



Strengthening Personal Boundaries: The Bioenergetic Approach

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When June first set foot in my office, I knew I had my work cut out for me. June had the classic symptoms of PTSD: difficulty sleeping, persistent hyperarousal, significant tension in her body, and chronic exhaustion. She lived alone and hadn't been in an intimate relationship for almost a decade. She had few close friends and had severed nearly all contact with her family.

Fortunately, June had enough insight to surmise that many of these symptoms were rooted in early childhood boundary violations. Her first perpetrators had been her parents. Neither her mother nor her father showed her much love growing up, she told me in our first session. Instead, she said, they were reliant on her for emotional support and attention, and had been ever since she was a child.

"From an early age, my mom couldn't respond to my emotional and physical needs for love, nurturing, or protection," June said. "It almost made me feel ashamed for having those needs to begin with."

As a result, June had cut off all contact with her mother. This response of cutting off people who she felt had violated a boundary was something she'd employed more

recently with friends and colleagues at the nonprofit where she worked—even when the transgression was a tiny one.

In my work as a therapist, I've seen how boundary violations can have a profound impact on our mental health. Unresolved boundary issues often stem from childhood attachment injuries like disrespect, abuse, and neglect, often resulting in anxiety, depression, and PTSD later in life. Many people who've suffered boundary violations in early life struggle to conceptualize their boundaries, let alone assert them.

As a bioenergetic therapist incorporating a mind-body approach, I help clients express boundaries physically and verbally. When it was first developed in the 1950s, bioenergetic therapy focused on the developmental trauma stemming from childhood boundary violations. Although its founder, Alexander Lowen, didn't use words like *boundaries* or *trauma*, he acutely understood the impact of these violations on mental health. Modern bioenergetic therapists have further refined the work of helping clients strengthen their personal boundaries by adding a more relational emphasis.

The bioenergetic approach is a strong model for helping clients understand and assert boundaries, since it relies heavily on body-based interventions and movement to increase feeling, expand awareness, and promote overall health. When working with the body in therapy, clients often become more aware of the relational trauma they've suppressed.

Since humans communicate as much nonverbally as they do verbally, engaging the body is especially important, but often overlooked. Over the years, I've developed specific exercises to help clients practice new boundary behaviors, allowing them to *feel* the process of boundary creation rather than simply discuss it in abstract terms.

Based on her history and attachment trauma, I knew June would be a good candidate. She indicated she wanted help setting better personal boundaries and was receptive to the idea of mixing body exercises with talk therapy.

Clients who've experienced (and continue to experience) boundary violations are often unaware that the messages they send verbally and nonverbally don't match. For example, they might believe they've expressed themselves clearly, but their voice doesn't express conviction or their body sends a different message. For instance, they might say, "Stop!" timidly, while taking a step backwards when, in their mind, they were assertive.

I wanted to help June match her intentions with her voice and body, but first, I'd need for her to feel what it was like to set boundaries. June agreed to try.

“Okay,” I began in our next session, “I want you to stand and place your feet about hip-width apart, with your knees slightly bent and your weight evenly divided on both feet. Bend and straighten your legs a few times while pressing your feet into the floor. Pay attention to what you sense in your body while doing this.”

June obliged. Almost immediately, she began to smile.

“I notice my breathing getting deeper. I definitely feel more connected to my body,” she said.

“Great,” I replied. “In order to have the strength to set clear boundaries with people in your life, you first need to feel solid in yourself.”

“Now, bend forward at the waist,” I continued. “Let your arms and head hang loose.”

June bowed forward, slowly, and dropped her arms.

“How does that feel?” I asked.

“I’m feeling less tense,” she replied. “Especially in my neck and shoulders.”

“Good! I can already see your body loosening up,” I told her. “It’s a little like how a tennis player stands with their knees bent, relaxed, alert, and focused on the ball. You’re ready to respond in the moment. Knowing what this feeling of relaxed readiness feels like will help you know when you’re ready and comfortable responding to a boundary violation. Next, slowly bring your upper body back up, while continuing to press down in your legs and feet.”

June obliged.

“Now, June, think about what it would be like to vouch for yourself, to set those boundaries. See if you can envision that. What does it feel like?”

“I can feel how much more in contact I am with my body,” she replied. “I’m also noticing fewer anxious thoughts than usual. My mind isn’t racing thinking about how someone might react to me asserting myself. I feel more confident.”

As our work progressed, I introduced a bioenergetic exercise more specifically developed to help June practice asserting boundaries.

“Put both hands out in front of you with your palms facing outward,” I told June in a later session. “Keep your elbows slightly bent, and press out with your wrists, and if it feels okay to do so, add some words, like ‘Stop!’ or ‘This is my space!’ or ‘I have a right to my boundary!’”

Initially, June was hesitant.

“I’m afraid to set boundaries like this. What if someone gets angry at me?”

“Stop, take some deep breaths, and bend your knees. Remember the grounding exercise you learned in your first sessions. You can do this!”

As June did the grounding movements, she became calmer and was able to return to the exercise.

“Okay, that’s much better,” she said, exhaling. “I know it’ll be difficult, but I think I can imagine standing my ground even if someone gets angry or tries to push me past my limits.”

Of course, I also wove talk therapy into our work. Not only did we explore how she might employ these exercises and ground herself in real-life situations at work and with friends, but we worked through the memories that boundary setting brought up—memories of situations where she’d been unable to assert her limits, like a time she narrowly missed being sexually assaulted by an aggressive date. We explored the impact of these violation together, and I made space for her to express the deep sorrow and anger she’d felt from past injuries but had been unable to express.

“You have a right to be angry,” I told her. “It isn’t fair that no one taught you to protect yourself. As a child, you didn’t have the ability to protect yourself or choose your relationship with people like your parents. But now, as an adult, you *can* make different choices. You *can* speak up for yourself.”

“You’re right,” June replied. “I do want and need people in my life, but I can choose who those people are, and I can say something when I feel disrespected.”

Slowly but surely, June became more adept at setting limits. She confronted friends directly when she felt hurt by them, rather than cutting off the relationship as she'd done previously. She even resumed contact with her mother, and began having phone conversations with her where she was able to firmly express her limits. For instance, in moments where her mother began talking incessantly about her own needs, June would cut her off after a certain point, letting her know that she was ready to end the conversation. Now, June says her mother is learning to communicate with her from a place of tenderness, not selfishness.

At work, too, she stood up for herself, taking ownership of her accomplishments when others tried to take credit for them—a specific boundary violation June had mentioned early in our work.

Wants and Needs

In bioenergetics, a boundary is not only defined as a limit you set, but how you reach out to ask for what you want or need. For some people, setting limits is easy but reaching out is challenging. For others, the opposite is true. Regardless, people need to know how to do both to have satisfying relationships.

Once I was confident that June could assert her boundaries, we turned focusing on ways she could assert her wants and needs. We came up with a list of people June could ask for help, like coworkers who might support her if she felt a superior was bullying her. We also incorporated asserting needs and wants movements into her existing skill-building exercises.

“Reach out your arms, keep your elbows loose, and extend your fingers forward, as if you’re reaching for connection, like you’re asking for a hug,” I instructed her. “Now, try saying ‘I need support’ or ‘Your friendship matters to me,’ or ‘Please help me.’”

There were bumps along the way, but the more we practiced this, the easier it became for June to ask for support.

“You have a right to your wants and needs,” I told her in a later session. “They won’t always be met, but you do have a right to ask for them.”

June still has work to do, but she’s developed valuable insight into her past, has worked through her longstanding discomfort with setting boundaries, and knows what she needs to do moving forward.

What else helped June? In our sessions, I modeled clear boundaries. I allowed her to set limits, including correcting me when I misinterpreted feelings she was trying to articulate or misunderstood a story she'd told. I set my own limits too. When June asked for things I couldn't give her, like extra time at the end of a session, I told her we'd have to wait until next time.

Roughly a year after she first began treatment, June has become much better at asserting her boundaries. She's now able to express limits *and* needs, and her trauma symptoms have mostly abated. She's also sleeping better, has more energy, and feels less tense. In short, she's learned to articulate her what she's feeling—and to be truly vulnerable.

"Our work together has been a game-changer," she told me recently. "I love having boundaries!"

Asserting boundaries sometimes means confronting painful loss. But in every case where I've worked with clients who've experienced boundary violations, helping them reinforce their boundaries has led to greater satisfaction, both in their relationships with others and in their relationship with themselves. If you're working with clients who struggle to set boundaries, I strongly suggest you look into bioenergetics boundary work.

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