



STEPPING STONES  
CURRICULUM

# CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

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# UNIT ONE: BOUNDARIES

Have you ever struggled with knowing whether you are doing too much or too little in your relationships with other? Have you ever felt like, for some reason, you seem to struggle with building or maintaining healthy relationships? Or maybe you don't even know what it means to have a healthy relationship? You are not alone! This unit will help you recognize patterns that are sabotaging your relationships and leaving you out of balance with your thinking, feeling, and behavior.

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

### **What are boundaries?**

Boundaries are the emotional and physical space between you and the other person. It is like an invisible perimeter or mental fence that indicates where you begin and another person ends. Boundaries are how you know you are vs who you are not.

### **Why are boundaries important?**

Boundaries are how a person knows who they are and who they are not. It allows us to recognize our own unique thoughts, feelings, goals, and desires from those of others. Boundaries also influence how we balance our conflicting needs of wanting to connect and be close with others while also maintaining our independence and uniqueness.

Boundaries impact our relationship with ourselves and others. They play a role in how we deal with relationship issues, such as intimacy, loneliness, conflict, etc. Boundaries also impact our personal identity — how we think and feel about ourselves, as well as how others see us.

## WHEN BOUNDARIES BECOME PROBLEMATIC

Boundaries become a problem when they are either too close (meshed) or too distant (detached). It is not uncommon for individuals to struggle with both extremes.

**Enmeshed** is a word used to describe when we let people into too much of our lives and lose our sense of self. Symptoms of this include:

1. Being the yes person.

1. Do you find yourself having difficulty saying no to others, even when you don't want to do something, it is not good for you, or it goes against your gut instincts?

2. Giving too much.

1. Do you give too much of your time, your trust, your possessions, or your body to others?

3. Involved too quickly.

1. Do you tend to jump into relationships (romantic or friendship) with others before you have time to build trust and find out whether or not they are a safe person?

**Detached** is when boundaries can be too distant and we don't let people into our lives for fear of losing our independence, being hurt, or being taken advantage of by others. Symptoms of this include:

1. Being the "no" person.

1. Do you have difficulty saying "yes" to others or making commitments with others?

2. Isolation.

1. Do you have a tendency to isolate from other people?

2. Do you often feel lonely?

3. Distrust.

1. Are you skeptical of others and find yourself questioning their motives?

2. Do you feel safe sharing the "real" you with anyone in your life?

4. Do you leave relationships too quickly?

1. Do you get out of a relationship at the first sign of conflict?

2. Or do you push the person away when you begin to feel vulnerable?

5. Disconnected.

1. Do you feel cut off from others?

2. Do you lack friendships?

3. Are there people in your life you can turn to for support or help?

**Do I struggle with boundaries?** If you have ever experienced someone violating you through emotional, verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse, this represents a BIG violation of your personal boundaries. Your body and your emotions were violated by trauma.

For individuals who have experienced trauma as a child and/or an adult, it can be difficult to know how to achieve healthy, balanced boundaries in relationships with others.

You may also have difficulty setting boundaries with yourself. For example, do you have difficulty saying “no” to yourself? Do you end up doing things you promised yourself that you wouldn’t do (smoking pot when you promised yourself you would quit or going back to an abusive partner? Or maybe you have difficulty saying “yes” to yourself. Examples of this include depriving yourself too much by not eating enough or taking time to relax and have fun.

Boundary problems are often driven by our desires to be loved and accepted by others. By always saying “yes” and giving all of yourself to someone, you may be trying to win that person’s love or acceptance; however, this can lead them placing unfair demands on you and manipulating you. The other extreme of disconnecting from others may lead you to believe that you are protecting yourself; however, it often leads to lack of support, isolation, and loneliness.

It is not uncommon for people who struggle with boundaries to also violate others’ boundaries as well. Signs of this could include: trying to control others; “testing” people; or intruding on other people’s business.

## SYMPTOMS OF HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Boundaries **keep you safe**. Being able to say “no” to others reduces the risk of others taking advantage of, or hurting you. Being able to say “yes” allows you to connect with others and receive support when needed.

Boundaries **are flexible**. It is important to be able to let go of destructive relationships, while also being able to hang onto safe

and nurturing relationships. Being flexible with your boundaries allows you to know when and how to set limits at appropriate times in your relationships with others.

Boundaries help you to **prevent extremes in relationships**. Setting good boundaries are important to maintaining balance in relationships. It helps us to avoid being too close vs too distant, giving all vs giving too little, trusting too much too quickly vs being distrusting and pushing others away.

Boundaries create **connectedness**. Healthy boundaries allow you to resolve conflicts with others and maintain relationships over time.

How do I start setting healthy boundaries?

1. The first step is recognizing symptoms of unhealthy boundaries in your relationships.
2. Second, can you identify any negative thoughts or beliefs that may be influencing your enmeshed or detached boundaries? For example, if you find yourself struggling to say “no” to others, is it because you hear they will reject you or do you believe you must win their approval?
3. Third, what behaviors can you begin to change in order to begin setting healthy boundaries? For example, you could begin practicing saying “no” to unnecessary demands others put on you. Start small and build on your successes!

Remember: change can be difficult and uncomfortable. Don't be surprised that you may feel guilty when you begin saying “no” or you may feel awkward when you begin saying “yes”. These feelings are normal. Also remember that individuals in your life may not like these changes either. Building healthy boundaries will lead to changes in your relationships with others. Keep in mind that these changes are to improve your emotional, mental, and physical well-being. It will be worth it in the long run!

“We change our behavior when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing.

Consequences give us the pain that motivates us to change.”

— Dr Henry Cloud —

# CODEPENDENCY

Codependent is a term used to describe symptoms (behaviors, attitudes, beliefs) that negatively affect a person's self-identity and relationships with others. Codependency often is a result of growing up in a dysfunctional home, being raised by chemically dependent parents, and/or being in a committed relationship with a person who has a chemical dependency.

Codependency symptoms include:

- ✓ Assuming responsibility for others' feelings & behaviors
- ✓ Fear of being hurt/rejected by others
- ✓ Putting others' wants, demands, or needs first even when it goes against my beliefs or what is best for me
- ✓ Others' feelings and opinions determine what I say or do and how I react
- ✓ I ignore my own beliefs, values, or feelings in order to connect with others in a relationship
- ✓ Difficulty identifying and expressing my own feelings
- ✓ Fear/worry about how others may react to my feelings, decisions, and/or opinions
- ✓ Difficulty making decisions
- ✓ The desire to feel "needed" by others in my relationship with them
- ✓ Staying in a relationship when it is harmful to me or unhealthy
- ✓ Denying my own needs in order to meet the needs of my partner in hopes that this will get them to love me and never leave me.

**Where does codependency come from?** Codependency is often a result of relationship trauma or growing up in a dysfunctional home. Children who grow up in traumatic households often learn that if they can read others' moods, they can stay out of trouble or not "upset" the household. As a result, these children become more focused on those around them and what others are feeling and begin not paying attention to or

ignoring what is going on inside of them. In a sense, it is a result of learning how to survive in their home environment.

It is also true of individuals who are in relationship with a chemically dependent person or abusive partner. A codependent person tries to “keep the peace” by learning how to read the other person and behave in ways that avoid making their partner or loved one upset. Codependency, though it appears to be about caretaking for others, is really about our own anxiety and fear. Remember — codependency is a result of learning how to predict others’ moods and wishes in order to avoid trouble or conflict. It is out of fear — fear that the person may “leave” or “get upset” or become abusive toward us or no longer love us — that the codependent person is driven to try and “read” that person in order to avoid “triggering” them.

## BOUNDARIES AND CODEPENDENCY

Developing and setting healthy boundaries is how you can begin to recover from codependency. Without boundaries, we have no protection (physically, sexually, and emotionally) because we take on others’ reality and lose our sense of who we are. When boundaries are not intact in a relationship, it leads us to trying to control other people or allowing others to control us.

**The first step** in building healthy boundaries and reducing codependent behaviors is by taking ownership of who you are. This means that you do not blame others but instead recognize that how you think or feel and what you choose to do or not do is part of your sense of identity - who you are.

**The second step** involves letting go of others. This may involve letting go emotionally, mentally, or sometimes even physically. Letting go involves allowing a person to take responsibility for their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors just as you have begun to do with yourself.

When you are able to begin practicing these two steps, your sense of self will improve. You will also find that you are less fearful, anxious, and helpless in your relationships when you can let go of the belief that you are responsible for others and, instead, invest your energy in taking care of and changing yourself. The only person you have control over is ... YOU!

# UNIT TWO: COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication is something we do every day and, often times, we do not realize the impact that our verbal or non-verbal communication has on others.

Verbal communication is the words we use to express ourselves to others. Non-verbal communication is what our body language says to others about what we are thinking and feeling. For example, if someone rolls their eyes at you, it communicates a message to you about what they are thinking; they don't even have to say a word!

It is important to understand characteristics of good vs bad communication so that you can improve your relationships with others and effectively learn how to express your feelings, thoughts, and needs in a way that people will be willing to listen to you.

## FOUR STYLES OF COMMUNICATION

### **Passive**

This style of communication describes a person who withdraws from conversations and “shuts down” during conflict. Examples of passive behaviors include:

- ❖ Giving up/giving in
- ❖ People pleasing — being “too nice”
- ❖ Silently blaming others
- ❖ Beating around the bush
- ❖ Not stating personal opinion
- ❖ Self-pity; being a victim
- ❖ Withdrawing/refusing to talk
- ❖ Feeling like one's opinion/thoughts/feelings do not matter
- ❖ Going along with others' demands when you do not want to or you feel it is not right

### **Aggressive**



Individuals who use this style of communication attack others verbally and/or physically. Examples of aggressive behaviors include:

- ❖ Hitting, punching, scratching
- ❖ Throwing items/breaking things
- ❖ Yelling, name-calling, swearing
- ❖ Threatening or intimidating
- ❖ Demanding
- ❖ Shaming/embarrassing others
- ❖ Using a loud voice
- ❖ Speaking for others

A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh words stirs up anger.

- *Proverbs 15:1 (ESV)* -

### **Passive-Agressive**

This style of communication is demonstrated when individuals will not directly confront or talk with the person whom they have issues with but, instead, will use indirect approaches to “get back” at the other person. Examples of passive-aggressive behaviors include:

- ❖ Using humor that is hurtful/embarrassing
- ❖ Sarcasm/cynicism
- ❖ Withholding affection for “payback”
- ❖ Gossiping (talking behind someone’s back)
- ❖ Manipulating others
- ❖ Setting someone up
- ❖ Complaining to others but refusing to directly confront the source of the problem.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths,  
but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion,  
that it may give grace to those who hear.

- *Ephesians 4:29* -

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

- *Proverbs 12:18* -

## Assertive

Directly and clearly communicating your thoughts, feelings, and needs in a way that maintains the respect of yourself and the person(s) with whom you are communicating. This is the healthy form of communication. Examples of assertive behaviors include:

- ❖ Speaking for yourself (not for others)
- ❖ Owning your thoughts and feelings (“I feel” or “I think”) instead of blaming (“You made me feel...”)
- ❖ Being able to risk rejection and possible conflict when speaking
- ❖ Sharing your wants and needs while respecting that the other person may not be willing or able to meet your wishes
- ❖ Using an appropriate and respectful tone of voice when speaking
- ❖ Being able to say “yes” when you want to do something and “no” when you do not want to do something
- ❖ Verbalizing and acting on what you think is right

# IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Practicing assertive skills can help you improve your communication with others. It is also another way of setting healthy boundaries (see previous section). We will look at a few tips for how to become an assertive person.

**Practice “I” messages.** This allows you to clearly express your feelings about a situation without blaming or threatening others. This strategy helps us avoid putting the other person(s) on the defensive.

There are three parts to an “I” message:

1. Identify your feelings: “I feel angry...”
2. Identify the person’s behavior or the situation that is upsetting you: “When you put me down...”
3. State what you want to happen: “I want you to stop calling me names.”

Notice that using “I” messages does not blame the other person or put them in a defensive mode. Think about it — when a person

says to you: “YOU should ... YOU are ... YOU always...” it automatically makes you go on the defensive, right?

Also, using “I” messages allow you to take responsibility for your own feelings and thoughts and gives you the control to be able to request a change from the person with whom you are upset.

**Be aware of body language.** It has been suggested throughout multiple studies that up to 90% of communication is non-verbal (body language). That means that others perceive us mostly through non-verbal cues that we use. Such as:

**Eye contact.** Maintain direct eye contact with the person and appear interested. Don’t roll your eyes or pretend you are bored or sleepy.

**Posture.** Make sure your body is facing the other person you appear inviting and open to what the person has to say. (Example: folding your arms may give the appearance that you are angry or closed off).


**Gestures.** Don’t point, shake your fists, or use gestures that would indicate accusations, blame, or anger.

**Tone of voice.** Use a factual conversational tone of voice. Be clear and concise with your words.

**Timing.** Try to avoid picking a time to talk when you or the other person is tired, angry, distracted, etc. Choose to talk when both of you are in a good frame of mind.

**Active Listening.** Of course you want to be heard and understood by another person when you are upset. Have you ever considered that it is equally important for you to listen to them? In order to improve communication with someone, force yourself to practice staying quiet and hearing the other person’s perspective. Often, this can help you better understand why they may have responded or acted the way they did toward you. By practicing active listening, it also lets the person know you value their feelings. It also helps build equality and respect in the relationship when both parties are able to be heard.

### **Tips for Practicing Active Listening**

 Ask questions

- 👤 Restate/clarify in your own words what you believe the other person has said. Any misinterpretations can be clarified this way.
- 👤 Don't interrupt while the other person is talking
- 👤 Force yourself to remain quiet, non-judgmental, and physically/mentally present with the person while they talk
- 👤 Be aware of your body language and what it is "saying" to the other person

Sometimes it can be helpful to practice "fair" communication by setting a timer to make sure each person has an equal amount of time to speak. Try it! Set a time for 5 minutes to talk. When the timer goes off, allow the other person to talk for 5 minutes. After you have both had your time to share, clarify any additional questions you may have.

**Unacceptable Verbal Communication.** Most of us have struggled with communication issues at times and many of us have not always practiced the healthiest styles of communication; however, it is extremely important to be aware of what is verbal abuse.

- ❖ **NAME CALLING** • "You're so stupid!" "You're fat!" "Why are you so dumb?"
- ❖ **YELLING & SCREAMING** • Raising your voice.
- ❖ **SWEARING** • Using swear words toward another person.
- ❖ **THREATENING TO INTIMIDATE** • "If dinner isn't ready when I get home I'll leave you." "If I catch you looking at another man I will beat you." "If you come home with bad grades again, I'll kick you out of the house for good."
- ❖ **BLAMING** • "It's your fault I got drunk and punched you." "All of your nagging made me cheat on you."
- ❖ **DISMISSING ANOTHER'S FEELINGS AS UNIMPORTANT** • "How can you feel that way? It's so stupid!" "You're such a baby." "You don't really feel that way."
- ❖ **EMBARRASSING OR HUMILIATING A PERSON IN FRONT OF OTHERS** • "She's so stupid she can't even boil water." "You should've seen her before she got so fat."
- ❖ **MANIPULATING** • "If you forgive me just one more time for cheating on you I promise I will never do it again." "Please come pay my bail to get me out of jail. If you don't it's because you don't really love me."

Verbal abuse is unacceptable and should not be tolerated. As an adult, you have the right to set firm boundaries with individuals who are verbally abusive toward you. In the same way, it is also unacceptable for you to be verbally abusive toward others. It is never okay to hurt someone physically OR verbally. Verbal abuse is very emotionally and mentally damaging.

Referenced from: [www.guystuffcounseling.com](http://www.guystuffcounseling.com), copyright 2007-2012.

## UNIT THREE: ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Every person has the desire to connect with others and feel loved and accepted as a person — this is how God made us! We are not meant to deal with life on our own. We are relational creatures, made in the image of God — and God wants to connect with us!

Unfortunately, sometimes our views of relationships can get twisted by what we witnessed in our home growing up, how we were mistreated by others, or maybe from the scars left on our hearts and memories by painful experiences of romantic relationships from our past. This section is meant to help you recognize signs of unhealthy relationships, as well as learn to recognize characteristics that make up a healthy relationship.

There is a saying out there that goes something like this: “You will only attract the types of people to you that are as healthy or unhealthy as you are.”

Think about it...if we are not healthy as a person — having poor boundaries, mistreating others with our words, putting up with inappropriate behavior — then we cannot expect to attract someone to us who is any healthier.

Before you can be in a healthy relationship, you must get yourself healthy. The good news is that if you have been paying attention to and working on the skills in the previous sections of

this module, then you are already on your way to becoming a more healthy person.

## RECOGNIZING UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

“So encourage each other and build each other up,  
just as you are already doing.”  
— 1 Thessalonians 5:11

It is important to be aware of abuse in a relationship. There are three forms of abuse (sometimes called “domestic violence”). Even though someone may not physically harm you, that person may still be abusive toward you in other ways.

**Physical Abuse.** This can involve pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, use of a weapon, or any force that causes pain or injury to your body.

**Emotional Abuse.** Threats of harm toward you, your loved ones, friends, pets, or possessions; withholding finances or affection, depriving you of sleep, etc; verbal abuse (see communication section); harassment; overly controlling and jealous behavior; any behavior that causes emotional pain.

**Sexual Abuse.** Forcing you to commit sexual acts against your will, sexual aggression or violence, treating you as an “object” meant to meet their physical needs.

## THE ABUSE CYCLE

There is often a common pattern or cycle that can be recognized in a relationship where domestic violence is present.

**Tension Building.** The victim recognizes the building tension in the relationship, in which conflict increases. There may be some physical abuse that occurs, and the victim feels like he/she is

“walking on eggshells” to try and please the abuser in order to avoid increasing abusive behavior.

**Major Episode of Violence.** This can sometimes be triggered by a minor argument. There is usually very little the victim can do to de-escalate or stop the violence once it starts. Apologizing, begging, or reasoning with the abuser does not usually work at this point in the cycle.

**Remorse or Honeymoon Period.** The abuser feels guilty for his/her behavior, often begs for forgiveness and promises it will never happen again. Often, during this period, the abuser is on his/her “best behavior”; buying gifts for the victim, treating the victim with much kindness, etc. It is only a matter of time before the cycle repeats itself.

It is NEVER acceptable for abuse to occur in a relationship. If you are currently in a relationship and you can relate to any of the above forms of abuse (whether you are the abuser or the victim), please seek help immediately from a professional. If you do not, the situation will only get worse. You do not have to tolerate abusive behavior from someone else; you are a unique person, loved and valued by God, and you deserve to be treated with respect. If you are the abuser, then it is important you recognize the need for help so you can stop hurting others and learn how to have healthy relationships.

## WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO LEAVE AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

There are many reasons why a person may find it difficult to leave an abusive relationship. Here are some possible reasons:

**Increased Violence.** It can be dangerous for a victim to leave the abuser because the abuser may retaliate (seek revenge) or it may result in more severe violence.

**Lack of Financial Independence.** A person who relies on the abuser for financial support may not have the ability to support himself/herself if choosing to leave, especially if children are involved.

**False Hope.** Victims of abuse usually love their partners and want to believe that their partner can and will change. Victims often want to believe the promises they hear from the abuser during the “honeymoon” phase of the abuse cycle; however, lasting change rarely happens without professional involvement.

**Isolation.** Victims may have limited or no contact with family or friends because of the abuser’s control. As a result, victims often find it hard to leave the relationship without support from others.

**Self-Blame.** Abusers may brainwash their victims into believing that it is the victim’s fault for the abuse. Victims may begin to believe that, if they could just change — be more lovable, be more attractive, etc. — then the abuser would be happier and the abuse would stop.

**Religious and Cultural Beliefs.** Certain cultures and/or religions may have strong beliefs against separation of the family unit.

## WHEN TO GET OUT OF A RELATIONSHIP

- Anytime you or your child(ren)’s safety is at risk.
- You are compromising your personal beliefs or value system.
- You are becoming someone you don’t like or you are acting out of character when you are with this person.
- Despite his/her promises to change, the other person’s destructive behavior (emotional, physical, sexual abuse) continues to get worse.
- Others around you express concern about you since you have become involved in the relationship.

## BEWARE OF STALKING BEHAVIORS

When a person shows interest in you, it can be flattering. However, it is important to be aware of warning signs that this person may be displaying perpetrating or stalking behaviors. The legal definition of stalking varies from state to state; however, a general definition of stalking includes: When someone is watching



you, following you, threatening you, or harassing you in an aggressive way that makes you feel afraid or unsafe.

The following list includes some vernal behaviors to be on the lookout for from [LovelsRespect.com](https://www.LovelsRespect.com)

- Showing up at your house, work, or school uninvited.
- Waiting for you at places where that person knows you visit or hang out.
- Sending unwanted letters, emails, voicemails, or text messages; leaving notes on your vehicle, door, etc.
- Following you or tracking you on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok.
- Leaving unwanted gifts for you.
- Hang-up calls.
- Constant calling and/or texting.
- Making threatening or harassing comments towards you.

Often times we think of stalkers as strangers; however, three out of four victims are harassed or stalked by a person that they know. Just because you know someone, it does not make it okay for them to harass you or behave aggressively toward you. If someone's behavior makes you feel unsafe or afraid, seek help. If you believe you are in danger, call 9-1-1. Keep all evidence (text messages, voicemails, letters, social media postings, etc) and present it to the police.

## GETTING OUT OF A DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP

If you believe your safety may be at risk, make appropriate preparations and consult a professional on how to prepare for leaving (such as a Domestic Violence shelter, professional counselor, or legal advocate).

- ❖ Get your support system in place (friends, family, community resources, church, etc).
- ❖ Keep your focus on your personal goals and values.
- ❖ Allow yourself to grieve the loss of the relationship.
- ❖ Call 9-1-1 at any time you believe you may be in danger.

- ❖ Save any evidence of threats or aggression. Consider filing a personal protection order (PPO).
- ❖ Go to the county clerk’s office or the circuit court office in the county where you live and ask for a “do it yourself” personal protection order packet. If you are in immediate danger, ask the court for an ex parte order, without a hearing, and check the ex parte box on the form.

## HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP SIGNS VS UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP SIGNS

<b>HEALTHY SIGNS</b> <i>“The person I am in relationship with...”</i>	<b>UNHEALTHY SIGNS</b> <i>“The person I am in relationship with...”</i>
Supports me in my personal goals; encourages me to pursue my interests.	Discourages me from pursuing my goals, dreams, or hobbies.
Is honest with me and I feel I can be honest with them.	Gets mad easily, so I often feel I have to hide or cover up things.
Is respectful toward me and my loved ones; encourages me to have other supports besides just them.	Excludes me from friends and family; tells me I don’t need anyone else but them.
Has my best interest in mind.	Leads me to believe that I am responsible for their feelings; making them happy
Is willing to resolve conflict. Respects my thoughts and opinions.	Is physically abusive and/or verbally critical of me.
Shares common values and beliefs.	Makes it difficult for me to share my true thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Leads me to compromise my beliefs and values to be with them.

<b>HEALTHY SIGNS</b> <i>“The person I am in relationship with...”</i>	<b>UNHEALTHY SIGNS</b> <i>“The person I am in relationship with...”</i>
Shares responsibilities with me.	Demands things from me. Has unrealistic expectations.
Is able to say “I’m sorry” and/or admit that they are wrong.	Blames me. Makes excuses for their wrongful actions.
Spends time with me and we have fun together.	Is selfish with their time. It’s easier to just do what they want to do.

## UNIT FOUR: SELF ESTEEM AND SELF CARE

You have probably heard the term “self-esteem” many times. But how does that apply to you? Events that have occurred in your life and relationships you have had with others have impacted the way you have come to view yourself. Unfortunately, there is nothing you can do to change what has happened in the past; however, it is important that you realize you *can* take control of improving your self-image in the present!

This section will help you recognize what self-care is, the importance of taking time to care for yourself, and also recognizing the inner voices in your head that speak positive and negative messages to you about your self-worth.

It is very important that, first and foremost, you recognize that you are God’s creation and the Bible states that God made you in His image; therefore, when you speak negatively about yourself, you are bad mouthing God’s work! The good news is, no matter what you have done in the past, when you ask Christ to forgive you of your sins and come into your life, the Bible says that we are a new creation and the old is gone! When you make that step, it is important to begin behaving and thinking as a new person instead

of judging yourself or feeling guilty for what you've already been forgiven for. Let's get started with this challenge!

## NEGATIVE THINKING VS POSITIVE THINKING

“Self compassion is simply giving the same kindness to others that we would give to others.”

— Christopher Germer —

There are millions of thoughts that go through our heads every day. It is important to realize that you can and should look after the garden of your mind. For example, a healthy, productive garden requires a lot of time and attention in order to produce healthy plants. Think about it this way: if you plant a garden and never take time to weed it or water it, the weeds will overrun the good stuff and choke out the growth of the plants. This is like our minds. When we do not pay attention to what we are putting into our minds and what messages we say to ourselves, it is easy to allow weeds or negative thoughts to begin overriding the positive, helpful thoughts.

Be aware of what you put into your mind on a daily basis. Are you planting weeds by watching trashy TV shows, listening to angry music, or surrounding yourself with others who gossip? Or are you taking time to read positive literature and surround yourself with individuals who inspire you and help you grow?

Weeds of the mind tend to pop up in different forms, much like the variety of weeds you find in a garden. Weeds take the form of anxiety, fear, anger, jealousy, hatred, self-pity, or bitterness. These weeds of the mind hold back the ability for plants (positive thoughts) to bloom. By dwelling on the negative thoughts, it is much like feeding Miracle Grow to the weeds instead of the plants — it feeds further negativity.

You can control how much negativity you allow into your mind by paying attention to what you are listening to with your ears and what you are reading or watching with your eyes.

**What is self-care?** Self-care simply means doing positive, healthy things to care for you. It is not uncommon for women to neglect themselves in order to take care of children, significant others, aging parents, work demands, etc. However, when we neglect ourselves, it is easy to feel burned out, bitter, exhausted, and numb.

In order to help you get a good perspective on whether or not you are practicing good self care, consider this:

*If you treated another person as you have been treating yourself, would that person be your friend?*

Think of how you talk to yourself, how much time you spend with yourself doing things you enjoy, or how you treat your body. If you acted this way toward a friend, would they still be your friend?

In using an example of a bank account, think of it this way: when you continuously make withdrawals from your bank account, funds get low. You may even overdraw your account. Maintaining a bank account means that deposits have to be made in order for funds to be available to pay bills and make purchases. This is similar to self-care. If you continuously give to others and care for others without taking time to care for yourself (making deposits), you will soon find yourself overdrawn. As you know, if you continue to overdraw a bank account, you will end up in a very bad financial mess, owing the bank more money than the actual amount you have overdrawn because of overdraft fees.

In your life, when you continue to make withdrawals and care for others even after you are running on empty (overdrawn), there will be a price to pay physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or relationally. It is very important that you do things to rebuild your personal account! There are different parts to you that make up who you are as a whole person. Let's think of your life as a pie with different sections that make up the whole. Each of the different parts have different purposes; however, all of the sections work together and affect each other. For example, if you do not take care of yourself physically by eating or sleeping, it will more than likely affect you emotionally by leaving you more likely to be grumpy with others. Physically, you will probably not have a lot of energy and will be more likely to get sick.

If you begin to take better care of yourself physically, however, this will most likely have a positive impact on the other pieces of

the “pie”. If you get a good amount of sleep (7-8 hours per night), you eat healthily (include fruits and vegetables with each meal), and practice daily physical activity (at least 30 minutes each day), then you will notice benefits, such as having more social confidence, feeling better able to manage your stress, and thinking more clearly.

## IDEAS TO HELP IMPROVE YOUR OVERALL HEALTH

### Physical

- ★ Exercise at least 30 minutes per day for 5 or more days each week to the point that you break a sweat.
- ★ Include your kids and your pets! For example, make snowmen with your kids in the snow or play frisbee with your dog.
- ★ Get enough sleep each night (7-8 hours)
- ★ Eat foods that provide fuel and nutrition to your body by eating vegetable or fruit with each meal, as well as protein, such as cheese, yogurt, lean meat, nuts, and peanut butter.
- ★ Cut back on large amounts of caffeine. Avoid caffeine late in the day so it doesn't interrupt sleep. A good rule of thumb is to stop drinking caffeine after 12-noon.
- ★ Limit sugar in simple ways by drinking fewer sugary beverages (soda, sweet tea, juices, etc.) and eating things that are naturally sweet, such as fruit.

### Social

- ★ Spend time with friends and family.
- ★ Find a positive cause to volunteer for.
- ★ Get involved in a social group (Bible Study, mom groups, etc.).
- ★ Find free activities in the community to participate in — ones that you can include the whole family in!
- ★ Have a girls spa night. Invite your friends and have them bring their favorite nail polish, beauty supplies, etc to give each other makeovers.

## Emotional

- ★ Take a few minutes alone each day to de-stress and clear your mind.
- ★ Talk to a pastor, counselor, or mentor if you are struggling emotionally.
- ★ Don't let your feelings rule you — recognize them for what they are but also use your head to make good decisions.
- ★ Set healthy boundaries with others in your relationships.
- ★ Talk to someone you can trust about what you are going through. Don't bottle it up inside!

## Mental

- ★ Practice thinking of what you are thankful for on a daily basis.
- ★ Don't dwell on negative thoughts or feed into them. Remember, not everything we think is true!
- ★ Keep positive messages, quotes, or Bible verses in view. Post them on a mirror, on your refrigerator, or in your car.
- ★ Pay attention to what you fill your mind with — be sure to include positive music, TV shows, magazines, books, etc. and limit how much “junk” you watch, read, or listen to.

## Spiritual

- ★ Take time to pray.
- ★ Spend time with God each day. Talk to Him and read the Bible to get to know Him.
- ★ Sing or hum positive songs.
- ★ Give praise for all of the blessings in your life.
- ★ Practice the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5:22-23, NIV)
- ★ Do something kind for another person with no strings attached (no expectations to receive anything in return).
- ★ Find someone who is a positive role model and willing to mentor you in your Spiritual walk.

## Practice Time!

Now it is time to begin identifying ways in which you can improve your overall health. Identify *one* strategy in each of the 5

Life Areas that you are willing to begin doing to improve your health. You may use ideas listed in the previous pages or you can come up with your own; however, make sure it is something that is simple and you will be willing to follow through with doing. Don't set huge goals that will be difficult to do, or else you will feel bad about yourself and want to give up.

On a separate piece of paper, draw a circle and divide it into five different pieces. Label each of the pieces:

PHYSICAL  
SOCIAL  
EMOTIONAL  
MENTAL  
SPIRITUAL

Identify one idea for **each** area of your life that you are willing to begin practicing. Write one idea in each area of the pie. You can use the list on the previous pages for ideas or come up with your own.

## SHEDDING THE VICTIM ROLE

There are some individuals who have experienced many traumatic or tragic events in their lives; perhaps you are one of those people. Events that happen to us which are out of our control place us in the role of a "victim". When we are placed in a situation in which someone hurts us and we are unable to control or stop it from happening, it can leave us feeling helpless and fearful. It can be extremely difficult to work through being victimized and it can leave lasting changes to who we are. There is a common saying:

"We can't always control what has happened to us,  
But we can decide how we react to it."

Although you may be a victim of abuse, rape, theft, or other painful circumstances caused by others, there is a way that God can use these situations, if we allow Him to, to help us become a better person.



“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

**-Genesis 50:20, NIV-**

This was the reassurance that Joseph gave to his brothers, who were fearful that Joseph would seek revenge on them after the evil they had caused him. Instead of being a “victim” of his brothers’ evil behavior, Joseph chose to trust God to use the difficulties he had been through to accomplish the plans God had for his life. Joseph chose not to seek revenge against his brothers after he became successful and had the means to make their lives miserable. Instead, Joseph showed forgiveness toward his brothers and allowed God to use the bad that had happened to him as a way to help others.

You can do the same! With God’s help you can begin letting go of your past pain and allow God to use what you have been through for positive purposes. Instead of using so much of your energy being angry, bitter, or resentful toward others who have done you wrong, you can use that energy to motivate you do to something positive.

By choosing not to forgive, you end up hurting yourself most of all because the anger and resentment eats at you. But if you allow God to use the pain that someone else caused you for a good purpose, you're releasing the negative hold that memory and experience has had on your life. The past no longer controls you when you let go of resentment or hatred toward another person.

## EMBRACING THE SURVIVOR INSIDE YOU

Do you realize that when you no longer see yourself as a “victim” and begin taking action to better your life by practicing self-care and setting good boundaries with others, you are taking on the role of a survivor? I like the following definition of “survivor”: “A person who continues to function or prosper in spite of opposition, hardship, or setbacks.”

Is this you? Have you continued to live your life, move forward, and pursue your goals in spite of the difficulties you have faced? Well, if you got out of bed this morning, then that’s a start! The next step is to...well...take the NEXT STEP...literally! By putting one foot

in front of the other and refusing to get stuck in your current struggles or past problems, then you are making progress — even if it is little baby steps. Don't stop moving because as long as you are moving, regardless of how you may feel, you are refusing to be a victim any longer. Instead, you are a survivor!

**How does this apply to you?** On a separate piece of paper, write down your answers to the following questions:

1. Do you see yourself through the lens of a victim or a survivor? Give two examples why you believe this.
2. Identify two thoughts or behaviors that you need to decrease (do less of) in order to shed the “victim” role.

## SELF-ADVOCACY AND MOTIVATION

Part of working on the “new and improved you” is to realize that it is up to you to identify your needs and find ways to get those needs met. One of the biggest ways to get your identified needs met is to ask yourself two questions:

1. Am I able to meet this need of mine on my own?
2. If not, what trustworthy, reliable person can I ask for help to get this need met? Or, what resources are available to help me meet this need?

When we completely rely on others to care for us, make us happy, and meet all our needs, we will be disappointed because it means that our happiness, self-worth, etc. are completely dependent upon another person. This is unfair to place such big expectations on another person. And it can leave you feeling out of control of your own life and in a “victim” role.

Sometimes you may feel overwhelmed with your needs and it may be difficult to find the energy and motivation to make a change in order to address your needs. However, it is up to you to get yourself “unstuck” from your current situation and do the necessary work to make a positive change in your life.

By developing small goals, you can more easily begin to move forward and make changes to improve your life. Here are a few suggestions:

- Identify the need that is most important to you (example: getting a job)
- Take a piece of paper and list out the next 7 days (Monday, Tuesday, etc.)
- Identify one thing you can do each day that will help you meet the goal of finding a job.

EXAMPLE #1:

Monday — Look through the “Help Wanted” ads in the local paper and identify two jobs that you are interested in applying for.

EXAMPLE #2:

Tuesday — Pick up applications for the two jobs you are interested in and complete at least one application.

See how breaking down one big goal (getting a job) into smaller goals (fill out one application today) can help make the goal seem easier to accomplish? While we cannot rely on others to meet all of our needs, it is also important to recognize that we cannot get all of our needs without the help of others. Asking for help can sometimes be intimidating. Recall what you learned in the “Assertive Communication” section of this module and put it into practice!

## WHAT ASKING FOR HELP DOES NOT LOOK LIKE

- ➔ Whining and complaining to others about your current situation.
- ➔ Making up lies or “stretching” the truth about your current situation to get others to feel sorry for you.
- ➔ Taking advantage of others or manipulating others to get what you want.
- ➔ Refusing to do your part in getting your needs met.
- ➔ Demanding assistance from others.
- ➔ Believing you are entitled to (deserve to have) others’ help.
- ➔ Becoming dependent on other people, organizations, or the government to take care of you without developing a plan to help yourself.

# WHAT ASKING FOR HELP DOES LOOK LIKE

- ➔ Clearly stating your needs and requesting assistance in meeting those needs.
- ➔ Recognizing the difference between an unmet “need” versus an unnecessary “want”.
- ➔ Thanking the person or organization who provided the help to you.
- ➔ Requesting help from a person or organization in which you can trust not to take advantage of you or “blackmail” you by demanding unfair/unsafe repayment for the favor.
- ➔ Having a plan of how you can work to get this need met in the future without continually relying on other people or organizations.

If you look up the word “help” in the thesaurus, you will find that one of the replacement phrases for help is “to make easier”. I like that concept of what it means to ask for help. It does not mean that your problems or needs will completely go away. It also does not suggest that a person who asks for help is “weak”. Instead, the phrase helps us understand that asking for help from others is simply asking them to assist us in carrying a load that has become too heavy for us to carry alone.

In the Bible, Jesus says:

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”

- *Matthew 11:28-30 (NLT)* -

When you ask God to help you with your daily struggles and needs, he gives us peace and rest in exchange for your burdens. You can always go to God when you have needs and He will never turn you away. He will either provide you with enough strength and wisdom to meet that need on your own or He will bring the right people and/or resources into your life to help you meet that need. But you must be willing to do your part! Remember, keeping

one foot in front of the other and moving forward, doing your part, and help will come!

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In closing, I would like us to think about our self-worth from the viewpoint of our Creator. God knows us better than we even know ourselves. When you find yourself feeling ashamed or embarrassed of the image you see in the mirror, or you struggle to know who you truly are after the way others have abused or mistreated you, please consider the letter on the next page called, "Father's Love Letter".

## FATHER'S LOVE LETTER

An intimate message from God to you.

*My Child,*

*You may not know me, but I know everything about you. Psalm 139:1 I know when you sit down and when you rise up. Psalm 139:2 I am familiar with all your ways. Psalm 139:3 Even the very hairs on your head are numbered. Matthew 10:29-31 For you were made in my image. Genesis 1:27 In me you live and move and have your being. Acts 17:28 For you are my offspring. Acts 17:28 I knew you even before you were conceived. Jeremiah 1:4-5 I chose you when I planned creation. Ephesians 1:11-12 You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book. Psalm 139:15-16 I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live. Acts 17:26 You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:14 I knit you together in your mother's womb. Psalm 139:13 And brought you forth on the day you were born. Psalm 71:6 I have been misrepresented by those who don't know me. John 8:41-44 I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expression of love. 1 John 4:16 And it is my desire to lavish my love on you. 1 John 3:1 Simply because you are my child and I am your Father. 1 John 3:1 I offer you more than your earthly father ever could. Matthew 7:11 For I am the perfect father. Matthew 5:48 Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand. James 1:17 For I am your provider and I meet all your needs. Matthew 6:31-33 My plan for your future has always been filled with hope. Jeremiah 29:11 Because I love you with an everlasting love. Jeremiah 31:3 My thoughts toward you are countless as the sand on the seashore. Psalm 139:17-18 And I rejoice over you with singing. Zephaniah 3:17 I will never stop doing good to you. Jeremiah 32:40 For you are my treasured possession. Exodus 19:5 I desire to establish you with all my heart and all my soul. Jeremiah 32:41 And I want to show you great and marvelous things. Jeremiah 33:3 If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me. Deuteronomy 4:29 Delight in me and I will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:4 For it is I who gave you those desires. Philippians 2:13 I am able to do more for you than you could possibly imagine. Ephesians 3:20 For I am your greatest encourager. 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 I am also the Father who comforts you in all your troubles. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 When you are brokenhearted, I am close to you. Psalm 34:18 As a shepherd carries a lamb, I have carried you close to my heart. Isaiah 40:11 One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes. Revelation 21:3-4 And I'll take away all the pain you have suffered on this earth. Revelation 21:3-4 I am your Father, and I love you even as I love my son, Jesus. John 17:23 For in Jesus, my love for you is revealed. John 17:26 He is the exact representation of my being. Hebrews 1:3 He came to demonstrate that I am for you, not against you. Romans 8:31 And to tell you that I am not counting your sins. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 His death was the ultimate expression of my love for you. 1 John 4:10 I gave up everything I loved that I might gain your love. Romans 8:31-32 If you receive the gift of my son Jesus, you receive me. 1 John 2:23 And nothing will ever separate you from my love again. Romans 8:38-39 Come home and I'll throw the biggest party heaven has ever seen. Luke 15:7 I have always been Father, and will always be Father. Ephesians 3:14-15 My question is... Will you be my child? John 1:12-13 I am waiting for you. Luke 15:11-32*

*Love, Your Dad...  
Almighty God*

