

Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Three

By Diana Leafe Christian

My friend Joseph was now the community bad guy. A Certified Public Accountant, Joseph became a member of the Finance Team soon after he joined the community. In examining their books, he soon saw that the group had under-reported its earnings and expenses to the IRS for several years, and owed thousands in back taxes and potential fines. This shocked and appalled the group. Joseph was dismayed too, because while some in the group wanted to tell the IRS and pay what they owed, others didn't want to report their mistake but just keep going as they were. The community desperately needed the money, they argued; they needed the money to make long-planned repairs to their buildings.

In a series of tense community meetings Joseph tried to explain how filing taxes incorrectly and not paying enough each year was treated by the IRS. He explained how withholding information about this once they'd discovered their error would be viewed by the feds—and the potential consequences for the community if they did this. After much debate the group decided to report their error and request a payment plan.

While many community members understood why Joseph felt compelled to tell them about their mistake and urge them to report it, some older, more countercultural members couldn't let it go. They'd just as soon the community flew below the radar and never paid taxes at all. They thought Joseph should have left well enough alone. Why had they ever let a mainstream *bean counter* like him join the group?

In his quiet way Joseph did what he could. He invited these members to a meeting to further describe the legal issues and potential consequences to the community. Over the next few weeks most of them came to realize the IRS would have discovered the group's mistake anyway, and they were better off paying their back taxes sooner rather than later, so they gradually stopped feeling resentment and blame.

Except for an older member I'll call Eldred.

It stung.
It was character
assassination;
it was abusive.

Especially Challenging Behaviors

As described in Parts One and Two of this series (see gen-us.net/DLC), “especially challenging behaviors” in community are like those of Dwight, depicted in the first article: disdainful and contemptuous, lying, and behaving heartlessly towards his friends. And the behaviors of Mavis, often overbearing and harsh yet unable to tolerate attempts to give her feedback. And Olive, aggressive yet often seeing herself as victimized. And behaviors like those of Griswald in the second article: self-centeredness, lack of empathy, rage, hostility, and vengeance. Mental health professionals call these “narcissis-



It can be discouraging, demoralizing, or outright frightening when a fellow community member consistently behaves as if they're entitled to special treatment, displays little to no empathy, behaves contemptuously toward others, breaks community agreements with impunity, or flies into rages.

One of the best ways we can protect ourselves is to learn considerably more about these behaviors through videos, books, and articles.



Seven Shooter

Narcissistic Attitudes and Behaviors

More Obvious, Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)

Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
Entitlement
Impaired empathy
Lying; exaggerating accomplishments
Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts
Grandiosity
Craving attention
Criticizing others
Mocking or jeering at others
Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others
Bullying others

Less Obvious, Covert, Introverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)

Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
Relishing vengeance
Manipulating others; using people
Hypersensitivity to criticism
Projecting their behaviors and attitudes onto others
“Gaslighting” others (telling someone what they directly observed didn’t actually happen)
Envy others; resenting others
Limited self-awareness
Grooming newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality

tic” attitudes and behaviors. (See list, above.)

These aren’t occasional behaviors like many of us fall into on a bad day, but behaviors that are frequent and consistent. Yet people who exhibit them typically do only some of these behaviors—their particular cluster of behaviors—while other people do other clusters of behaviors. In various ways Eldred’s behaviors both resembled and differed from Dwight’s, Griswald’s, Olive’s, and Mavis’s, for example. Moreover, people with these behaviors often exhibit them only sometimes, and often only with certain people—whom mental health professionals call their “targets.” Dwight’s main targets were his girlfriend and his business partner; one of Olive’s targets was her work exchanger. And because of the tax issue, Eldred’s target was now Joseph.

Of course most community members *don’t* exhibit these behaviors, so it’s jarring and disorienting when we see them in our group. But when one or more fellow community members consistently and frequently act out these behaviors it can have a devastating effect on other community members, and on the whole group.

Joseph Takes Action

While Eldred had many admirable qualities, he also had a reputation for some of these behaviors: holding grudges, expressing visible resentment and sometimes outright hostility, criticizing people behind their backs or even to their faces, and outbursts of frustration or anger. Joseph became Eldred’s primary target. Eldred seemed unable to keep from giving him dirty looks and muttering about him under his breath in meetings, and several times outright publicly accused him of being dishonest.

It stung. It was character assassination; it was abusive. Joseph tried talking with Eldred in the presence of caring community members who wanted to help heal the rift, but nothing changed. Eldred engaged the community’s formal mediation process, but that didn’t work either. His resentment was implacable.

So Joseph set limits and boundaries.

“I just want to let everyone know,” he emailed the community, “I will no longer tolerate the following behaviors directed at me in meetings and other community gatherings: Making nasty comments about me, saying something to malign my character or question my honesty, or outright calling me names, giving me dirty looks or muttering under their breath about me. If someone does this I will publicly ask

them to stop. If they continue, I’ll leave the meeting or the gathering. If I leave a meeting or gathering, I want you to know it’s because I don’t allow anyone to treat me this way. Frankly, I don’t want any of us to treat each other like this!”

Setting limits and boundaries can mean taking one or more of these actions:

- Not engaging with the person when possible. Removing ourselves from the effects of these behaviors by no longer remaining in the person’s presence, when possible.
- Communicating to the person what we consider unacceptable behaviors in our presence.
- Communicating what we’ll do if that person, or anyone, behaves towards us in the unacceptable ways we describe.

Joseph communicated what he wouldn’t put up with in meetings and social interactions, and what he would do—remove himself from these gatherings—if the unacceptable behaviors continued.

Rose communicated her consequence directly to Dwight: that she would limit contact with him, as described in the first article in this series (COMMUNITIES #193). “I don’t understand you anymore,” she emailed him. “And I don’t think you understand me either. I want us to stop having any personal interactions—to not talk on the phone or visit

We learn that to deal effectively with these challenging behaviors we must lower our expectations and realize the person may never express much empathy or care about our feelings.

Marcelo Matarazzo



each other anymore. And from now on email each other only about community business.”

The limits and boundaries Joseph and Rose set were straightforward and clear. They didn’t demean, criticize, or put anyone down or put themselves down either. They didn’t target, label, scold, or rebuke anyone. Rose said what she wanted, and she could easily follow through and delete any emails from Dwight that weren’t about community business. Joseph stated what he didn’t want to experience and what he’d do if someone violated his boundaries for meeting behaviors, and that’s what he did.

Griswald’s community eventually set boundaries on his behavior too, when they finally had the courage to break his stalemate and use their voting fallback to get the furnace they’d needed for so long.

Setting limits and boundaries works. Eldred gradually stopped targeting Joseph with his hurtful behaviors in meetings. And in Rose’s community, while Dwight

continued treating most people badly, he accepted Rose’s boundaries and eventually stopped trying to engage her in any way other than emails about community business.

Joseph and Rose were gentle souls—but no one’s doormats!

Protecting Ourselves with Limits and Boundaries

“Always remember, these people are deeply insecure, they feel chronically threatened by the world and engage in grandiose or contemptuous shenanigans in response,” cautions psychologist Dr. Ramani Durvasula, in her book *Don’t You Know Who I Am?* “They cannot regulate or manage their feelings, especially frustration or bruises to their ego. They are hypersensitive to anything that smacks of criticism, and they lack empathy.” Her goal, she says, is to teach us how to protect ourselves, “to push back against the naïve assumption that narcissistic people will change in any substantial manner, that there will be...the ‘aha’ moment when they ‘get it’ and apologize for all the hurt they’ve caused.”

Her advice for dealing with people who do these behaviors: “Manage expectations, maintain boundaries, shore up your other supports, recognize that they will not change, take care of yourself, don’t engage, and get mental health assistance.”

(By “manage expectations” she means *lower* your expectations of the person—don’t expect empathy, understanding, or cooperation. By “get mental health assistance,” she means getting this assistance for *yourselves*, not for them.)

The second article in this series (COMMUNITIES #194), focused on learning about narcissistic attitudes and behaviors so we can become more realistic and know what to expect. (See Part Two, and Book Reviews, gen-us.net/DLC.) It also focused on lowering our expectations that people doing these behaviors will be able respond to our needs for empathy, reciprocity, and kindness. As Dr. Ramani

notes, having realistic—lower—expectations make us far less likely to feel stunned and baffled when we encounter these behaviors. With appropriately lowered expectations we won’t keep expecting the person to feel or extend empathy, care about our feelings, or act with self-awareness and extend basic courtesy toward others.

“When we don’t have boundaries,” writes Adelyn Birch in her book *Boundaries*, “we can neglect who we are and what we want.” As a result, she warns, we can see the skewed image of ourselves reflected in the behaviors of those who treat us badly. We can mistake these skewed images of ourselves for the truth about who we actually are. Joseph didn’t allow Eldred to define him to others or to distort his view of himself.

Birch, who counsels people in relationships with colleagues or partners who do these behaviors, suggests the following statements for boundary-setting:

- “I will not go against my personal values or rights in order to please someone else.”
- “I will not spend much time around anyone...
...who frequently or consistently does ____ or says ____.”
...who doesn’t treat me (or others) with respect.”
...who invalidates what I say, feel, or believe.”
...who is deceitful to me (or to others).”
...who lies to me (or to others).”
...who mistreats me (or others).”

In order to create limits and boundaries, we need to first speak up and tell the person what our boundaries are. This takes assertiveness, Birch says, which she defines as communicating to the person in a direct and honest way which behaviors are unacceptable to us, and sometimes also describing consequences: what we’ll do if the person’s behaviors persist. But being assertive—communicating directly and honestly—can be difficult for people who have habitually complied with and/or tried to

appease others, and who want to avoid what they fear will be a confrontation. When we encounter these behaviors a fear of rejection can kick in and silence us.

With practice, determination, and the emotional support of close friends—and it often takes practice, determination, and support!—people who find it hard to set limits and boundaries can become more emotionally resilient and confident in community.

“Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves even when we risk disappointing others,” says Brené Brown, research professor at the University of Houston and presenter of her now-famous TEDx Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability.”

Recognizing We Even Have Boundaries

Often we don't know what our boundaries are *until* they are violated. Rose didn't know anyone could actually behave as badly as Dwight did towards his girlfriend and others in their community. Joseph had never met anyone who behaved with as much hostility as Eldred. Rose's and Joseph's experiences with unkind behaviors helped each of them learn what their own boundaries were.

This is why, for many of us, it can be difficult to even recognize when our boundaries are being violated. Like Joseph and Rose, we can be so unaware that such self-centered, hurtful, callous behaviors actually exist—especially in *our* community!—that we remain in a twilight zone of confusion and denial. After a while we can become so used to these behaviors we become habituated to them, a phenomenon observed by psychologists. And if we become habituated to these behaviors in fellow community members we often don't recognize that something is wrong—or that we have the power to set boundaries to protect ourselves.

Doesn't Setting Boundaries Violate Community Values and Ideals?

But doesn't setting boundaries violate the basic principles of community living? Aren't we *supposed* to accept all our fellow community members just as they are and do everything we can to resolve any issues between us? Aren't we *supposed* to do as community consultants advise and use conflict as an opportunity to deepen our relationships with others and learn more about ourselves?

Yes and No. Yes, in most cases most of the time. And No with community members who exhibit narcissistic behaviors consistently and frequently. As noted in previous articles in this series, people who exhibit these behaviors typically cannot access or simulate empathy for others for very long (or at all). They tend not to respond to Sharing Circles, Talking Stick Circles, Wisdom Circles, and so on. They aren't usually moved by heartfelt pleas for understanding and changed behaviors, to skilled expressions of Nonviolent Communication, or to in-house conflict resolution efforts or mediations or the help of an outside community consultant. According to mental health professionals who help clients affected by people who habitually do these behaviors, what they *do* respond to is boundaries.

Adelyn Birch notes that some people believe setting boundaries is wrong, as they mistakenly think setting boundaries creates barriers that keep people from experiencing close relationships and intimacy. The opposite is true. Barriers keep hurtful and abusive behaviors out, she notes, while letting *in* close relationships and intimacy with people we like and whose company we enjoy.

Fear of Rejection

Then there's fear of rejection. “Many of us find it hard to set boundaries and defend them because we fear doing so will cause rejection or abandonment,” Birch writes. We may feel guilty if we say No because we think saying No to requests or demands, no matter how courteously we say it, might hurt someone's feelings. We can fear that setting boundaries will keep us from being liked, or loved. “If we're afraid to have boundaries,” Birch writes, “it means we care more about what others think of us than what we think about ourselves. In doing so we lose respect for ourselves and our self-worth suffers. Others lose respect for us, too....”

“Having boundaries *doesn't* mean you're a selfish or unloving person,” she continues. “Selfishness is self-absorption, self-seeking behavior that either disregards the rights and needs of others or tramples them deliberately in favor of personal gain. In contrast, taking the time and care to attend to your own legitimate wants and needs while not

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We learn we must set limits and boundaries with people who behave in these ways. Sometimes we must also defend our boundaries.



Our boundaries need no one's approval.

inflicting harm on others—being assertive—is perfectly healthy and desirable.”

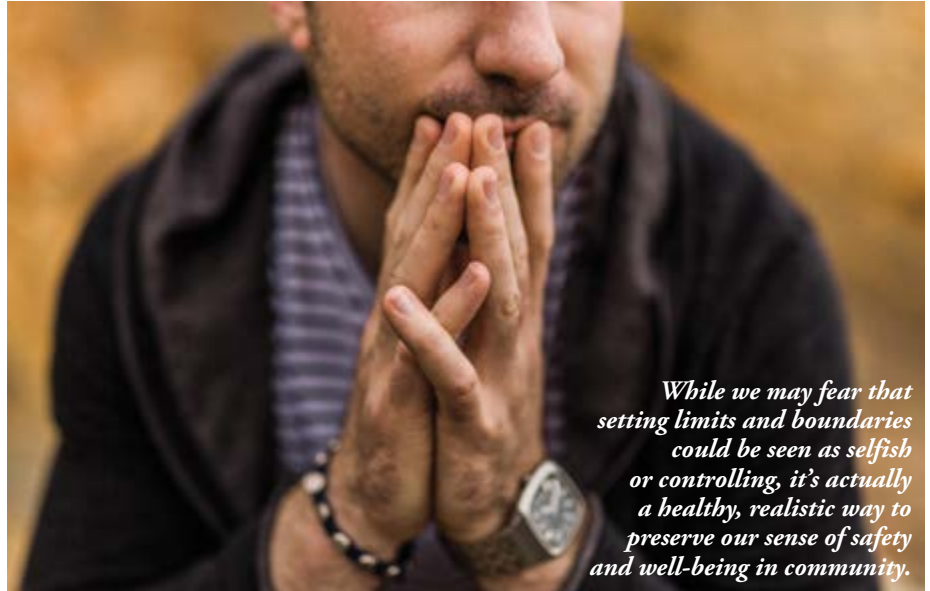
But Isn't Setting Boundaries Being "Controlling?"

No. While some may fear setting boundaries means they're acting in a controlling way or doing "power over" behaviors, there's quite a difference between being controlling and having boundaries. Controlling other people is about telling them what to do; setting boundaries is about saying what you do or do not want to experience. It's the difference between demanding your friend stop smoking, which would certainly be trying to control them, or reminding them to not smoke in your house, which is about defending your boundary about people smoking in your house.

In his book *In Sheep's Clothing*, clinical psychologist Dr. George Simon writes that we can't actually have power over other people's behaviors, things, or situations. "You have power over the decisions you make in *response* to those things," he writes. "It is your responsibility to exercise that power in your best interest."

Boundaries are about what we value; we create them to protect what is important to us in our lives, to ensure that we will get what we want and need in our community, and to protect ourselves from what we *don't* want. Thus our boundaries actually control our *own* experience. Our boundaries help us live life in our own community the way we want to live. According to Dr. Henry Cloud, psychologist and author of the New York Times best-seller, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*, "You get what you tolerate."

By creating boundaries when needed, Birch notes, we take a stand for ourselves and our lives. When we identify and state our boundaries and commit ourselves to honoring them, we'll know that *allowing*



Nathan Dumlao

While we may fear that setting limits and boundaries could be seen as selfish or controlling, it's actually a healthy, realistic way to preserve our sense of safety and well-being in community.

some people to violate our boundaries (perhaps because we're trying to placate them or get them to like us) means we're *not* taking a stand for our own life and well-being, but handing over our life and well-being to others.

Fellow community members who are truly interested in our well-being will respect our needs, values, and desires—and our boundaries—rather than trampling on them from indifference or their own unhealed personal issues.

Defending our Boundaries

What happens if someone violates our boundaries and we do nothing? If we ignore boundary violations and take no further action, Birch writes, we may feel disoriented and powerless. We may experience ourselves as misunderstood, disregarded, or victimized.

"Just because you define a boundary and even declare it, it doesn't mean others will respect it," writes George Shippey, Ph.D., contributor to the website, Counseling Resource. "Setting personal boundaries requires planning out exactly what to do should someone try to violate them.... Ultimately," he adds, "boundaries are only as good as our skills and resolve to define, declare, and defend them."

Thus, stating our boundaries is sometimes just the first step, Birch notes. We may also have to defend them, by reminding people of the boundaries we've set with them.

At first we may feel embarrassed, guilty, or selfish when we remind someone of our boundaries and let them know they are violating them. However, when we defend our boundaries by reminding people what they are, we reduce our own self-sabotaging behaviors, Birch says. These can include believing it's a good idea to give people with these behaviors many "second chances," or to spend our time and energy on people who don't feel good to be around or who even harm us.

If someone violates our boundaries, after first reminding them what our boundaries are, we may also need to create reasonable non-punitive consequences as Joseph did. We need to remind the person violating our boundaries that they are doing this, and let them know what we'll do if they continue.

Defending our boundaries by stating what we'll do if they're violated—our consequences—does not mean arguing about our boundaries or our consequences or explaining these to the person (which we might be tempted to do). We don't owe them or anyone an explanation. Our boundaries are our boundaries and they're ours and ours alone, Birch notes. Our boundaries need no one's approval.

And "consequences" need not be a dirty word. Consequences in an intentional community are not like the punitive fines and jail terms of mainstream culture. Consequences in community are what we tell people *we* will do if they cross our boundaries. If we don't follow through on our consequences then our boundaries mean nothing. Consequences are *not* threats made to control the other person. They are actions we sincerely intend to

take if a boundary is violated, as Joseph did when he stated what behaviors he would no longer put up with in meetings, and that if this wasn't honored he would leave the meeting.

Whole communities *also* need to set limits and boundaries and defend them, and sometimes with “a graduated series consequences,” to guard against the often devastating effects when one or more community members do these behaviors. (See “A Graduated Series of Consequences and “The Community Eye,” COMMUNITIES #184.)

When these behaviors go unchecked in community, they can not only make people's lives miserable, but can lower community morale, drive away potential new members, and, in worst-case scenarios, cause especially vulnerable members to stop attending meetings or participating in social events. Or just pack their bags and leave!

Joseph Sets More Boundaries

People with these behaviors “have a tendency to hold onto grievances and air them repeatedly,” Dr. Ramani writes. The more time that goes by, the more grievances can pile up. “The person will march out the things they think you did wrong months and even years ago.”

This is just what Eldred did. No matter that he rarely said abusive things to and about Joseph in meetings, for him the issue was still unresolved. The first mediation had changed nothing. They'd arranged a second mediation; same thing. Eldred had requested further mediations but Joseph always declined; believing that nothing he'd say or do would make a difference. He considered Eldred a troubled soul, and let go of attempting to have a normal relationship with him.

Over the years Eldred and Joseph didn't interact socially, but when community business called for it they communicated neutrally. Yet sometimes Eldred seemed unable to keep from shooting Joseph dirty looks, or sending occasional snarky emails about him.

Ten years later Eldred emailed to ask for another mediation. The problem had never been fully resolved, he said. Joseph had violated community agreements by stubbornly declining mediations. He hadn't adequately apologized for or explained why he felt compelled to meddle in the community's business re the IRS. He went on to insult Joseph's character and integrity. Every day he had to pass Joseph's blue Volvo in the parking lot, and seeing it every day triggered upset, he said, like an unhealed wound, because Joseph had never acknowledged just how badly he'd treated the community when he outed their tax issue.

Eldred's email struck Joseph and his friends as an expression of emotional pain that wasn't really about him. But still, enough was enough. He wrote:

“Eldred, I got your email. I send good wishes for your health and well-being as well as for an end to the burden that you've experienced over the years. I believe your in-

tentions all along have been for the best. I know mine have been.

“Your description of my character and my intentions don't match my reality. Because of what you said in this email, and other things you've said to and about me over the years, I'm increasing my boundaries with you. I'm choosing not to engage with you on email or in other ways from now on. Please respect this boundary and don't try to email me again or engage with me if we meet sometime in the community building or elsewhere.”

Like his first email setting boundaries about behaviors in meetings, and like Rose setting boundaries with Dwight, Joseph's reply to Eldred was compassionate, yet firm and clear. He didn't criticize or demean him. He didn't make him wrong and didn't make himself wrong either. He simply said he was setting another boundary about what he wanted and required from then on.

“Compassionate people ask for what they need,” writes Brené Brown. “They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment.”

Coming Next

The next article will focus on what else we can do to protect ourselves, including, if we're willing, getting healing help for ourselves from outside of the community: therapy, shamanic healing, a powerful spiritual practice, or other ways to strengthen our resilience and become far less vulnerable to the effects of these behaviors. Future articles will explore how small groups of friends can help each other protect themselves; and also how whole communities can set limits and boundaries, and defend those boundaries—such as through “a graduated series consequences” or even asking someone to stop attending community meetings for a while. 🐦

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Levi Guzman

We can still feel compassion for people who act in these ways, while protecting ourselves by lowering our expectations, setting limits and boundaries, and enjoying a happier life with friends in community.