

# Boundaries Not Walls

By Aphrodite Matsakis Ph.D.

Dear Women,

I am very concerned about the labels “enabler,” “codependent” and “love addict” which some of you put on yourselves. In general, these terms refer to organizing your life around a love relationship or the needs of others instead of your own. Yet these labels refer to so many human qualities that almost anyone could be seen as suffering from one of these problems. Because of this lack of precision, the terms, “codependency,” “enabler,” etc., are not official psychiatric diagnoses. Instead, they belong to the realm of pop psychology.

Nevertheless, trying to live through others, making “saving” or “fixing others” our sole purpose in life, or hoping that by sacrificing ourselves we can make others happy are all dead-end streets. But oh-how-well we women have been taught to drive on these streets! Yet, there is a difference between wanting a love relationship and being parked on one of these dead-end streets, although the lines between the two are far from clear sometimes.

The codependency movement espouses the value of emotional self-sufficiency and urges people to build up enough inner “strength” so that they do not swerve from attaining their personal objectives due to others. These are important goals for women who have traditionally been socialized to put others first and take reactive rather than proactive stances in life.

Yet there is a danger in taking these ideas to an extreme. As caring human beings, we are going to react to others. And that's okay, not necessarily a sign of some neurosis. Loving someone profoundly and being able to respond deeply to that person when they are hurting is quite different from permanently or significantly limiting our growth in order to help that person.

In addition, the popular ideas that psychological strength and health mean “I don't need anybody except myself” and “nobody can hurt me unless I choose to let them” are not grounded in emotional reality. Others can hurt us. Sometimes just one word from their lips can almost devastate us. We, women, have to be able to talk about this kind of pain and not be shamed into silence for fear of being seen as a “codependent,” “weak,” or “unliberated.”

Allowing others to “get to us” does not necessarily mean we are psychological cripples. Rather it can reflect the basic human need to form emotional bonds. According to ethnologists, these bonds have survival value in that they insure physical safety and mental health. And according to physiological research, interaction with others, even on a superficial level, can reduce feelings of fear.

To date, no human being has ever proven to be totally self-sufficient. While it is imperative for our psychological growth to try to meet as many of our needs as possible by ourselves, some of our needs can only be met by others. We need others to meet our very human, very normal, very healthy needs to be loved, appreciated, cared for, touched, and respected. It is also normal and to want to be “special” to someone.

Yet numerous articles in both popular and feminist women's magazines toot the glories of solitude and the virtues of living alone, along with dire warnings about the dangers of “loving too much.” (In contrast, our mothers were fed articles about the horrors of loving “too little.”) These articles concede that it is only human for a woman who doesn't have a love relationship to feel a “little lonely.” But if she feels a “lot lonely,” she is probably neurotic, overly dependent, or living out some drama from her past.

Such an unliberated, codependent woman, these articles imply, should be ashamed of herself. Instead of acting like a helpless girl-victim-child waiting for a man to fulfill and direct her, she should be taking charge of her life with as little assistance as possible from others, male or female.

Does this mean that “strong” (“liberated,” “independent,” etc.) women must never ever want, or need, an intimate relationship. Is it truly “sick” to want to give and receive love? Does being a feminist mean becoming a “man with breasts” or trying to emulate the worst qualities of the traditional male sex-role stereotype?

Unfortunately, in the name of women's liberation, women are being encouraged by some to adopt a “macho” stance and become “tough, independent” machas. But why are we trying to be machas when being macho never worked that well for men? As we women strive toward freedom from the old roles, we need to be careful not to substitute the shackles of the traditional female role for those of the traditional male role. Except for persons who have a character

disorder, a psychosis, or some other grave mental problem, the toughness of machos and machas is usually a façade. Even persons with solid self-esteem are not totally immune to negative feedback and rejection.

If we, women, begin to take the position that invulnerability and total self-sufficiency are the definition of mental health, then we are advocating as a standard of mental health that we have often found to be so painful and intolerable in some of the men we love (or have loved): that seemingly impenetrable emotional wall that keeps others out.

Traditionally men have erected such walls to safeguard themselves from the possibility of hurt inherent in human interactions. Having such a “wall” gives the external appearance of emotional self-control, which, in a society that highly values stoicism, is considered a sign of strength. Yet the need for such a wall doesn’t necessarily signify strength or control. Sometimes it signifies fear.

Sometimes people who need thick walls to protect themselves are afraid of their emotions, not in control of them. For one reason or another, they lack the ability and stamina to experience and cope with the wide range of feelings attending human relationships. Perhaps they didn’t have the benefit of being taught about emotions or lacked emotional support as a child. Whatever the reasons, the end result is an individual who fears not only hurt, disappointment, and anger, but joy, ecstasy, and love.

Today, in an effort to avoid being “codependent” or “enabling,” some women are trying to establish similar walls. Yet if having such walls is so wonderful, then why all the addictions, all the depression, and all the ranting and raving on the part of those who have them?

Even hardened combat vets suffer from the effects of prolonged social isolation and lack of human touch and affection. When the pain of the wall becomes intolerable, the individual can become aggressive or self-destructive. The higher suicide rates for those who live alone (as opposed to those who are married or live with others) suggest some of the painful effects of pure and simple human loneliness.

On the other hand, men have so often taken advantage of women's desire for male companionship, sex, and love, that many feminists advise women to build some sort of wall

against men. In certain instances, such a wall has prevented the total, or almost total, psychological or physical annihilation of the woman, for example, in cases of women battering.

In less dire circumstances, however, we women need to establish boundaries, not walls. The boundaries can promote our well-being by protecting us from unnecessary strain and personal violations. In contrast to walls, which shut most people out, our boundaries need to let people in, but only on terms which are healthy for us (save, in times of crisis, when time-limited personal sacrifices may be warranted). Also unlike walls, which are rigid and unchanging, our boundaries can and should change over time, as we continually enter new phases of self-development.

Defining our boundaries, believing that we deserve to have them, and then teaching others to respect them, are hardly simple, or easy processes. They can involve considerable soul-searching and experimentation. Asserting our boundaries in the face of opposition of significant others is yet another major problem, especially since we women have been trained to be nice and to desire approval.

In addition, life often presents us with dilemmas for which we are not prepared. At such times, we might not know what healthy boundaries might be for us and find ourselves engaging in behavior which we may later judge to be “codependent” or “enabling.” Under such circumstances, my wish for you is that you do not beat yourselves up mercilessly for your alleged “codependency.”

Instead, you need to remember all the traditional messages you were exposed to about women being expected to selflessly give of themselves and nurture and care for others. Today many of us are caught in a double bind. When we establish self-enhancing boundaries, we can easily be labeled as “unfeminine,” “cold,” “selfish,” or even “lesbian man-haters.” Yet when we fulfill traditional expectations and give much to others (especially men), we might be pejoratively accused of being “codependent,” “love addicted,” or “enabling.”

These concepts were intended to help liberate women, not to serve as just another way for women to negatively label themselves or to search within for all those hidden defects as part of the seemingly endless feminine search for perfection. Given that so many women's personal problems can be traced to the sexist structure of our society, the search within is only a partial solution to life's problems. Society must also change. Consequently, the labels of codependent,

etc., like so many other derogatory pop-psychology labels, all too often serve to blame women for following the dictates of their societal upbringing or responding to social pressures.

True feminism supports the development not only of the mind, but the heart and soul--for both sexes. Therefore women, like men, who want emotional connection and seek to develop their hearts and their souls, as well as their brains and fortitude, are generally much healthier than those who follow the traditional male path of neglecting emotional and spiritual development and focusing solely on vocational or intellectual achievement.

As a therapist, I have heard countless women lament the “fact” that they “unconsciously” attract dysfunctional or abusive men. “I’m a sicko,” they decide. Yet there are so many emotionally and spiritually stunted, if not mangled men, in the world, it’s not too hard to meet one who is emotionally immature or twisted. And, with one out of every five adult men in our country having a substance abuse problem and with at least thirty percent of marriages reporting wife battering, meeting a dysfunctional man is more a matter of probabilities than a woman's unconscious desires.

Yet the popular theory is that some women “unconsciously” attract dysfunctional men because they “unconsciously” learned to desire punishment and unhappiness due to some form of abuse in their histories. True, many women have been victimized in family and other situations. And in their need to survive these brutal circumstances, they learned how to tolerate or cope with highly unequal and punitive circumstances. However, women who are able to talk about their “unconscious” desire for unhappiness (or more accurately their successful adaptation to their former of victimization) are no longer talking about “unconscious” motives. The fact that they can talk about such patterns means the patterns are quite conscious.

I am not advocating self-sacrifice. However, relationships do involve some degree of compromise. The problem in male-female love and other relationships is *not so much* that we women make a few adjustments (even sacrifices in some cases-- for a limited time, hopefully). Rather the problem is (a) that we women are usually the ones who make *all or almost all* these adjustments (or sacrifices) and (b) that our sacrifices are not acknowledged or appreciated, but taken for granted. Furthermore, some of the sacrifices are unnecessary in that they do not serve the needs of the relationship or the best interests of either of the individuals involved, but rather the infantile, overly dependent, aggressive, or egotistical needs of the male.

No woman should be run into the ground by a man (or another woman.) On the other hand, we need not be ashamed of our need for love-- even the love of a man. According to an ancient Greek myth, the first human beings were born in pairs, physically joined to their life-long mate or partner, almost like Siamese twins.

But then the gods became angry with the human race and decided to punish humans in the worst way possible: by condemning them to loneliness. Hence the gods split the pairs apart and scattered the individuals throughout the world. Each person then began a search for his or her original special partner. Those few who were fortunate to find their mate were happy; and those who didn't suffered greatly.

Our love relationships should never cost us our financial security, our physical safety, or our self-respect. Yet to say that we can live without love and attempt to do so in order to prove to others that we are free of "codependency," "love addiction," or some other pop problem is as misguided and self-denying as allowing ourselves to become slaves to a love relationship.