and more.



Boundaries.Me

Has helped over 49,000 people ... and counting!

“Good and Sound Counsel”

I'm so glad that I have found Boundaries.Me! Such quality and good and sound counsel. If you've had a hard time finding access to good counseling, this is the next best thing.

“Beacon of hope”

In the journey of this life, we experience trauma. Dr. Cloud shares his wisdom and guides us so that we can let go of what binds and holds us back.

“Incredible Resource”

This is an incredible resource. As a registered provisional psychologist, and mother of two ... the content at Boundaries.Me has deeply enriched both my professional and parenting life.

“Most comprehensive”

When you're really ready and serious about growing as a person with varying emotional issues or in your relationships or your personal career goals, this is the most comprehensive material available



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