

Emotional Safety

Steps to Safety

- 1) **Respect Walls.** No one likes relational walls. They prevent us from feeling close to others. We want to destroy walls so we can get through to the person on the other side. However, walls serve a purpose. Walls are *always* built by people who feel threatened. Attempting to tear down or through a wall only serves to confirm the original need for the wall.

So do walls help relationships? No, not really. At some point, if a relationship is going to flourish, the wall has to come down. So what can one do to help take down a wall brick-by-brick?

- a. First, the person with the wall needs to know that you understand the wall is there for a reason and that you accept its presence. The person needs to know that his or her well-being is the most important thing to you; therefore, the wall can stay as long as it is needed.
 - b. Second, let the person know that you're not going to require him or her to be open with you or break down the wall until he or she feels safe. Your job is to give the other person every reason in the world to feel safe, while still honoring the right and responsibility of that person to take care of himself or herself.
- 2) **Love.** A second step to safety is learning to love the other person. Love, in the Biblical sense of the word, is about accurately seeing the immense value of someone made in God's image. God created each one of us as a one-of-a-kind person, with unique gifts and personality. He sees us as precious and valuable, so much so Jesus was willing to give His very life to preserve ours. When we see and treat others as God does, we recognize and affirm their value. To love means to value, and to refuse to do, say, or act in ways that devalue. When we love, it helps create a safe environment that encourages relationships to grow.
 - 3) **Suspend Judgment.** Compassion and understanding create a tremendous amount of safety. When a person refuses to judge motives, but instead tries to understand why a person acts in a particular way, that person's compassion encourages the one on the receiving end to open up and relationships can grow. Judgment results in defensiveness and closes down relationships, while curiosity results in openness and safety, giving life to relationships. Judgment writes people off suggesting "I already know everything I need to in order to render my verdict." Curiosity says something quite different. It says "I don't know enough yet to render a verdict, so I'll forget about sentencing for a while. It's true I don't like what has happened. But I still need to open the door to discovery."
 - 4) **Value Differences.** A fourth step to safety is learning how to deal with differences. When two people are in conflict, they often point to their differences as the problem. But that's simply not true. Differences are actually a blessing if you know how to deal with them and capitalize on them. By valuing differences instead of resenting them we can grow in ways impossible on our own. If a relationship is going to be safe, it must make room for all of both people. If certain parts of your spouse are not welcome in the relationship, then there is no longer room for them to be who they are. There's nothing safe about that. Instead a person is forced to put up walls or use energy to pretend to be someone they're not. Intimacy is impossible in such circumstances because now we're not even being real anymore.
 - 5) **Be Trustworthy.** When we recognize the value of our spouse we refuse to act carelessly with them, but instead commit to being trustworthy. When we treat someone in a way that shows we recognize both their *incredible value* and their *vulnerability*, we demonstrate our trustworthiness.

You need to be trustworthy with both others and yourself. We've already defined being trustworthy with others. Being trustworthy with yourself means whenever you let someone have access to the most sensitive part of you and they start getting careless, you must take back that part of yourself and think, *Excuse me. Apparently, you've lost track of how valuable and how vulnerable I am. But I haven't, and I can't let that happen.* All relationships involve choice. When people treat you badly, you can choose to be trustworthy in a couple ways. You may need to build a wall and shut the person out, at least for a time. That can be very appropriate. Some people have no clue and are not likely to get a clue anytime soon. Therefore you can treat them cordially, but you don't need to give them access to the most vulnerable part of you. They can shout over your walls, but that's it. Putting up walls can be effective, but they do have their drawbacks. Walls prevent us from being able to connect with people. A second alternative is more like drawing a line in the sand. You say, "Hey, I'm safeguarding that part of me because I can't trust you with it right now. But I want you to know that I want this relationship with you. Therefore, I will give you repeated opportunities to try again. But I need you to know that the next time I let you in, and every single time thereafter, I'll be requiring the same thing: that you show me, through word and deed, that you understand how valuable and vulnerable I am and that you act accordingly. To the degree that you do this, let's be friends. But when you forget, I need you to know that I will protect myself." Creating these sort of *boundaries* allow a person to engage freely in relationship.