

# BOUNDARIES

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## Setting limits: creating healthy boundaries

Jenny's mother is ill and lives alone. Even though she can afford it, Jenny's mother refuses to hire anyone to help her with housework and meals, so Jenny rushes over every day after work, prepares her a meal and does some cleaning and laundry. By the time she gets home to start supper for her own family, Jenny is feeling tired and resentful.

Seven-year-old Matthew has been signed up for hockey, even though he doesn't want to play. He tells his dad that he's afraid he'll get hurt. His father replies in anger, "I can't believe you're such a wimp! I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk!"

Mark's boss confides in Mark about her problems with her husband and other personal matters. Lately, she has started to talk to Mark about her concerns with other employees, Mark's peers. Mark feels uncomfortable with this, but is reluctant to say anything, since his employee review is coming up soon.

In each of these stories, there is a misuse of power in which one person's needs are being met at the expense of the feelings of someone else. Each story involves a violation of boundaries. Boundaries, an important component of emotional wellbeing, are the limits of edges that separate you from others -- just as a fence outlines the boundaries to someone's property. Your personal boundaries mark where the outside world ends, and you begin.

## Your comfort zones

Like your skin, which is an example of a physical boundary that separates you from the world and protects your body, emotional boundaries are a sort of comfort zone that keep you separate, protect you from hurt and yet are flexible enough when they need to be.

Emotional boundaries allow us to see ourselves as unique human beings with our own feelings, needs, and perceptions. They enable us to decide what behaviors we will accept from whom, who we will be close to and, who we will remain distant from.

Everyone's boundaries are unique, a product of upbringing, society, and personal experiences. People differ, for example, in how much privacy or companionship they require, how often they accommodate the demands of others or how easily they ask for help.

Healthy boundaries tend to be flexible but not too fuzzy. In some contexts, it's okay to give in, okay to reveal your private thoughts, okay to be touched but in other situations it's not.

In her book *'Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin'* (Parkside Publishers, 1991), Anne Katherine says, "Boundaries bring order to our lives. As we learn to strengthen our boundaries, we gain a clearer sense of ourselves and our relationships to others."

Boundaries empower us to determine how we'll be treated by others." Weak boundaries are easily violated by thoughtless, needy, or abusive people. People without strong boundaries have trouble setting limits. They





feel angry when they give in to others and guilty when they do not. They are unsure of how to stop others from hurting them, suffer anxiety about what others might think, and often end up taking on too much.

## When boundaries are weak

**Problems repeat themselves.** If you don't ask your friend not to call during supper, or to stop asking for a lift home every day, he or she will keep doing it.

**Relationships are damaged.** When you can't protect your boundaries, you may have to resort to less direct and less effective ways of protecting your feelings or getting your needs met, such as defensiveness or playing the martyr. People may not get the hint or may resent your behavior. In turn, you may overreact to small things because you've bottled up your anger.

**Your self-image becomes damaged.** If your boundaries are not strong, you may end up spending your energy doing what others want and living by other people's priorities, standards, and expectations. You will be unable to express your own thoughts and opinions and may even become confused as to what they are.

## Reasons for shaky boundaries

**Not knowing what our boundaries are.** Individuals may have a special problem with protecting boundaries due to their being raised to be people pleasers and to put relationships and what others want first.

**Overestimating the risk of setting limits.** We may be afraid that if we protect our

boundaries, others will be angry at us, that they will be hurt, that they will reject us. These fears may be the result of faulty self-talk, or they may be justified. Sometimes people think they have the right to violate our boundaries and will become hurt or angry if we don't allow them to do so. If we give in to this, however, we become emotional hostages, blackmailed by their wants.

**Understanding the risks of not protecting our boundaries.** We can often keep the peace, avoid conflict, get praised for our 'unselfishness'. Unfortunately, these gains tend to be short-term because the underlying problem has not been dealt with.

**Empty self-talk.** We tell ourselves that we must be 'nice' to everyone at all times, that we could not stand the rejection or hurt that will surely result if we assert ourselves. For example, 'If I was a good son, I would do what she wanted.' Or 'I won't be able to handle it if he gets mad.'

**Childhood boundary violations.** If your boundaries were not respected as a child, you will likely have problems protecting your boundaries as a result. Boundary violations happen occasionally in the healthiest families, but in dysfunctional families, boundary violations can occur continually. If, as a child, you were given too much responsibility, if you were neglected, if your feelings were not respected or if you were otherwise abused, you were not allowed to establish healthy boundaries. Therefore, you may lack the skills necessary to do so now.

**It's never too late.**





The good news is it is never too late to start strengthening your boundaries. Here are some suggestions for doing so:

**Become aware of your boundaries.** Boundaries are signaled by feelings, so you need to start paying close attention to your feelings. Feelings can act as an alarm system to tell you something is wrong. If you start feeling angry, resentful, anxious, embarrassed, or hurt, the feeling may be an indication that your boundaries are being violated. Unfortunately, many people have been taught and/or believe that their own feelings are wrong or invalid, and they are often not sure of just what they are feeling or where these feelings are coming from. Boundaries can be a problem for women socialized to look out for other peoples' needs at the expense of their own.

**Pay attention to bodily feelings.** For example, tense muscles, tightness in your stomach, or headaches can all be clues that your boundaries are being violated. Try thinking of a situation in which you felt resentful or upset and ask yourself: If I was free to do whatever I wanted in this situation, and no one would be upset, what would I do? What would I think if this had happened to a dear friend? Was I accepting responsibility for someone else's problems, feelings, or decisions?

## Make your boundaries clear to others.

You certainly don't need to be rude to do this. Using polite honesty, describe the situation. Tell the other person specifically what behavior you think is bothersome or hurtful. Do not make assumptions about what his or

her motives are and avoid generalizations or judgments.

"If" statements are useful here. Rather than blaming the other person, you state how you feel or what you think about the situation. For example, instead of saying, "You are so rude; you always ignore me," you could say, "I feel ignored and unimportant when you do not look at me when I'm talking to you."

It is unreasonable to expect others to know what your limits are in each situation. People are not mind readers. They don't necessarily know that they are violating your boundaries. It's up to you to let them know if you are having a problem with what they are doing. This will be easier if you remind yourself that it is your right and responsibility to treat others how you expect to be treated.

If a situation arises that you tend to have trouble with, you don't always have to respond right away. Give yourself permission to think about things for a minute. For example, you could say, "I'm not sure how I feel about this. Let me get back to you."

Remember that healthy boundaries are flexible. Setting limits does not have to be all or none. "Now is not a good time for me, but I can call you back in five minutes," or "I'm willing to drive you to work for another week. After that, you'll have to find another way to get to work."

If you are worried about hurting someone when you set your limits with them, prepare them a bit. For example, you could say, "This may be difficult for you to hear." If you empathize with the other person, he or she will take what you have to say more easily.





Decide on consequences and how you will enforce them. This will be more difficult if people have trampled on your boundaries in the past and see you as someone who is unable to set limits. State the problem in a serious way. Let the person know what you will do if the situation continues. This is not a threat. You are not trying to scare or intimidate the other person, rather you are merely stating what you will do. For example, "If you don't stop yelling at me, I'm going to hang up," or "If you continue to be late, I'll have to leave without you." Then you must follow through. If you don't, you will have merely taught the person that you needn't be taken seriously.

Remember, it's okay to accept criticism. It's not okay to accept abuse. When someone is being abusive, try using a technique called 'fogging'. You acknowledge that the person has a right to his or her own opinion, but you neither agree nor disagree with the criticism. Rather you state that the person may or may not be correct, but either way you do not allow abuse.

If someone were to call you stupid, for example, you could respond with, "It's true that some of my decisions have not been the right ones, but I resent being called stupid. I will have to leave if you continue to speak to me in that manner." Or "It may be that I am too sensitive, but I do not find this kind of humor funny." Or "You may be right. This may not be the best report in the world, but I can't accept your shouting at me."

Look for the power imbalances in your relationships. Look at your relationships with people you have power over or with those who have power over you. For example, are you expecting your children to meet your

needs? That is too much responsibility to place on children and may be an abuse of your power as a parent.

What about your parents? Are they expecting you to meet their needs? There is nothing wrong with helping your parents, but it's a violation of your boundaries if helping them means your own priorities get second place.

Are you acting as a confidant to your boss or a counsellor to your employees? What happens when these roles clash? For example, what if you must evaluate your employee's performance or if your boss asks you to take on extra work? When roles are mixed, loyalties can become divided, and confusion or resentment may result.

When you start to change how you react to others, you may find that things feel awkward, even scary. You may not do it right at first or sometimes even for a long time. Whenever you realize that you've made a mistake, also realize that you are taking the most important step: becoming aware. Accept that fact that setbacks are a normal part of change.

Our boundaries play a part in all our relationships. Although it's not always easy, establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries are very important for emotional wellbeing. Doing so requires balancing individuality with intimacy, and respect for others with respect for self.

## Helpful hints on how to develop and maintain boundaries:

- 🧠 You can only work on you.
- 🧠 You can only change you and no one else.





- 🧠 If you sacrifice your needs, you only have yourself to blame.
- 🧠 Be aware of what your needs and wants are in a relationship.
- 🧠 Become aware of your own feelings, attitudes, and beliefs.
- 🧠 Know yourself and what your limits are.
- 🧠 Be aware of what you place value on in a relationship and realize that it is not the same for everyone.
- 🧠 It's okay to ask for what you need and want.
- 🧠 When you don't know what your needs and wants are, ask yourself "why?". Then take some time and do self-exploration.
- 🧠 Be prepared that a change in you could bring conflict in relationships.
- 🧠 When you put a boundary in place, be clear as to what you need and want in doing so.
- 🧠 It's okay to ask for help.
- 🧠 Refrain from demanding, manipulating, or punishing someone to get what you need or want.
- 🧠 If you protect the person with whom you are in a relationship from being hurt and attempt to maintain the status quo of the relationship, you risk jeopardizing your own growth.
- 🧠 When asserting your boundary, stick to the key issue.
- 🧠 It is important to validate the other person while taking ownership, making sure to use "I" statements.
- 🧠 It is important to refrain from playing the blame game.

*They map out my comfort zone from which I can soar in the freedom of who I am. Because I care about me and want the best for this person who is valuable, I will create my own boundaries. Carefully constructed, they will reflect where I am in my own emotional growth.*

*Sometimes others may not like the boundaries I set. I will maintain the boundaries despite their wishes and desires. I must feel safe to grow fully.*

*Boundaries are not cement barriers. They can be moved to accommodate new growth. I choose to give myself a safe place to grow by setting boundaries so others cannot intrude. It's a loving thing to do to set my limits.*

**"Empower yourself today."**

## Affirmation on Boundaries

*Today, I will set safe, reasonable boundaries for myself.  
Boundaries are not limitations.*

