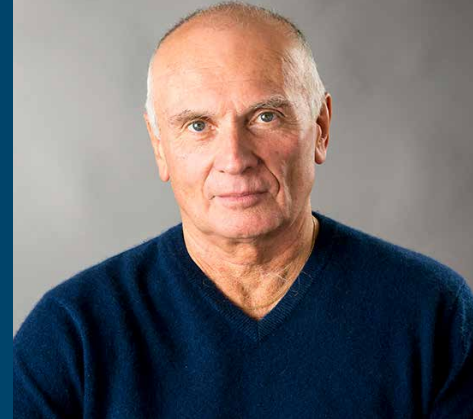




# Developmental Trauma and Boundaries Supporting a Well Lived Life

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



Trauma can be defined as the experience of an unregulated nervous system due to the violation of a physical, sexual or emotional boundary. An unregulated nervous system tends to constrict thinking, feeling and acting. Developmental trauma is the result of repeated violations throughout childhood. It leaves violated individuals confused about how to support their own safety. They typically employ childhood strategies to attempt to secure safety in adulthood. These techniques include hypervigilence, physical and/or emotional isolation, and fusion or merger with others.

Hypervigilance is an overactive monitoring of the immediate environment. It operates under the illusion that some potential violation can be detected and avoided. Not only is it exhausting, but also it is inefficient as a reliable warning system. It also distances one's focus from bodily messages often informed by instinct, which is likely carried in our DNA and inherited from as far back as the Saber Tooth Tiger.

Emotional isolation works, as survivors simply do not allow others to know what is wanted and what is felt emotionally. It is a form of boundary aimed at separating vulnerable feelings from being shamed by

a possible perpetrator. Of course, in order to prevent some wish or emotions from spilling out, they repress them, keeping them anonymous even to themselves. The result is that they are severely impaired in regard to relating to others. They cannot genuinely participate in relationships. They can neither collaborate with others nor create some semblance of real emotional intimacy. Friendship remains a remote possibility.

The purpose of physical isolation is to prevent others from accessing them in any way. It does operate as a much-needed boundary; its non-permeable nature makes accessing life's jewels almost impossible. Hidden away behind an impenetrable wall, they mistakenly decide they are safe, immune from danger and loss. However, love, friendship, intimacy and interpersonal growth are serious losses.

The utilization of fusion or merger happens as a child amplifies the capacity to adapt and comply with the wishes and expectation of the prevailing authority figures. The child is convinced that danger can be averted through exaggerated accommodation. Similar to the other defenses, fusion is brought along into adulthood, until the anger and disgust of coping by betraying one's own feelings and desires becomes intolerable. At that point, social interaction is defined as either unsafe or simply

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an opportunity to betray oneself. Given those options, physical isolation becomes increasingly attractive.

In order to mitigate the implications of isolating, survivors will often employ euphemisms like privacy and solitude. The difference between solitude and isolation is that solitude is a way to renew, pulling inward in order to get reacquainted with the self. Isolation is a strategy to support safety and the likelihood of self-betrayal when interacting with others.

It is common for therapists treating Developmental Trauma to help survivors recover their natural relationship to instinct in order to employ effective boundaries in support of safety. The therapist will encourage the client to focus on bodily messages when deciding to engage socially. The problem is that when survivors have employed physical isolation for years, the somatic message likely heard will be, “Don’t go” and “don’t join”. The check-in with the body will simply report what is most familiar. Survivors will certainly be employing a boundary, ironically, one that seriously prevents learning about the nuances of good boundaries.

Before suggesting that survivors need to check in with his or her body regarding getting involved with others, I recommend asking the following questions: Do you believe in the event that you are considering attending? Do you believe people will gain something positive by attending? Do you believe you might gain something positive? Would you recommend the event to family and friends? If clients respond to one or more questions with a “no” or “I don’t know”, then simply encourage the client not to attend.

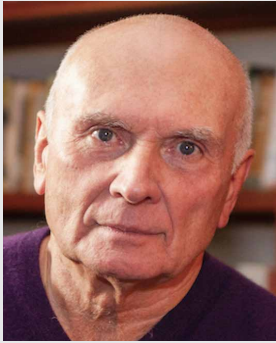
If survivors respond in the affirmative to the above questions, then seriously consider recommending that the client attend the event in question. A

popular survivor response to such a suggestion is: “I’ll probably get triggered when I’m there!” Such a response translates to shallow breathing, sweating palms, anxiety, muscle tightness, etc. My response is, “Life is about getting triggered and learning to ground and calm yourself down”.

I then suggest practicing the skills we have been working on while attending. Ask for help and support by someone attending with you. Practice saying “No” and “Yes” appropriately to different aspects of the event that appeal or do not appeal to you. Use your eyes to orient. It is important to learn how to track internal sensations and spreading emotions throughout the body, not allowing an emotion to anchor in any one place, and to employ breathing techniques that support calming, sit or stand where you are most comfortable or take a short walk outdoors to support grounding. Following the event, take a personal inventory of how effective you were at self-care. Be honest, congratulating yourself for the successes and clarifying the areas needing practice.

Survivors of Developmental Trauma automatically employ boundaries (physical, emotional isolation and merger) in order to cope with internal tremors such as anxiety, shallow breathing, nausea, muscle tension, joint pain and headaches. However, isolation does not help clients to learn to live the life they were meant to live, moving from surviving to thriving with effective boundaries.

Boundaries are words and actions aimed at separating us from what may be harmful, distasteful or unwanted. They are meant to support safety while actively participating in life. They also prevent what we love and appreciate from being interrupted. Effective boundaries help to bring more meaning and depth to a life well lived.



**PAUL DUNION** earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a wholistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.