
Boundary Problems Associated with PTSD and Substance Abuse

Note: Some people become upset when reading the list below. Only read it if you feel safe to do so, and stop if it is too upsetting.

People with PTSD and substance abuse may be prone to boundary problems, such as the following:

- Extremes: trusting too much or too little; isolation or enmeshment.
- Relationships that are brittle (easily damaged, fragile).
- Tolerating others' flaws too much; doing anything to preserve the relationship.
- Use of substances as an attempt to connect with others.
- Avoiding relationships because they are too painful.
- Overcompliance at times; too much resistance at other times.
- Always being the one to give.
- Spending time with unsafe people.
- Not seeing the hostility in others' words or actions.
- Being overly angry, with a hair-trigger temper; often ready to "blow up."
- Difficulty expressing feelings; expressing them in actions rather than words (acting out).
- May respect men for being "strong" and disrespect women for being "weak."
- Feeling that one can never get over a loss; not knowing how to mourn; fear of abandonment.
- Difficulty getting out of bad relationships.
- Confusion between fear and attraction (i.e., feeling excited when it is really fear).
- Relationships with people who use substances.
- Living for someone else rather than yourself.
- Manipulation: guilt, threats, or lying.
- Reenactments: getting involved in repeated destructive relationship patterns (e.g., recreating the trauma roles of abuser, bystander, victim, rescuer, or accomplice).
- "Stockholm Syndrome": feeling attachment and love for the abuser.
- Wanting to be rescued; wanting others to take responsibility for the relationship.
- Confusion about what is appropriate in relationships: What can one rightly expect of others? When should a relationship end? How much should one give in a relationship? Is it okay to say "no" to others?
- "Identification with the aggressor": believing the abuser is right.

Acknowledgment: This handout is drawn largely from Herman (1992). Ask your therapist for guidance if you would like to locate the source.

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