

Coping with College Series

Extreme Sports: Relationships Without Boundaries

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For just a moment, I'd like you to take an imaginary journey with me. Think of your favorite sport or activity. Now imagine that sport without any rules or boundaries. The football field or the golf course has no "out of bounds." There is no rulebook. Everything is "fair game." Think to yourself, would the game even be "playable" anymore?

Take it a step further. In the absence of a universal rulebook, each player creates his or her own private "rulebook" and plays the game by his/her own rules. To complicate it even further, what if every player kept their rulebook under lock and key and never shared their rules with anyone else? So, although everyone's playing the same game, nobody knows the rules by which anyone else is playing. It would be chaos, wouldn't it?

Remind you of anything? How about your relationships? Although we would probably never play a sport without rules or boundaries, we do it all the time with our relationships. There is no universal rulebook when it comes to relationships; we all develop our rulebooks slowly over time. Many of us don't even know our own rules. Yet, as we go through life, we are constantly asking ourselves questions... Do I want to be around others right now or would I rather be alone? Do I want to talk about what is on my mind or would I rather keep it to myself? Do I want physical contact or do I need my personal space? These are just a few examples of the "rules or boundaries" we are talking about. In other words, at any given time, what feels comfortable and safe for you?

Here are a couple of basic principles about boundaries. First of all, it is extremely important to share your personal boundaries with the people in your life. No matter how well someone knows us, they're probably not psychic. We cannot expect another person to know our needs if we don't share those needs directly. When we play a game or sport, we don't just assume we are all playing by the same rules. We state the rules out loud, and for most sports or games, the rules are written down and agreed upon. We need to do the same in our relationships.

Secondly, it is important that once a boundary has been stated, that it be respected--period. When it comes to relationships, there are no referees. We must all call our own fouls. So, if someone has crossed one of your emotional, physical or spiritual boundaries, it is your responsibility to bring it to their attention. If the person still disrespects your boundaries then you need to call a "technical foul." Maybe they need to sit on the sidelines for a while, but if it continues, you need to get them out of your game... and out of your life.

Finally, we are only responsible for our own decisions and actions. We cannot control how others play the game of life and we should not hold ourselves responsible for their actions. Of course, everyone's needs are important. But, no matter how much you care for the people in your life, you are not responsible for their happiness. And they are not responsible for your happiness, either. True happiness and contentment cannot be found outside of oneself and it definitely cannot be found inside another person.