Be Known, the Podcast

Kerrah E. Fabacher, LPC-S

Episode 90: Boundaries Heal the Nervous System

Originally published on May 8, 2023

This is Be Known, and I’m Kerrah Fabacher. You’re listening to episode \_\_\_90\_\_\_. We were made for relationship, but so often our relationships are broken. And when our relationships are broken, we are broken. One of our deepest human desires is to be known, but we often have lost ourselves along the way. This is a podcast to help you get your relationships back to a place of wholeness. A place of authentic connection, where you feel truly known.

So come on in and sit a while. Let’s exchange fear for love and finally see what good relationships are made of.

\*\*\*\*\*

Okay, I know it’s been a minute since we’ve talked about boundaries in this space, but if you’ve been around for a bit, you know I love boundaries. For real. Maybe because they’ve been revolutionary in my life and in the lives of my friends and clients. We’ll come back to boundary basics soon, but today, I’m excited to approach it in a fresh way.

There are so many different types of boundaries and times when we need to implement the different types, but recently I’ve had to set more boundaries in some relationships. Boundaries aren’t always about *relationships*, because some are simply about things like time management. But some of mine have been more about relationships lately. There was a moment that happened with someone in my life that brought (and still brings up) so much stress, I felt it strongly in my body. My muscles were tense. My throat tight. My heart racing. My body froze. Encounters after that even were causing panic attacks. The event was so traumatic that it affected my body, which is what trauma does. My brain interpreted the event as unsafe, and my body reacted. But when I decided to set some firm boundaries with the person, over the course of the next day or two, my body felt a sense of relief. And when I continue to maintain those boundaries, my body moves out of that place of extreme stress to a more regulated state.

My boundaries are one of the things that are literally regulating and healing my nervous system from that traumatic event.

Boundaries can heal the nervous system.

This is profound to me.

Are you ready to nerd out for a minute?

Okay. Here we go.

We all have an autonomic nervous system in our bodies. There are two parts of this system: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is what activates our traumatic responses- fight, flight, freeze, and fawn— the protector instincts we all have when we feel or when we are unsafe, though some of us are more prone to one response or another. I love how Aundi Kolber educates us on these responses in her two books: *Try Softer* and *Strong Like Water*. Highly recommend both of those reads. The parasympathetic nervous system, in contrast, is for relaxing the body, bringing it back to a place of felt safety and regulated functioning.

On the MHS (Mental Health Services) blog, they describe it in this way when a person is under stress or experiencing trauma:

In periods of stress, the body’s fight or flight response activates. A normally regulated nervous system experiences the stress but returns to normal when the threat has passed. This period during which you have the ability to self regulate is called the window of tolerance, and most people move through several of these cycles daily. One example is rushing to get somewhere and running late but relaxing once you reach your destination on time. However, the system works very differently when the body experiences trauma.

Traumatic events push the nervous system outside its ability to regulate itself. For some, the system gets stuck in the “on” position, and the person is overstimulated and unable to calm. Anxiety, anger, restlessness, panic, and hyperactivity can all result when you stay in this ready-to-react mode. This physical state of hyperarousal is stressful for *every* system in the body. In other people, the nervous system is stuck in the “off” position, resulting in depression, disconnection, fatigue, and lethargy. People can alternate between these highs and lows.

In cases of extreme and chronic stress, such as ongoing trauma, complex PTSD may result.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now, I know that not every hard things is classified as trauma. And not every time someone hurts you or disappoints you or whatever is classified as trauma, either. According to the American Psychological association, trauma is defined this way:

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are little “t” traumatic events, and the big “T” traumatic events. It becomes traumatic when it has a significant, often long-term impact on one’s emotional, physical, mental, and maybe even spiritual well-being. Big T would be things like the different forms of abuse (including emotional and spiritual), natural disasters, wars, traumatic loss, chronic or terminal illness, major car accidents, mass shootings, divorce, and things like that. Little ’t’ events could be things like breakups, job loss, bullying, or maybe a shaming experience. This event with a person in my life where I had to set boundaries was a little ’t’ event, but it still has had such an impact on me. On my body.

There are so so many things we can do to heal the nervous system, to regulate it and promote a sense of safety. But today, I want you to hear this main thing: boundaries can heal the nervous system.

Boundaries! That thing may of us avoid because we want to keep the peace. We don’t want to stir up more conflict or rock the boat. We care for others’ well-being and neglect our own. Yep. The boundaries we desperately need for our well-being. They can help heal the nervous system.

In fact, I think it’s safe to say that healing is nearly impossible without some boundaries.

Are y’all hearing me yet?

If you don’t have healthy boundaries in your life, you can feel even more stress and other uncomfortable emotions. If I had not set some firm, clear boundaries with this person I mentioned earlier, I’d be putting myself in situations over and over of extreme stress. P*ushing our needs aside is not heroic and selfless. It’s neglect and self-disrespect.* When we aren’t setting good boundaries, we aren’t taking care of ourselves. And putting ourselves under more stress.

And when we don’t set boundaries with others, we may think we’re avoiding some *external* conflict with them, but what happens is more *internal* conflict that consistently activates our fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses. The nervous system will never feel safe if there’s always a battle happening within us like this.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Setting good boundaries can help activate the parasympathetic nervous system— the part that calms us down, helps us feel safe and connected and regulated, remember?

And setting some firm boundaries with unsafe people specifically is even better. Because safe people activate that parasympathetic nervous system. This is part of the science of safety. And unsafe people activate the sympathetic nervous system. So, if there are unsafe people in your life, maybe it’s time to set more boundaries with them.

Speak up for yourself when they hurt your feelings or talk down to you or whatever it is.

Set some distance between the two of you. Physically. Emotionally. Whatever serves you best.

Say no instead of always saying yes.

Process the hurt of what they did with a safe person.

Maybe let them go.

Those actions are easier said than done, and often require a lot of practice (and maybe therapy :) or boundaries coaching— shameless plug). But they are absolutely necessary for you to feel safe, calm, and relaxed instead of hyperaroused, overstimulated, anxious, and stressed. Boundaries can heal your nervous system, my friend. So prioritize them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks for sitting a while with me. I trust that setting good boundaries will help you take a step toward wholeness so you can finally see what good relationships are made of.

Along with professional counseling, I also offer boundaries coaching where we specifically focus on identifying current boundary issues and implementing healthier boundaries. If this is something you’d be interested in, check out my website [www.kerrahfabacher.com/book-online](http://www.kerrahfabacher.com/book-online) to see if you’d be a good fit, and email me at info@kerrahfabacher.com to see if you’re a good candidate.

To finish up, the transcript for this episode will be on the podcast page on my website, [kerrahfabacher.com](http://kerrahfabacher.com).

A big thanks to my friend Robert Hargrove for creating the music for the show, and the team at Wildfire Creative Co for editing.

Until next time friend, I’ll see you soon.

1. https://www.mhs-dbt.com/blog/parasympathetic-nervous-system-and-trauma/#:~:text=Traumatic%20events%20push%20the%20nervous,ready%2Dto%2Dreact%20mode. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMIVa8PKTac/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)