

# Emotional Control & Boundaries

by Dr. Raymond J. Hill

This paper will be addressing two issues that I believe are essential to understand and accept if one is to have good mental health. a- Emotional control has to do with where our emotions come from and how to get control of our emotions. b- Boundaries have to do with how we see ourselves in society and how we respect who another person is, and in turn demand that others respect who we are. First: Emotional Control

## Emotional Control

When my daughter was three years old she sat at the dining room table to my right. When I placed a glass of milk on the table, it was simply a matter of time...perhaps it was two minutes, perhaps it was five minutes...before that glass of milk was on the floor. My reaction was “God, I am going to be picking up after her until she is twenty-one”. Obviously upset, I would then go to the kitchen, get her another glass of milk, and upon entering the room would say with some emphasis, “Shannan, please put your glass on the other side of your plate”. Typically, Shannan would cry, run to her room and I had to give myself a “C minus” as a parenting grade.

Why this story? The question I am trying to answer is where do our emotions come from? Specifically, why did I get upset? Is it a matter of stimulus---leading to---response? Was it in other words, the spilling of the milk that made me angry? The answer to the question is, “NO!” Something happens in between the spilling of the milk and my anger, and that is my self-talk, i.e. the things I say to myself sub vocally. When I said to myself, “I am going to clean up after her until she is twenty-one”, I was planting the seed for my anger...I was setting myself up to be angry. Even though it *feels* as though my anger is the result of the spilling of the milk, it is really my self-talk that was the cause for my anger.

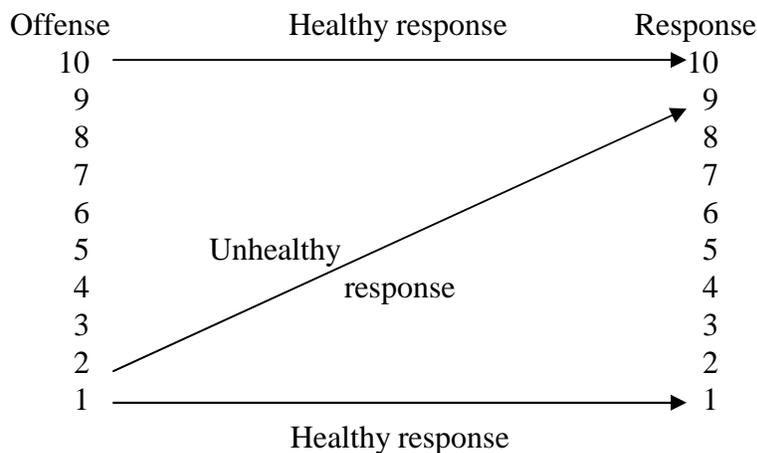
I believe the following makes the point. Imagine that you are sitting in a room with three or four other people having a conversation. All of a sudden someone throws open the door of the room and yells in an obscenity, and then shuts the door. A person who has a poor self-image might say to himself, “what did I do wrong” and feel *concern*. A person with a good self-image might say, “we've got a nut on our hands” and feel *curious*. If it were a man who yelled the obscenity, an insecure woman might say, “oh, is he going to hurt me”, and she might feel *fear*. A man who had a healthy dose of testosterone, might say, “who does this bum think he is”, and feel *anger*. In other words in the room you could have three or four different emotions as a result of the one intrusion. It does violence to our intellect to say that the intruder caused the man to feel anger and at the same time caused the lady to feel fear. No! The truth of the matter is that the intruder was simply a catalyst for each of us to have an emotion, and the specific emotion the individual felt was due to what he/she added to the outburst.

Why is this distinction important? If I say to you, “you make me mad”, then **I** have the emotion (mad) and **you** have the blame. This makes me a victim since you caused the emotion...not me...and therefore I can do nothing about it. It is only if I take ownership of my emotion...if I admit I was the cause...that I can do something about it. However, if you caused my emotion I am not in control of it. You have the power. I can only have control if I caused it.

We always have a choice how we respond to any stimulus. If I am driving down the road and someone cuts me off, I have a couple of choices how to respond. On one hand I can say, “That guy did that deliberately”, and then step on the gas and have a nice fight. Of course I am angry. On the other hand, I could say to myself, “Wow, that guy seems to be spaced out, I hope he gets home without killing himself”. Then I am at peace. I have a choice...I always have a choice.

Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor said that they can take away from you your freedom, your clothes and your food; but the one thing they can't take from you, is how you choose to respond to them. Life is full of choices. I personally faced this issue with my Dad who I loved very much. When he died, I had a choice. I could have focused on the fact we were never going to share a meal again, we were never going to have a drink together again, we were never going to share our lives again. If I had done that, I would have gone into the toilet. On the other hand, I reminded myself that he was suffering physically, his mental faculties were going and that I believe in an afterlife. I chose the latter and I was at peace with his death. We always have choices! Always!

Here is another perspective. Take a look at the following chart:



Suppose an offense happens to you on a scale of 1 to 10. As an example: someone accidentally bumps into you at the supermarket...a one offense calls for a one response, i.e. a shrug of the shoulders and saying, “no sweat”. But suppose a one offense happens to you and you respond by screaming and shouting at the individual...an 8 or a 9 response,

you are not responding to the offense, but rather you are responding to your history. That history may go back to childhood or it might be the result of an argument you had with your spouse that morning.

A healthy person should be able to go from complete tranquility to complete rage. If I was to go home tonight and someone was beating up on my daughter, and my response was, “You shouldn’t be beating on my kid like that” as I walked away, that’s not only unhealthy psychologically, but cowardly. A ten offense calls for a ten response. There is nothing wrong with any emotion. The only question is, is the emotion appropriate to what is going on. Genetics plays a role...history plays a role...but we are always able to play the trump card...choice. I am not denying that people can influence us and even in a major way. But, we still have a choice.

Anger and some other so-called negative emotions are sometimes appropriate, but they should be warranted. The question we need to ask ourselves is, “Is this the emotion I want to feel”? If the answer is “no” then proceed to change your emotion through your self-talk. Our emotions do not come from outer space. It is a creation of our own, and it can be a terrible burden if they control us rather than we controlling them.

I am not saying we should repress our emotions. In the story above of Shannan spilling the milk, if I had said, “God, I am going to be cleaning up after her until she is twenty-one...but I better not say anything because if I do my wife will yell at me”, then I am repressing my emotions. There will then evolve a negative energy that will grow and grow with each repression until finally I will blow with volcanic force, perhaps even over a minor issue. We call that “stuffing it”. I am not saying repress your emotions. I am saying check to see if this is a healthy emotion or not. If it is, Great! If it isn’t, then proceed to change it with your self-talk.

Ninety-eight to ninety-nine percent of our emotions are fine. But we all have that one or two percent of our emotional reaction that we wish we didn’t have, e.g. my yelling at a three year-old for spilling the milk. It was obvious who was the idiot there. It is crazy to yell at a 3, 10, 15, or 30 year old for accidentally spilling milk. What to do?

When you want to change a habit, it takes anywhere from one to three months. This took me six weeks. So what did I do? I did some heavy duty self-talk when I sat down at the table each night. It went something like this. “Every kid since Adam and Eve spilled their milk, here I am in my fifties and I still spill glasses. There may not be milk in them, but I spill glasses. Give the kid a break. Lighten up!” Two or three weeks would go by and Shannan would do her thing again. My old self-talk would come into play, “God I am going to...etc.” Then I would catch and stop myself and repeat the positive talk above. Slowly but surely my new way of self-talk replaced my old self-talk and in six weeks when she spilled the milk, I was O.K. with it and simply got up, got a cloth and poured her another glass. She was happy, I was happy and everybody was happy.

To conclude: how does one change an emotional response that they do not want? First of all accept the fact that **you** are responsible for your own emotions and stop blaming other people for how **you** feel. Then, when you have an emotion you do not want, stop...figure out what it was that you said to yourself that caused the emotion...then change that self-talk and your emotional response will eventually change. Let's take an example. Suppose your spouse forgets your birthday. If your self-talk is like this: "He doesn't care about me; he only thinks of himself; he doesn't love me; he only takes and doesn't give", then be assured you are going to be angry, and things will continue to go south. On the other hand if you say to yourself: "I know he loves me; he's the absent-minded professor; he is so preoccupied with work; he is such a good Dad; normally he is pretty helpful", then your emotional response will be quite different. Choices! Choices! Choices!

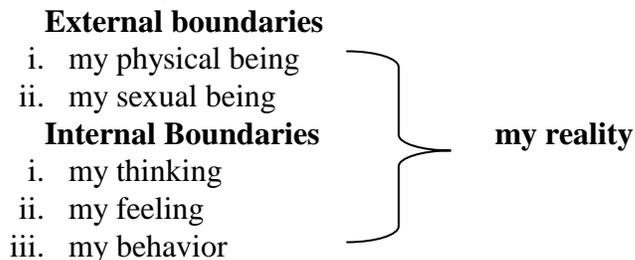
Remember you have a choice as to how you respond to any situation whether it is death, divorce or whatever. This is not necessarily easy, especially if you have viewed your emotions as something over which you had no control. This is something parents need to learn. This is something parents need to teach their children so that they can have a happier and more fulfilling life.

## Boundaries

Pia Mellody, a nationally known expert on co-dependency defines boundaries as "A system of limit setting that enhances a person's ability to have a sense of self, and to control the impact of others on them, and their impact on others". I like that definition. The following contains much of Pia's thinking.

In other words: What does Ray Hill stand for? As a father? As a psychologist? As a moral person? As a political person? As an economic person? As a spiritual person? In other words, what are the values by which I guide my life?

When we talk about boundaries we are talking about two kinds of boundaries.



All of this comprises my reality...how I see myself in the world. For purposes of this paper, I am not as interested in the external boundaries as I am in the internal boundaries, but I will cover them for the sake of completion.

## External Boundaries

Imagine you are at a cocktail party. For some reason women have more of a problem with this concept than men, because when a man is making a pass at a woman, very often he will come into her space very closely and speak softly. Somehow this is supposed to be sexy. Too many women say to themselves, “this guy is standing too close, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings so I better not say anything”. In a subtle way she is putting herself down. Here is a guy that is in her space, and *she* is concerned about *his* feelings? What about her feelings? A lot of the problem comes from breaking behavior down as:

### Passive-----Assertive-----Aggressive

Passive behavior is “anything you want to do is fine...my wishes are not important”. Aggressive behavior is “I don’t care what you want to do; this is what I want to do.” Passive behavior respects only the other’s rights; aggressive behavior respects only my rights. Both are pathological. Assertive behavior says: “This is what I would like to do...what would you like to do...let’s talk”. Here, both people’s rights are honored. This is healthy. Where women get into trouble is that aggressive behavior is associated with masculinity, and many women in order to avoid coming across as masculine go to the other extreme and become passive. In the example above, the woman should say: “Ray, you are standing too close, please back up”. She is not being aggressive...she is not taking away my rights. She is simply being assertive.

Here are a couple of assertions that I believe are necessary for good mental health.

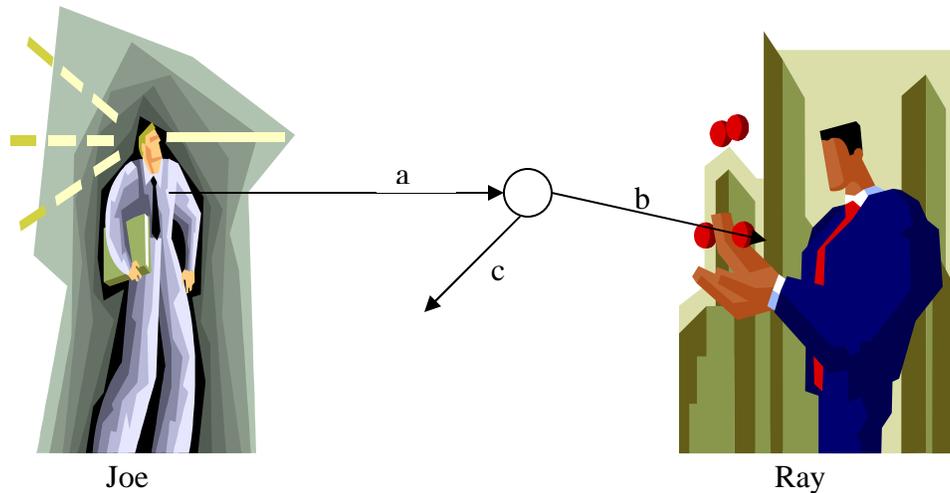
Physical Assertion: *“I have the right to control distance and non-sexual touching with you, and you have the same right with me”.*

Sexual Assertion: *“I have the right to determine with whom, when, where and how I am going to be sexual, and you have the same right. If the “whom” is O.K. then we have to agree on when, where and how”.*

In other words when anything is done with another person either physically or sexually, it needs to be done with mutual consent and without pressure.

## Internal Boundaries

Let me give an example of good boundaries. Suppose Joe has made an appointment with me for 9:00 AM. He arrives at nine and asks to see me. My secretary says, “Ray isn’t in right now, why don’t you take a seat”? 9:10 arrives, and I don’t show. 9:20 arrives and I still don’t show. At 9:30 I come sashaying in and say, “Come on Joe, let’s go”. Joe then says, “Hold it Ray, I’m angry!



Consider the two figures above. Joe is on the left and I am on the right. That circle surrounding me represents my boundaries. Line “a” is Joe’s comment to me that he is angry. As long as he takes ownership of his anger and doesn’t blame me for *his* being angry, that is perfectly O.K. He is giving me feedback. He might equally have thought, “Ray is never late, I hope he wasn’t in an accident”, and instead of feeling anger, he might have felt concern. Or he might have said, “Good, I didn’t want to get into anything heavy today anyway” and instead of anger, felt relief. The point is, he chose to be angry. As long as he isn’t blaming me for his being angry, that is a healthy Joe.

The circle represents a decision point for me. If I am healthy, I don’t fall apart simply because Joe is angry. If I am healthy I instead evaluate what Joe says for its validity. My thinking process might go something like this: “Yes, Joe is right. I was up at the Village Inn having a cup of coffee with Carl and we were just shooting the breeze. I told Joe I would be there at 9:00. Joe is right and I was wrong”. Line “b” represents that conclusion. I take that information in to myself and it is now part of my psyche, or how I view myself in the world. On the other hand, I might say to Joe: “Joe, I am sorry I was late, but I was in an accident and the police wouldn’t let me leave”. If Joe then responded, “You told me you were going to be here at 9:00. I don’t want to hear any excuses. You should have been here”. That would have been an unjustified response on Joe’s part and I would have thrown it out. That is what Line “c” represents. I have evaluated Joe’s comment, and believe it was unjustified and then I rejected it (line “c”). This does not mean my decision is right, but it is my decision. I talk with alcoholics and tell them they are drinking like a fish. The first thing many will say, “Not me...not me”. But still, that decision, right or wrong, is mine.

Therefore this is an instance where both Joe and I are psychologically healthy. He is healthy because he had a feeling, did not blame me for it, but did let me know. I was healthy because I didn’t fall apart at Joe’s anger, but instead evaluated it for its validity or lack of it.

I spent 20 years in the Air Force and some of the guys would come up and say, “You know, I don’t know who I am”. I wanted to say, but happily did not say, “Take out your ID, check it out and grow up”. Now that I am in this field, I believe I know where they were coming from.

They were coming from home where mom told them what to do; dad told them what to do; teacher told them what to do; boyfriend told them what to do; girlfriend told them what to do; doctor told them what to do. In other words life was very reactive. If they wanted to pass a test, they had to study. If they wanted to take a girl out on a date, they had to earn money. Life was very reactive, and they weren’t able to develop boundaries or have a good sense of who they were.

Women have a tendency to fall into this category, i.e. not to have boundaries. As an example consider a woman who has been raped. That act may have lasted only a few minutes, but for the rest of her life as she walks down the street, she knows that the man walking near her could have his way with her and she would have very little to say about it. If she comes out of a theater at night and her car is across the lot, you better believe she is going to be very reactive and looking this way and that to be sure she is safe. A man on the other hand could walk in a sleazy part of town at 3:00 AM and although he may be robbed he doesn’t have to fear that he will be raped. That is simply not true of a woman. She, in this circumstance, is wise to be reactive.

This is also true of anyone who has been physically, sexually or emotionally abused. Suppose a young boy hears all his life, “You worthless bum; you’ll never grow up to be anything; you’ll be a bridge person all your life; you’ll never be anybody”. These folk have a hard time trusting anyone. They say to themselves, “If this is what mom and dad think of me...who are supposed to love me just by giving me birth...how can I trust anyone”? Physical and emotional abuse can be every bit as debilitating as sexual abuse.

People like those depicted have a tough time establishing boundaries. You will see some women fall apart simply because someone made a derogatory remark about their dress, their hair or whatever. They don’t evaluate where the statement is coming from. Perhaps it is coming from jealousy. Perhaps it is coming from bad taste. Perhaps it is coming from pure malice. Perhaps it is coming from anger. There is no reason to take a statement at face value and react to it just because it is said.

Most people do not have good boundaries until they are in their 40’s 50’s or 60’s. Many people never get good boundaries. To have good boundaries you have to be somewhat established in life and at peace with it. If you are worried about your marriage, you have to be reactive. If you are worried about your mortgage, you have to be reactive. A reactive person does not have a good sense of who they are since they are constantly changing to satisfy different situations. That is why they do not have a good sense of what they stand for, whether it be economically, politically, or as a mother as a father etc. A proactive person will say, “This is who I am. I hope you like me, but if you don’t that’s O.K.” A proactive person is comfortable with who they are and what they stand for. They do not

feel obliged to meet everyone's perception of who they should be. Therefore it usually takes having a sense of security and being at peace to be proactive rather than reactive.

Often men react differently to abuse than women. Men have a tendency to build walls. This is a very effective technique. These men have been hurt and they don't want to hurt again. They want to shut out emotions. These are the men who have no social life. They stay home all day, watching TV or reading. They may even go to the extreme of shopping at night in order to avoid meeting people. They want only their own company. They have put up walls and it is effective. When hurt comes along it doesn't penetrate. The only problem is that when love comes along it doesn't penetrate either.

There is a third type of boundary. It is called damaged boundaries. These are people who have good boundaries at work, but not at home; good boundaries at home but not at work; good boundaries at work but not with neighbors. The process of maturation for these people is to fill in the spaces and to develop a good set of boundaries

Boundaries are important in any relationship. They are respectful of the individual's rights and wishes. Having good boundaries protects myself from overreacting and also protects me from offending. Not everyone sets boundaries in the same place. For example, in one relationship if the spouse commits adultery, the partner may say it is over and proceed with a divorce. Another relationship may have a different take, and the offended spouse may say, "O.K. as long as it doesn't happen again, we can go on". Different people set different boundaries and in a relationship it is important to discover your spouse's boundaries. A person has different boundaries with different people. For example an individual will have different boundaries with his spouse, than with his children, than with his neighbor and with his boss.

The following is a mental health assertion that I believe we all need to accept if we are going to be healthy psychologically.

*"I create what I think and what I feel, and I choose to do what I do or not do, and the same is true for you too. I am not responsible for your thinking, feeling or doing, nor are you responsible for mine".*

Given the truth of that statement one must be aware of how we impact others. When we push through another's boundary system we are responsible for the impact on the other and owe the other person an apology. In other words when, as in the case above with Joe I was late for my appointment, I owed Joe an apology.

Pia Mellody reminds us that in child abuse the message is, "You caused me to feel what I feel, to think what I think, to do what I do. It is your fault, and you should change so I can be comfortable". This denies the educational role of the parent.

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In Dr. Hill's book *Emotional Traps* he talks about ways of obtaining better results in life and points to traps that people fall into because of emotional chaos. He addresses destructive modes of thinking, whether it is in the family, in business, with neighbors or in politics.

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