

Setting Boundaries

To be a healthy person and have healthy relationships, you must learn how to develop personal boundaries. Boundaries are the invisible emotional fences we place around things, like ourselves, to differentiate them from other things, like someone else. An effective boundary allows me to have alone time, to gently tell you when it is time to go home or get off the phone or to frame in careful language behaviors I will not tolerate. Boundaries are not walls. Boundaries are about you, not the other person (Matthew 7:1-6). Boundaries are not sinful, selfish, fleshly, rude, insensitive or uncaring (Galatians 6:2-5). Boundaries do not exclude servanthood. Boundaries are not a form of punishment or a statement of mistrust. Setting boundaries is not disrespectful, bad or wrong. In fact, boundaries make you feel safe in your environment and can prevent you from being hurt. Personal boundaries are healthy. Setting boundaries raises your sense of self-esteem, because you are sending yourself the message that you are worthy of care.

Moreover, setting boundaries makes others feel safe around you. Boundaries let people know what you want and don't want. And more importantly, boundaries let people know what your limits are. This gives others the security of knowing your relationship guidelines, eliminating their fears about how they should relate to you. When you set boundaries, people in your life know exactly what they can and cannot do around you.

A boundary is like a dividing line between you and anyone else, even a loved one. The line represents both physical and emotional limits others may not violate. Each person has their own internal indicator of when their line is being crossed. A boundary, when crossed by others, will create intense emotions (such as anger, rage, guilt, etc.) that serve as signals. Boundaries are drawn from your value system and help define who you are. They actually make you "trustworthier" because you are consistent.

Stop and think: What are your boundaries? Where do you draw the line? To find out, think of instances in the past year when you felt intense negative emotions in response to something done or said to you. More likely than not, your boundaries were being crossed.

Boundary problems?

Many people have trouble setting boundaries. For most, it is because they really do not know how to set them or why it would be important. For some, it reflects an unhealthy behavior pattern. There are four types of individuals with boundary problems.

1. Compliant

Compliant people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries. Their boundary is like a screen door on a submarine. They give in easily to the demands and needs of others. They are "pleasers" and can't say "no." Compliant take on too many responsibilities and set too few boundaries. Compliant often allow others to control them. They are clearly out of balance and out

of integrity with themselves. Compliers often say “yes” on the outside and “no” on the inside. Why? Usually fear—fear of abandonment, rejection, shame, being seen negatively, of someone being angry, not being accepted, not seen as spiritual. Compliers lack awareness; the pain caused by a lack of boundaries is invisible to them. The emotional consequence for Compliers is a lack of spontaneity and personal growth.

2. Avoidants

Unlike Compliers who operate out of fear, these individuals are unable to ask for help, to let others in or to recognize their own needs. Usually some emotional wound is at the heart of this pattern. Avoidants withdraw when they have needs; they do not seek the support of others. It is frustrating to try to get close an Avoidant. They don't open up. Their boundary is a wall; nothing and no one gets in or out. The emotional consequence for Avoidants is a lack of intimacy and fellowship.

3. Controllers

Controllers don't respect the limits of others. Boundaries are for other people, not them. They resist taking responsibility for their own lives, so they need to control others. Most controllers have a deep need to be right (not wrong), although they would perceive it as an effective way to get things done. Often undisciplined, they seldom let anyone too close. The emotional consequences for control are social isolation, anger and self-righteousness. There are two types of controllers, active and passive. Active controllers are like tanks; they roll over anything or anyone. They may even abusive. Passive controllers are usually subtly manipulative.

4. Nonresponsives

Nonresponsives are insensitive to the feelings of others. They don't violate your boundaries. They stay aloof and disconnected. They often present a critical spirit—projecting their anger on others. They are so absorbed in their own issues that they exclude others. The emotional consequences are relational distance, isolation and emotional addictions.

The two most common types of individuals with boundary problems include:

- **Controlling Nonresponsives**

They have a hard time looking past themselves. Instead, they see others as responsible for their struggles. They really want someone to take care of them. Not surprisingly, they gravitate to those with blurry boundaries (pleasers).

- **Compliant Avoidants**

These Avoidants search for someone to rescue or fix. They keep saying yes when they really want to say no, which keeps them out of touch with their feelings. They may help you but you will never truly know them.

Stop and think: Do you see yourself as one of these types? Do you allow others to cross your boundaries? Are you violating the boundaries of others? Are you getting all that you want out of your relationships? If your life is filled with more of what you do not want and not enough of what you do want, then it's time to set your boundaries.

How do I set boundaries?

- Ø Start with baby steps (baby no's)
- Ø Practice saying "no"
- Ø Understand the qualities that define who you are
- Ø Rehearse scenarios in your own mind.
- Ø Be clear about your values and motives.
- Ø Be clear about your spiritual relationship to the person(s) with whom you are setting a boundary.
- Ø Work through your guilt and anxiety with an accountability partner.
- Ø Speak the truth in love.
- Ø Understand that boundaries define who you are and what you are willing to do; they are not an indictment of the other person.
- Ø Check your emotional pulse to understand the other person:
 - § Feeling annoyed—attention getting-pleaser
 - § Feeling pressured, challenged—active controller
 - § Feeling frustrated—passive controller
 - § Feeling patronized—compliant
 - § Feeling hurt/ not heard—nonresponsive
 - § Feeling helpless/exasperated—avoidant
- Ø Educate the people in your life about your boundaries.
- Ø Don't make people wrong for their past behavior toward you. Instead, calmly inform them about what they can and cannot do around you.
- Ø The following boundary-setting process will help you further educate people who ignore or invade your boundaries. Use a neutral tone of voice. Note that each step in the process is slightly more firm. Stop when the other person responds positively to your request.

Inform: "Do you know that you are speaking loudly (or hurting me, saying things I don't like, etc.)?"

Request: "Please lower your voice." "Please stop hurting me." "Please stop what you are saying."

Instruct: "I need for you not to yell." "I need you to stop hurting me." "I need you to stop what you are saying."

Warn: "You may never speak to me in that tone of voice." "You may never hurt me like this." "You may never say this to me."

Take a stand: "Stop. I demand you to stop right now."

Time out: "What you are doing/saying is unacceptable to me. I am open to working this out when you are able to do so reasonably. I am now leaving for (duration) to protect myself."

Extended time out: "I am going to distance from you to protect myself until you can do/say *X* or stop doing/saying *X*."

Godly people set boundaries. God never calls us to vengeance or rudeness. In fact, Romans 12:14-16 is in effect saying, "Be kind in what you say, do and think." However, neither does God call us to be "doormats" or to enable evil behavior. In reality, most people like to know where they stand with you. If you do not have boundaries, you are essentially giving yourself away. With boundaries, you give and serve out of your fullness in Christ—you give generously, not out of obligation. When you set boundaries, it makes others conscious of their behavior; it also communicates your core value; everyone one of us must stand for something.

Boundaries can be used not only to protect you from unwanted behavior, but also to foster behavior you desire and need. Identify what you need from others to thrive, and then ask for what you want. For boundaries to be a reality in your life and not just a nice concept, you must be willing to act consistently. You must have a commitment to uphold what is right and true for you. Practice makes perfect. Learning how to set boundaries and how to have only what you want in your life takes time and practice. It will feel awkward at first. People may not like what you are saying, but keep practicing and communicating. You will get better, more skilled, and more graceful.

In summary:

Know your boundaries. Use your feelings, such as anger, guilt, or frustration, as signals that your boundaries are being crossed.

Everyone has their own idea of the line that can't be crossed by others. You are only responsible for your boundaries. Your "line" may be different than someone else's; in fact it probably is. Be clear about your boundaries and respect the boundaries of others.

Educate others about your boundaries. Tell others your limits. In a firm but positive tone let them know your boundary lines. Don't focus on the past and shame the person for past behavior. Just establish clearly and calmly what they can and cannot do or say when they're relating with you. Some people will adhere right away, some never will. Surround yourself with people who will respect your boundaries.

Paul tells us in Galatians chapter five that when we are filled with God's Spirit, we will experience fruit—love, joy, peace, etc. I believe a sense of peace is the ultimate consequence of maintaining firm and healthy boundaries. Most people will feel relieved that they now know how you want to be treated. People who want to be in relationship with you want to know what the rules are—and everyone's rules are a little different. In the great guessing game of relationships, sometimes people guess wrong. They have old patterns of their own and they have many past experiences,

both good and bad. In fact, some people have never been treated well in a relationship and so they're really feeling around in the dark. Verbalizing boundaries makes a clear picture for all concerned. Boundaries are truly about love because through them I am sharing who I am.

Want to know more about boundaries? Read Cloud and Townsend's excellent book, *Boundaries*.

(Excerpted from *Developing Healthy Relationships* by Dr. Jeff Parziale)