How to Create Healthy Boundaries

"An intimate relationship is one in which neither party silences, sacrifices, or betrays the self and each party expresses strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence in a balanced way." ~Harriet Lerner

Setting boundaries is essential if we want to be both physically and emotionally healthy.

Creating healthy boundaries is empowering. By recognizing the need to set and enforce limits, you protect your self-esteem, maintain self-respect, and enjoy healthy relationships.

Unhealthy boundaries cause emotional pain that can lead to dependency, depression, anxiety, and even stress-induced physical illness. A lack of boundaries is like leaving the door to your home unlocked: anyone, including unwelcome guests, can enter at will. On the other hand, having too rigid boundaries can lead to isolation, like living in a locked-up castle surrounded by a mote. No one can get in, and you can't get out.

What Are Boundaries?

Boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify for themselves what are reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave around them and how they will respond when someone steps outside those limits. (outofthefog.net)

The easiest way to think about a boundary is a property line. We have all seen "No Trespassing" signs, which send a clear message that if you violate that boundary, there will be a consequence. This type of boundary is easy to picture and understand because you can see the sign and the border it protects. Personal boundaries can be harder to define because the lines are invisible, can change, and are unique to each individual.

Personal boundaries, just like the "No Trespassing" sign, define where you end and others begin and are determined by the amount of physical and emotional space you allow between yourself and others. Personal boundaries help you decide what types of communication, behavior, and interaction are acceptable.

Why is it important to set boundaries?

• To practice self-care and self-respect

• To communicate your needs in a relationship

• To make time and space for positive interactions

• To set limits in a relationship in a way that is healthy

Physical Boundaries

Physical boundaries provide a barrier between you and an intruding force, like a Band-Aid protects a wound from bacteria.

Physical boundaries include your body, sense of personal space, sexual orientation, and privacy. These boundaries are expressed through clothing, shelter, noise tolerance, verbal instruction, and body language.

An example of physical boundary violation: a close talker. Your immediate and automatic reaction is to step back in order to reset your personal space. By doing this, you send a non-verbal message that when this person stands so close you feel an invasion of your personal space. If the person continues to move closer, you might verbally protect your boundary by telling him/her to stop crowding you.

Other examples of physical boundary invasions are:

- Inappropriate touching, such as unwanted sexual advances.
- Looking through others' personal files and emails.
- Not allowing others their personal space. (e.g., barging into your boss's office without knocking)

Emotional and Intellectual Boundaries

These boundaries protect your sense of self-esteem and ability to separate your feelings from others'. When you have weak emotional boundaries, it's like getting caught in the midst of a hurricane with no protection. You expose yourself to being greatly affected by others' words, thoughts, and actions and end up feeling bruised, wounded, and battered.

These include beliefs, behaviors, choices, sense of responsibility, and your ability to be intimate with others.

Examples of emotional and intellectual boundary invasions are:

- Not knowing how to separate your feelings from your partner's and allowing his/her mood to dictate your level of happiness or sadness (a.k.a. codependency).
- Sacrificing your plans, dreams, and goals in order to please others.
- Not taking responsibility for yourself and blaming others for your problems.

Barriers to Boundary Setting

It seems obvious that no one would want his/her boundaries violated. So why do we allow it? Why do we NOT enforce or uphold our boundaries?

- FEAR of rejection and, ultimately, abandonment.
- FEAR of confrontation.
- GUILT.
- We were not taught healthy boundaries.
- Safety Concerns

> If you are dealing with someone who is physically dangerous or threatening to you, it may not be safe to attempt to set explicit boundaries with them. If you are in this situation, it can be helpful to work with a counselor, therapist or advocate to create a safety plan and boundary setting may be a part of this.

Assess the current state of your boundaries

HEALTHY BOUNDARIES allow you to:

- Have high self-esteem and self-respect.
- Share personal information gradually, in a mutually sharing and trusting relationship.
- Protect physical and emotional space from intrusion.
- Have an equal partnership where responsibility and power are shared.
- Be assertive. Confidently and truthfully say "yes" or "no" and be okay when others say "no" to you.
- Separate your needs, thoughts, feelings, and desires from others. Recognize that your boundaries and needs are different from others.
- Empower yourself to make healthy choices and take responsibility for yourself.

UNHEALTHY BOUNDARIES are characterized by:

- Sharing too much too soon or, at the other end of the spectrum, closing yourself off and not expressing your need and wants.
- Feeling responsible for others' happiness.
- Inability to say "no" for fear of rejection or abandonment.
- Weak sense of your own identity. You base how you feel about yourself on how others treat you.
- Disempowerment. You allow others to make decisions for you; consequently, you feel powerless and do not take responsibility for your own life.

Tips for Setting Healthy Boundaries

(Modified from the book, *Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin* by Anne Katherine)

When you identify the need to set a boundary, do it clearly, calmly, firmly, respectfully, and in as few words as possible. Do not justify, get angry, or apologize for the boundary you are setting.

You are not responsible for the other person's reaction to the boundary you are setting. You are only responsible for communicating your boundary in a respectful manner. If it upset them, know it is their problem. Some people, especially those accustomed to controlling, abusing, or manipulating you, might test you. Plan on it, expect it, but remain firm. Remember, your behavior must match the boundaries you are setting. You cannot successfully establish a clear boundary if you send mixed messages by apologizing.

At first, you will probably feel selfish, guilty, or embarrassed when you set a boundary. Do it anyway and remind yourself you have a right to self-care. Setting boundaries takes practice and determination. Don't let anxiety, fear or guilt prevent you from taking care of yourself.

When you feel anger or resentment or find yourself whining or complaining, you probably need to set a boundary. Listen to yourself, determine what you need to do or say, then communicate assertively.

Learning to set healthy boundaries takes time. It is a process. Set them in your own time frame, not when someone else tells you.

Develop a support system of people who respect your right to set boundaries. Eliminate toxic persons from your life—those who want to manipulate, abuse, and control you.

Boundary Exploration

Think about a person, or a group of people, with whom you struggle to set healthy boundaries. This could mean that your boundaries are too rigid (you keep this person at a distance), too porous (you open up too much), or there's some other problem that isn't so easily labeled.

Who do you struggle to set healthy boundaries with? (e.g. "my husband" or "coworkers")

_____

In your relationship with the person you listed above, how are your boundaries in each of the following categories? Add a check in the appropriate column for each boundary category.

Boundary Category	Porous	Rigid	Healthy	Other
Physical Boundaries				
Intellectual Boundaries				
Emotional Boundaries				
Sexual Boundaries				
Material Boundaries				
Time Boundaries				

Take a moment to imagine what it will be like when you begin to establish healthy boundaries with this person. If your boundaries are too rigid, that might mean opening up. If they're porous, it might mean setting limits and saying "no" when you don't want to do something.

What are some specific actions you can take to improve your boundaries?

How do you think the other person will respond to these changes?

How do you think your life will be different once you've established healthy boundaries?

What are Personal Boundaries?

Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships. A person with healthy boundaries can say "no" to others when they want to, but they are also comfortable opening themselves up to intimacy and close relationships.

A person who always keeps others at a distance (whether emotionally, physically, or otherwise) is said to have *rigid boundaries*. Alternatively, someone who tends to get too involved with others has *porous boundaries*.

Common traits of rigid, porous, and healthy boundaries.		
Rigid Boundaries	**Porous Boundaries**	**Healthy Boundaries**
Avoids intimacy and close relationships. Unlikely to ask for help. Has few close relationships. Very protective of personal information. May seem detached, even with romantic partners. Keeps others at a distance to avoid the possibility of rejection.	Overshares personal information. Difficulty saying "no" to the requests of others. Overinvolved with others' problems. Dependent on the opinions of others. Accepting of abuse or disrespect. Fears rejection if they do not comply with others.	Values own opinions. Doesn't compromise values for others. Shares personal information in an appropriate way (does not over or under share). Knows personal wants and needs, and can communicate them. Accepting when others say "no" to them.

Most people have a mix of different boundary types. For example, someone could have healthy boundaries at work, porous boundaries in romantic relationships, and a mix of all three types with their family.

The appropriateness of boundaries depends heavily on setting. What's appropriate to say when you're out with friends might not be appropriate when you're at work.

Some cultures have very different expectations when it comes to boundaries. For example, in some cultures it's considered wildly inappropriate to express emotions publicly. In other cultures, emotional expression is encouraged.

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What are Personal Boundaries?

Types of Boundaries

Physical boundaries refer to personal space and physical touch. Healthy physical boundaries include an awareness of what's appropriate, and what's not, in various settings and types of relationships (hug, shake hands, or kiss?). Physical boundaries may be violated if someone touches you when you don't want them to, or when they invade your personal space (for example, rummaging through your bedroom).

Intellectual boundaries refer to thoughts and ideas. Healthy intellectual boundaries include respect for others' ideas, and an awareness of appropriate discussion (should we talk about the weather, or politics?). Intellectual boundaries are violated when someone dismisses or belittles another person's thoughts or ideas.

Emotional boundaries refer to a person's feelings. Healthy emotional boundaries include limitations on when to share, and when not to share, personal information. For example, gradually sharing personal information during the development of a relationship, as opposed to revealing everything to everyone. Emotional boundaries are violated when someone criticizes, belittles, or invalidates another person's feelings.

Sexual boundaries refer to the emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects of sexuality. Healthy sexual boundaries involve mutual understanding and respect of limitations and desires between sexual partners. Sexual boundaries can be violated with unwanted sexual touch, pressure to engage in sexual acts, leering, or sexual comments.

Material boundaries refer to money and possessions. Healthy material boundaries involve setting limits on what you will share, and with whom. For example, it may be appropriate to lend a car to a family member, but probably not to someone you met this morning. Material boundaries are violated when someone steals or damages another person's possessions, or when they pressure them to give or lend them their possessions.

Time boundaries refer to how a person uses their time. To have healthy time boundaries, a person must set aside enough time for each facet of their life such as work, relationships, and hobbies. Time boundaries are violated when another person demands too much of another's time.