

Setting Healthy Personal Boundaries



What is a boundary?

A boundary is the:

- Emotional and physical space between you and another person.
- Demarcation of where you end and another begins and where you begin and another ends.
- Limit or line over which you will not allow anyone to cross because of the negative impact of its being crossed in the past.
- Established set of limits over your physical and emotional well-being which you expect others to respect in their relationship with you.
- Emotional and physical space you need in order to be the real you without the pressure from others to be something that you are not.
- Emotional and/or physical perimeter of your life which is or has been violated when you were emotionally, verbally, physically and/or sexually abused.
- Healthy emotional and physical distance you can maintain between you and another so that you do not become overly enmeshed and/or dependent.
- Appropriate amount of emotional and physical closeness you need to maintain so that you and another do not become too detached and/or overly independent.
- Balanced emotional and physical limits set on interacting with another so that you can achieve an interdependent relationship of independent beings who do not lose their personal identity, uniqueness and autonomy in the process.
- Clearly defined limits within which you are free to be yourself with no restrictions placed on you by others as to how to think, feel or act.
- Set of parameters which make you a unique, autonomous and free individual who has the freedom to be a creative, original, idiosyncratic problem solver.

Source: Johnson State College, Vermont

<http://www.jsc.edu/StudentLife/CounselingServices/documents/Developing-Healthy-Boundaries.pdf>

8 Basic Principles of Healthy Boundary Setting

1. **Good, Decent People Set Boundaries.** Establishing boundaries makes you a safe person. People know where they stand with you. Boundaries are the way we take care of ourselves. We have both a right and a duty to protect and defend ourselves.
2. **Generous People Set Boundaries.** If you don't set boundaries you are giving yourself away. With boundaries you only give what you want which means you can afford to be generous to more people over a longer period of time.
3. **Boundaries Allow Others to Grow.** Because it makes others conscious of their behavior thus allowing them to change.
4. **Boundaries Allow You To Get More of What You Want, and Less of What You Don't.** Boundaries not only protect you from unwanted behavior, they also foster the behavior that you want.
5. **Effective People Set Boundaries.** Because doing so keeps you in control of your time and efforts which makes you feel better about yourself. This leads to your being more effective.
6. **Stick to Your Guns.** In order for boundary setting to work for you, you must develop a commitment to uphold what is right and true for you. You must act consistently in upholding your boundaries.
7. **Practice Makes Perfect.** If this is not familiar behavior it will feel awkward and unnatural at first, but anything worth doing is worth doing badly at first. People may not like it at first that's natural they are used to getting their own way with you.
8. **Keep It Up.** With practice you will get more skillful and graceful.



5 Healthy Benefits of Boundary Setting

1. Contribution to Others' Well Being
2. Freedom From Bad Behavior, Fear or Pain
3. Increased Self Esteem and Self Respect
4. More Respect From Others
5. Requirement for Honest, Direct Communication



5 Guidelines for Setting Effective Boundaries

1. Back up boundary setting with action.
2. Be direct, firm and gracious.
3. Don't debate, defend or over-explain.
4. Have support easily available on the sidelines in the beginning.
5. Stay strong, don't give in.

11 Signs and Symptoms of Ignored Boundaries



Boundaries are likely being ignored if one or more of the following characteristic symptoms exist:

1. **Over Enmeshment:** This symptom requires everyone to follow the rule that everyone must do everything together and that everyone is to think, feel and act in the same way. No one is allowed to deviate from the family or group norms. Everyone looks homogeneous. Uniqueness, autonomy and idiosyncratic behaviors are viewed as deviations from the norm.
2. **Disassociation:** This symptom involves blanking out during a stressful emotional event. You feel your physical and/or emotional space being violated and you tell yourself something like: "It doesn't matter." "Ignore it and it will go away soon enough." "No sense in fighting it, just hang on and it will be over soon." "Don't put up a struggle or else it will be worse for you." This blanking out results in you being out of touch with your feelings about what happened. It also may result in your inability to remember what happened.
3. **Excessive Detachment:** This symptom occurs when neither you nor anyone else in the group or family is able to establish any fusion of emotions or affiliation of feelings. Everyone is totally independent from everyone else and there doesn't seem to be anything to hold you and them together in healthy union. You and they seem to lack a common purpose, goal, identity or rationale for existing together. There is a seeming lack of desire from you and the other members to draw together to form a union because you fear loss of personal identity.
4. **Victimhood or Martyrdom:** In this symptom, you identify yourself as a violated victim and become overly defensive to ward off further violation. Or it can be that once you accept your victimization you continue to be knowingly victimized and then let others know of your martyrdom.
5. **Chip on the Shoulder:** This symptom is reflected in your interactions with others. Because of your anger over past violation of your emotional and/or physical space and the real or perceived ignoring of your rights by others, you have a "chip on your shoulder" that declares "I dare you to come too close!"
6. **Invisibility:** This symptom involves your pulling in or over-controlling so that others even yourself never know how you are really feeling or what you are really thinking. Your goal is not to be seen or heard so that your boundaries are not violated.
7. **Aloofness or Shyness:** This symptom is a result of your insecurity from real or perceived experiences of being ignored, roved or rejected in the past. This feels like a violation of your efforts to expand or stretch your boundaries to include others in your space. Once rejected you take the defensive posture to reject others before they reject you. This keeps you inward and unwilling or fearful of opening up your space to others.
8. **Cold and Distant:** This symptom builds walls or barriers to insure that others do not permeate or invade your emotional or physical space. This too can be a defense, due to previous hurt and pain, from being violated, hurt, ignored or rejected. This stance is your declaration that "I've drawn the line over which I dare you to cross." It is a way to keep others out and put them off.
9. **Smothering:** This symptom results when another is overly solicitous of your needs and interests. This cloying interest is overly intrusive into your emotional and physical space. It can be so overwhelming that you feel like you are being strangled, held too tightly and lack freedom to breathe on your own. You feel violated, used and overwhelmed.
10. **Lack of Privacy:** this symptom is present when you feel that nothing you think, feel or do is your own business. You are expected to report to others in your family or group all the detail and content of your feelings, reactions, opinions, relationships and dealings with the outside world. You begin to feel that nothing you experience can be kept in the privacy of your own domain. You begin to believe you don't have a private domain or your own space into which you can escape to be your own person.

Situational Examples of Setting Healthy Boundaries

1. **Anger** - "You may not continue to yell at me. If you do, I will leave the room and end this meeting."
2. **Buy Time** - "I have a policy of not making snap decisions. I need time to think and reflect on what I want to do. If you need an immediate answer it will be no."
3. **Criticism** - "It's not okay with me for you to make comments about my weight. Please stop. If you don't I won't be able to continue this conversation."
4. **Extra Commitments** - "Although this is an important issue to me, I must decline your request for my help at this time." Or "I need to honor my family's needs."
5. **Money** - "I won't be lending you any more money. I care about you and you need to start taking responsibility for yourself."

REMEMBER, It is not enough to set boundaries. It is necessary to be willing to do whatever it takes to enforce them. Enforcing boundaries means following through with consequences.



Guidelines for Setting Consequences

- Set forth clearly and unemotionally.
- Actions you are willing to take.
- May allow for gradual change.
- May be negotiable rather than rigid lines in the sand.

Examples of Stating Clear Consequences

1. "If you break plans with me by not showing up or calling me, I will call you on your behaviors and let you know how I feel."
2. "If you continue (offensive behavior) I will leave the room/house/ ask you to leave."
3. "If you continue to repeat the behavior I will consider all of my options including leaving the relationship."
4. "If you continue to ignore my solutions or suggestions, I will assume that you are not interested in receiving help from me and I will stop working on your case."

If you are not ready to end a relationship or conversation don't say you are until you really are. If people are unwilling to respect your boundaries, they are not true friends or people you want to spend time with. Setting personal boundaries and limits can be very important in how you lead your life and the quality of the relationships you have.

23 Signs of Unhealthy Boundaries

1. Telling all.
2. Talking at an intimate level on the first meeting.
3. Falling in love with a new acquaintance.
4. Falling in love with anyone who reaches out.
5. Being overwhelmed by a person - preoccupied.
6. Acting on first sexual impulse.
7. Going against personal values or rights to please others.
8. Not noticing when someone else displays inappropriate boundaries.
9. Not noticing when someone invades your boundaries.
10. Accepting food, gifts, touch, sex that you don't want.
11. Touching a person without asking.
12. Taking as much as you can get for the sake of getting.
13. Giving as much as you can give for the sake of giving.
14. Allowing someone to take as much as they can from you.
15. Letting others direct your life.
16. Letting others describe your reality.
17. Letting others define you.
18. Believing others can anticipate your needs.
19. Expecting others to fill your needs automatically.
20. Falling apart so someone will take care of you.
21. Self abuse.
22. Sexual and physical abuse.
23. Food abuse.



How to establish healthier boundaries

Follow these steps to more effectively establish healthy boundaries between yourself and others.

First: Identify the symptoms of your boundaries currently being or having been violated or ignored.

Second: Identify the irrational or unhealthy thinking and beliefs by which you allow your boundaries to be ignored or violated.

Third: Identify new, more rational, healthy thinking and beliefs which will encourage you to change your behaviors so that you build healthy boundaries between you and others.

Fourth: Identify new behaviors you need to add to your healthy boundary building behaviors repertoire in order to sustain healthy boundaries between you and others.

Fifth: Implement the healthy boundary building beliefs and behaviors in your life so that your space, privacy and rights are no longer ignored or violated.

Rational Boundary-Building Thinking

These are just a few examples of unhealthy thoughts or beliefs which allow boundaries to be ignored or violated. Following each unhealthy belief is a healthy, rational, realistic, reality-based affirmation for healthy boundary building.

Unhealthy Belief	Healthy Boundary Builder
I can never say "no" to others.	I have a right to say "no" to others if it is an invasion of my space or a violation of my rights.
It is my duty to hold them together.	I have a right to take care of myself. If they want to stay together as a family or group, it is up to each individual to make such a decision. We all share responsibility to create the interdependency needed to keep us a united group.
I can never trust anyone again.	I have a right to take the risk to grow in my relationships with others. If I find my rights are being violated or ignored, I can assertively protect myself to ensure I am not hurt.
I would feel guilty if I did something on my own and left my family or group out of it.	I have the right and need to do things which are uniquely mine so that I do not become so overly enmeshed with others that I lose my identity.
I should do everything I can to spend as much time together with you or else we won't be a healthy family or group.	I have a right and a need to explore my own interests, hobbies and outlets so that I can bring back to this family or group my unique personality to enrich our lives rather than be lost in a closed and over enmeshed system.
It doesn't matter what they are doing to me. As long as I keep quiet and don't complain, they will eventually leave me alone.	I will stand up for myself and assert my rights to be respected and not hurt or violated. If they choose to ignore me, then I have the right to leave them or ask them to get out of my life.
As long as I am not seen or heard, I won't be violated or hurt.	I have a right to be visible and to be seen and heard. I will stand up for myself so that others can learn to respect my rights, my needs and not violate my space.
I'd rather not pay attention to what is happening to me in this relationship which is overly intrusive, smothering and violating my privacy. In this way I don't have to feel the pain and hurt that comes from such a violation.	I choose no longer to disassociate from my feelings when I am being treated in a negatively painful way so that I can be aware of what is happening to me and assertively protect myself from further violation or hurt.
I've been hurt badly in the past and I will never let anyone in close enough to hurt me again.	I do not need to be cold and distant or aloof and shy as protective tools to avoid being hurt. I choose to open myself up to others trusting that I will be assertive to protect my rights and privacy from being violated.
I can never tell where to draw the line with others.	There is a line I have drawn over which I do not allow others to cross. This line ensures me my uniqueness, autonomy and privacy. I am able to be me the way I really am rather than the way people want me to be by drawing this line. By this line I let others know: this is who I am and where I begin and you end; this is who you are and where you begin and I end; we will never cross over this line so that we can maintain a healthy relationship with one another.