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Boundaries for Your Soul | Kimberly Miller

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The Veritas Forum

In her recent book, *Boundaries for Your Soul*, therapist Kimberly Miller describes the process of turning your inner critic into your biggest champion. Instead of fighting or ignoring our feelings and anxieties, Kim wants us to befriend them. On our latest podcast episode, Kim discusses the approach that transformed her life and the lives of her clients.

Transcript

The truth is that we are all complex people. We all have a complex ecosystem of feelings within us and beliefs and a mature person was able to hold all of who they are at once. In her recent book, *Boundaries for Your Soul*, therapist Kim Miller describes the process of turning your inner critic into your biggest champion.

Instead of fighting or ignoring our feelings and anxieties, Kim wants us to befriend them. In this interview with Bethany Jenkins, VP of forums and content at Veritaas, Kim discusses the approach that transformed her life and the lives of her clients.

[Music] Today's podcast, I am so excited to share a new guest with us.

Her name is Kim Miller and she is the author of a book that was just published this summer called *Boundaries for Your Soul* with an amazing subtitle called *How to Turn Your Overwhelming Thoughts and Feelings into Your Greatest Allies*. Hi Kim, how are you? Hi Bethany, I'm great. Thank you so much for having me.

I'm really excited about having you because personally I am a person who likes to numb all of my feelings as much as possible. I am on any agreement, I'm an eight. And on the In Mires Breaks, I'm an ENTP.

So I'm a thinker, not a feeler. So I'm very excited to almost treat this podcast as a counseling session if you don't mind. Sure, no problem.

Yeah, sounds good. So I would love to, before we get into the contents of the book, I

would love to hear about you as the author. If you wouldn't mind sharing a little bit about your background.

Sure, well, I'm an Enneagram 1 and I am an INFP. And I grew up in originally Dallas, Texas. My grandmother was a Southern Baptist and sent me to her church and church camp.

And then, but when I was young, about one year old, my mother was a Catholic, and she was a Catholic. And then I was in the middle of my school, and I was in the middle of my school. And then my mother and father divorced.

And so my mom, after a few years in Dallas, moved to New York City with me and my older sister. I was a former Presbyterian in high school for the first three years of the church's founding, 89 to 92. And I was baptized Presbyterian.

So I have a Southern Baptist Catholic and Presbyterian influences in my life. It's about the same as me. I grew up Southern Baptist and I'm still a member of a Presbyterian for 14 years.

So, okay, welcome to the conversation. Thank you. Thanks.

Yeah. So, and now I live in California. I'm a marriage and family therapist there.

I have a private practice and I'm married to my husband, Ken Miller, who's a government professor. He's just finished a book comparing the states of Texas and California. They're their policies and economics.

So very interesting. Yeah. You tell a story in your book about a moment when you were talking with a friend where you really started to see the benefits of kind of the therapy that you now practice internal family systems, but without even having the language to at the time to describe what that was.

Can you share with us that story? Sure. So I was in graduate school and I was studying theology and, and this is before you were a counselor, right? That's right. I just knew I wanted to work somehow for the church.

I just really loved the church. It was at home to me wherever I lived. And I wanted to be involved in it and give my life to serving the church.

And so I was studying theology and at the same time as I was walking closely with Jesus and very involved in Bible studies, I had this aching loneliness in my heart. I didn't really know why it was there, but I figured everybody had it. I thought, oh, everybody doesn't everybody just walk around with this like physical pain in their chest from from loneliness.

And I was, but I got, I was kind of getting tired of it. And I told this friend of mine when

she was over visiting one night about this pain. And I said, do you have any idea how to get rid of this feeling that I have? And she said, oh, you know, she said, what about just taking this throw pillow here on your couch and just holding it and imagining that this is a younger part of you that feels the sorrow from your father's absence.

And imagine caring for this little part of you like a parent would comfort a child. And the moment I did that, Bethany, I felt relief like I had never felt relief before. And now I know to call that internal differentiation, just like you can be enmeshed or you can differentiate from a person.

You can also differentiate from a part of your soul and get perspective on it and doing so brings immediate relief. And that's what we're talking about. So fast forward to the point where you become a therapist, you've been working for years.

First of all, I would love you to say what is, can you describe what internal family systems is. Sure. Well, it's a method of therapy that was developed in the 90s in originally in Chicago by a psychiatrist, sorry, a psychologist named Richard Schwartz.

And he was, he's not a Christian, he's a Jewish heritage and he was working with women who have eating disorders in particular. And he noticed as he was working with them that they've talked about parts of them that wanted to act one way and other parts of them that felt a different way. And so he noticed his clients talking a lot about parts.

And, and then he also noticed that it wasn't helpful to argue with these clients. But what helped was when he became curious about the parts of them that had these different agendas. And when he listened to them and understood their intentions, they softened and that it was actually helping his clients.

So instead of trying to get his clients to stop acting out when he, when he tried to become curious about them and understand their goals and help them meet their goals in a different way, he was more effective. So he eventually discovered that there are three different categories of parts that he noticed in his clients manager parts, firefighter parts and exile parts, which we can go into later. So that's the model that he then developed for the soul, including in addition to self what he calls the self, which is the sort of calm, clear, compassionate, curious space inside from which one can lead the parts of the soul.

So yeah, so he developed so he was a family therapist. And he realized that these parts relate to each other like members of a family so he called his model internal family systems therapy. And I really enjoyed learning about this model and found it very effective for myself and also eventually for my clients.

And what I did notice too is that it's not in a couple of ways it was not consistent with my Christian faith. And so that's why my co author Allison and I decided to develop a

Christian approach to IFS. So that's interesting.

I loved this idea that it's, it's like, it operates almost like a family, because I have crazy ants and goals and people that love to fight at every family meal that you almost prefer them not coming to Thanksgiving. But you know you say your family just come on, which is exactly how we treat ourselves there are parts of me that are crazy there are parts of me that want to fight there are parts of me. Sometimes I want I don't want to bring them along with me.

Right, right. But that's our normal response. Yeah, yeah, it's really interesting.

You mentioned in that brief brief description you just said was that you discovered it was good for the clients and help for the clients you were seeing. Could you tell me a little bit more about that before you decided to take it more public with the book. What was, how did your, how did the people you worked with find it helpful.

Well, maybe an example would be helpful. Great. So yeah, so I had a client that came to me.

I've changed her information and identifying information and changed her name, but I write about her in my book. I call her Megan in the book. She came to me just saying she was on the verge of divorce that she and her husband weren't speaking to each other.

So that's, that was her quote presenting problem and therapy. And so as I began to work with her. We discovered that she had a very striving manager part of her.

She is the executive director of a nonprofit organization. And she was spent a lot of time working very hard to keep this organization running and she was doing so neglected her, her family. And so what we did was we, we focused on the area that she was holding the sense of needing to achieve so much in her physical self.

And then we got to know this part of her and she began to relate to this driving manager part of her. And as she even pictured it using her imagination, she saw it. She described it as a part of her.

Just looked like her, but it was walking up this eternal escalator. She said, and it was carrying these heavy buckets of water. That's how she imagined this part of her.

If you can imagine just just walking up an eternal escalate like never, like where is the end of the escalators, never, it's just never going to come. And this part of her felt that way. And it was so burdened by this sense of so much responsibility that it never felt like it had time to stop and pay attention to her husband.

So as she worked with this part and invited it to sort of relax and trust her spirit, let's self and trust in God, then she began to be able to make space for relaxing with her husband

and kids at night when she went home. And their relationship really improved. Yeah.

So, can you tell me more about what the spirit, let's self is that you just mentioned. Sure. So the IFS model says that we have a self inside that can lead the different parts of the soul.

Our book speaks of the spirit, let's self. So it's a phrase that we coined because we believe that once the Holy Spirit is inside, it dwells inside a believer, that self, so to speak inside, can be guided and led and directed by God's Holy Spirit to minister to the hurting parts of the soul and to lead and guide them. So in a way, you could call this book a manual for how to walk in the spirit.

Or, yeah. I loved what you said about how to recognize when it's the spirit, lead self versus just the self, the self can be so critical and can be hard on ourselves, but the spirit lead self. You guys mentioned that the markers of that all start with seats, you have calmness, clarity, curiosity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity and connectedness, which of course in the family system, I want to be friends with that self.

Right. For the idea for me to become that self would be amazing. Can you talk to me about exiles? Sure.

Yeah. So the, the exiles are the more vulnerable parts of us that are carrying memories or feelings as a result of pain or trauma from our past. And so they're, they're the more tender parts of us.

They enable us to be empathetic. So that's the benefit that they are in our lives. And so we want to really cherish and take care of these important parts of us.

And also help them because they often are stuck in the past. You know, the book is called boundaries for your soul, which means some maybe some parts may be too close to us. Usually usually our protectors, you know, and some parts may be too far and we need to get our attention.

And these are the exiles that are often stuck in the past. And, um, there's a lot of brain science to back up this sort of thing. We get trauma literally just stuck in our brains and we can even, even if we work really hard to think through a problem, if we don't access the memory emotionally, we don't, we can't unlock it.

These, the trauma gets encoded in our implicit memory and we need to be able to access these exiles so that they can release the burdens that they're carrying as a result of their trauma. I love you said that God designed you to have different feelings simultaneously. That was very freeing for me.

Yes, yes. Well, yeah, I mean, when we're young, you think about how a Disney land and there's bad characters and good characters and that's all that our brain can understand

is like, that's good. That's bad.

But, you know, the truth is, is that we are, we're all complex people. We all have a complex ecosystem of feelings within us and beliefs and, and a mature person or someone with mental health is able to hold all of who they are at once. And also, we haven't even touched upon the idea of other people having parts.

Yeah. And, you know, if someone's angry at you, and you might think to yourself, wait, I thought they, I thought they liked me or I thought they cared about me. Yeah.

You might ask, well, maybe there's a part of them that's upset with me and how, you know, let me create a space to hold all of who this person is, including their, their anger and, and including their love. Mm hmm. Yeah.

I've always imagined that my epitaph would say sorrowful, yet always rejoicing that same tension of having things that live together, but no need to get into death. That's beautiful. Well, it's hard to talk about soul care without speaking of gardening, you know, and so gardens are great examples of having different parts that interrelate to one another and that really need each other.

And like we can and I have a garden with some redwood trees and I learned through gardening that these roots of the redwood trees intermingle underground so it's good to have more than one because they actually support each other. And so that's why we had one and we planted two more so that they can, they can be, they can strengthen one another and that's how we are internally that when one part of us becomes more healthy, then that part actually helps the other parts too. Yeah.

I love that. So how long does this process take come because that's what I'm wondering I want I have these problems I want to focus on them is it like two hours I need is it two months. I did it ever get done because I imagine I have a lot of overwhelming parts and so I'm one, you know, do you go like stuff but each one of them down the line or what does that look like.

Oh, well I tend to think of it like a child growing up that you don't really see the growth happening in the moment but if you go away and come back a year later you you realize how far the person has come and how much taller they are and I feel like that's growth is like that you may have a good experience of kind of working through an issue, working with the part of your soul and you've grown maybe just a tiny little millimeter and you might not notice it in the moment and you may say wait, I'm still unhappy, you know, the next day and they didn't work. But and we all have skeptical parts like that but there was growth there and over time you can really notice the difference, notice the change and you what you'll notice is that you'll feel lighter. You know, people say that I just have heard it so many times.

I feel lighter and they say they're more flexible so mental health, a symptom of mental health is being more flexible and being more resilient. So how long does it take? I mean it's just an ongoing process of sanctification. And how important are other people in that process because I was thinking you know it's wonderful to read this book alone but to actually go through it with either a small group or a counselor what is what do you have recommendations for that? Yes, well I mean in the original boundaries book by Cloud and Townsend, they talk about having friends that go to this experience with you and I read that book and I thought you know what I want to boundaries committee and so I called my sister and I said, would you be on my boundaries committee? She said I would be, she said I'll be the president of your boundaries committee and so and we've been that for each other for decades now and so I think it's a great idea to say hey you know to a group of friends let's form an internal boundaries committee and we can focus together because this is as you can tell this is a whole own language.

Oh yes, not a language I'm fluent in by the way. You're pretty good at it. It's not yeah you're very experienced already that that's me I would say but at the end of the book there's a glossary that has definitely a lot of these terms and you know you you might not want to just say to somebody you never talked to this about before I'm going to take a U-turn right now but if that's part of your vocabulary with a friend, right? Ken and I use that a lot in our marriage will say like I need to take a U-turn right now and it's just a way of saying like I'm feeling a little bit reactive I need to spend a moment trying to understand where this feeling is coming from.

And so yet to have a group of people with whom you share this common language can be really fun and it can really help you in your process. Well that's great. Thank you so much Kim for joining us today and talking about your book and your life and all of the internal vulnerable parts of our life, of our hearts and for counseling me.

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