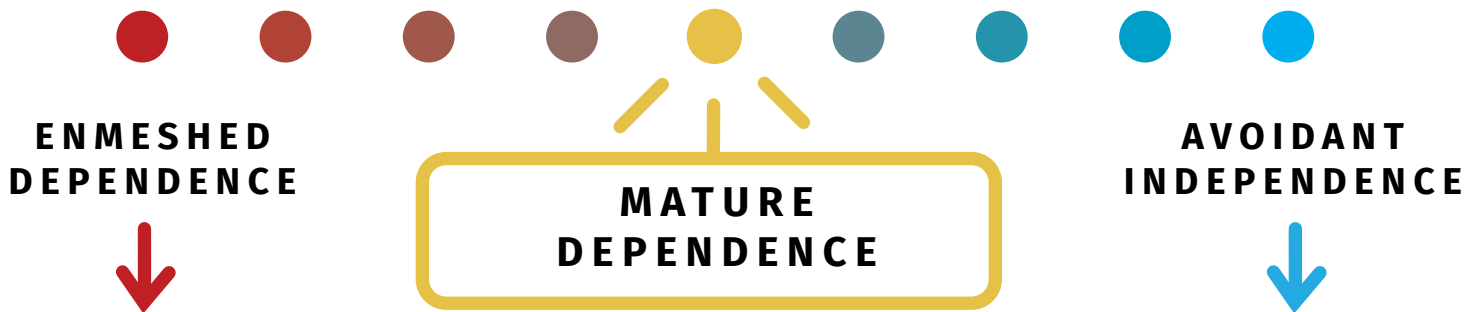


# ASSESSING HOW YOU APPROACH *Boundaries*

## WHERE DO YOU FALL?

If you think about boundaries on a continuum, one end might be labeled “enmeshed dependence” and the other “avoidant independence,” with lots of variation in-between. Below are a visual scale and lists of some common characteristics to help you to figure out where you might fall on the continuum, what relational patterns might be common for you, and how you can grow towards mature dependence with boundaries.

### HEALTHY BOUNDARIES



- Others share too much with you (you may also share too much with them)
- Feel guilty for having your own needs
- Feel responsible for others
- Can't say "no"
- Think more about what others need than your own needs (not the virtue of charity, but an unhealthy concern for others and simultaneous rejection of the self)
- Avoid conflicts
- Lack a strong sense of self
- Have trouble not absorbing other people's feelings
- Often seek approval
- Don't know how to sit with difficult emotions or soothe yourself in healthy ways (can lead to seeking comfort, often overindulgence, in things such as food, alcohol, pornography, etc.)
- Fear abandonment

- Tough exterior
- Would rather ignore a problem than deal with it
- Want others to think you are "fine"
- When there is a relational issue, you'd rather cut the person out of your life than work through it (not appropriate and healthy boundaries, which may include limiting or even cutting off contact with a particularly toxic person after discernment)
- Keep your relationships "surface level"
- Struggle to be vulnerable
- May engage in sexual intimacy without emotional closeness
- Pull away when others begin to get close
- May sabotage your relationships

# WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Boundaries*

If you can see yourself as enmeshed dependent or avoidant independent, I invite you to read the following words of encouragement and to bring whatever feelings arise to God in prayer. He doesn't mind your mess.

He isn't put off by your confusion regarding relationships and boundaries.

He is the Divine Healer and is proud of you for taking an honest look at your patterns of relating. God Himself is Truth, and the more truth about you that you discover, the more of Him that can take up residence within you.

## TO THOSE WHO ARE

## *Avoidant in their Relationships*

Dear Soul,

I know your rough and tough exterior exhausts you. I know the pain that lies beneath, even if you don't yet. Can you for one moment suspend the lie that you have to do it all yourself and rest in the truth of God's Word?

*"I am with you always." (Matthew 28:20)*

*"The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Exodus 14:14)*

*"I am the Lord who heals you." (Exodus 15:26)*

*"I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3)*

I understand your deep desire for closeness, intimacy, real relationship. I also know that these things terrify you. At the moment you learned of your parents' divorce or break-up, you swore you'd never hurt like that again and a thick, nearly impenetrable wall went up around your heart. You thought if only you could keep others far enough from you and be in relationships without sharing your real self, all would be well. You vowed that you would be the one in control from then on. The powerlessness you felt was turned into a (false) feeling of power when you made a pact with yourself that you'd remain untouchable. I am so sorry for the fear you felt, the utter terror that never left you, day or night. I am sorry for your loneliness and that the enormous task of figuring out relationships was left to you without a model.



You were quite resourceful for building your wall – how smart of you and a very normal response to protect yourself. The wall served you well, perhaps helped you to survive, and it seems only fitting to honor that. And yet, it is also important that you understand that you no longer need that wall. The wall, which once served to protect you, is now serving to keep out those things which you deeply crave: love and intimacy with others. I know it is terrifying, so you won't be asked to tear down the wall all at once. Instead, only consider handing over the keys to your wall to Jesus Christ. He Himself will be the gatekeeper. He will help you to discern who to let in and who to keep out. And all who come to you must pass through Him first. It is possible to let others in, to be known, and to enter into real relationship with them. Even though your trust may have been shattered after the divorce, you can learn to trust again.

Make this your prayer, even when you don't feel it: "Jesus, I Trust in You," and you will open the door for a flood of graces to fall upon you and for a way of living that you never thought possible. Let these words soak deeply into your heart and permeate your very being: Be Not Afraid.

#### TO THOSE WHO HAVE

## *Experienced Emeshment*



Dear One,

I see you. I see the self that has been squelched, packed down, hidden away... S/he is not gone. I'm so sorry that you felt there wasn't room for you. Your efforts to care for others have been valiant and served you well in the past; they were your way of surviving. You disappeared somewhere along the way but you must know that it is okay to come out now. The Lord Himself has never taken His eyes from you and so even if you had wanted to, you could not cease to exist. He has been waiting for you and has prepared a safe place for you in His Heart. He knows you deeply, even if you don't yet know yourself.

It is ok if you have layers of emotions: grief, anger, confusion... Let these rise to the surface and bring them to your good Father. You have permission to feel all of it. Squelching everything is no longer necessary. Sit here for a moment in this space if you are able. (And if you are not, do not be ashamed. You can try again when you are ready. In the meantime, the Lord Himself continues to pour out tremendous graces upon you.) Allow the feelings to wash over you and know this: You are not alone. Your Heavenly Father is here. He sent His only Son for moments just like this. You do not carry these emotions alone. Jesus Christ took every one of them upon Himself as He carried the cross and offered Himself for all upon it. As He toiled beneath the weight of it, He thought of you, saw you – your true self, and loved you. Gone are the days that you seemingly walk alone. He is with you, He carries your burdens, and He invites your true self to come alive. Rest in this moment with Him...



Then, when you are ready, it may help to also consider the “why” behind the enmeshment. Remember that your parents’ response to their divorce is often a survival response. Their unbalanced relating toward you can sometimes be a normal response to a traumatic situation as they try to figure out their new normal. For example, for those spouses who never wanted to divorce in the first place, their primary attachment has been ripped from them, leaving them completely torn open, exposed, alone....

True as this may be, and as much as it may aid us in having compassion and offering forgiveness, it does not mean that it was fair for you, and it is still dysfunctional relating. Think of it this way: Imagine that in order to save herself from being hit by a car, a woman jumps out of the way, but as she does, she lands on you and breaks your legs. Can you fault her for trying to preserve her own life? No; any of us in her situation would do the same. Does the same action still have a profoundly negative effect on you not only at the moment it happened, but for years to come, perhaps your whole life, depending on how the healing process goes? Yes. There is nothing wrong with saying the truth of all of this. You are hurt. Deeply. And even though others involved may be hurt too, it’s okay to acknowledge your pain and your need to have a self. You don’t have to disappear because another is hurting. Your pain matters. It is not a luxury to have a self. It is a command from God: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Remember, your self is good. It does not have to be snuffed out by another more powerful self or disappear beneath the towering needs of another. There is room in the Heart of God for both of you.

## **BY DR. JILL VERSCHAETSE**

Dr. Jill is a wife, mother, and licensed clinical psychologist. Although much of her work is currently at home, focused on mothering her own young children, she continues to do part-time work through psychological consultation and speaking engagements.

Dr. Jill is also a child of divorce and a graduate of the Life-Giving Wounds retreat. She is honored to be a part of the Life-Giving Wounds traveling retreat team, and she and her husband Dr. Nate Verschaeste serve as psychological advisors for Life-Giving Wounds.