

Tri-Life

Establishing Personal Boundaries

Our personal boundaries influence how we feel about ourselves and how we relate to everyone else. Boundaries represent the psychological dividing lines between us and other people. They are important because they allow us to maintain a healthy sense of self as an individual – separate from everyone else. Without this sense, we cannot achieve balance or maintain our own values and goals while encountering the influences and emotions of others.

Blurred or damaged boundaries are generally the result of having grown up in a family in which personal boundaries were either unclear or nonexistent, for instance, we may have been led to believe that our feelings and behaviors should always reflect those of a parent. Or perhaps in our family of origin there was invasive behavior, lack of privacy, or physical/emotional/sexual abuse. When individuality is not respected, boundaries don't exist.

We can become so consumed with another's behavior and problems that we lose our own direction, as well as our sense of self. Our self-esteem improves – and our relationships improve – when we learn how to build stronger personal boundaries. We're unable to experience healthy intimacy without healthy boundaries. For instance, if I don't know which emotions are mine and which are someone else's – or if I think the other person's opinions are always right – I'm unable to hear the messages that my mind and body are sending me about what is true for me and what is not. To be healthy, I must know my own feelings and my own opinions.

You can begin to reclaim your boundaries by learning to establish limits. There are times when it is appropriate to say:

“This behavior is okay with me, but this behavior is not okay.”

“I'll think about it.”

“Absolutely not.”

There are times when words are ineffective, and setting limits means walking out the door, or taking the time to meet your own needs rather than the demands of another person.

The first step in defining your personal boundaries is learning to perceive the differences between you and those you love. When you've become so merged with someone that you've lost your sense of self and feel that the other person's feelings and actions are your own, you inevitably end up thinking that you're responsible for their actions.

Signs you are letting your boundaries be violated:

- You ignore your feelings, while feeling others' feelings very intensely.
- You rescue others with no thought of your own safety and well-being.
- You take orders from someone who's telling you what to do, even when you know that the action you're taking as a result is not the best one for you.
- You pretend that your opinions and interests match someone else's, when in fact they differ.
- You become sexually involved with someone before you're ready, just to please the person.
- You accept the other person's point of view while discounting your own.
- You push yourself beyond your limits.
- You frequently change your plans at the last minute to suit the whims of a new lover or friend.
- You decline joining an activity/organization you are interested in so you can suit someone else.
- You give endlessly of your time, talents, money, and services.
- You blame yourself for someone else's drunkenness, rudeness, thoughtlessness, or irresponsibility.
- You conceal your true feelings.

Signs you are not honoring your boundaries:

- Working too hard and/or too long
 - Doing too much for others
 - Not eating regular, healthy meals
 - Too little or too much sleep
 - Too little or too much time alone
 - Too little or too much exercise
 - Not enough contact with people who truly care about you
 - Insufficient or too many leisure activities
 - Using chemicals to avoid yourself: nicotine, alcohol, caffeine, sugar, pills, drugs
 - Using compulsions to avoid yourself: eating, starving, exercise, work, shopping, spending, TV, sex, games, sports
- (Excerpted from *Boundaries* by Anne Katherine.)

Some signs you are strengthening your boundaries:

- You act on feelings when you need to.
- You can say “no” when you want to without experiencing excessive guilt.
- You generally do what you want to do rather than depending on the suggestions of others.
- You no longer blame yourself for everything that goes wrong in a relationship or friendship.
- You no longer feel solely responsible for making a relationship work or making another person happy.
- You don’t take things personally (ex., if a friend is inconsiderate or a partner has a wandering eye, you know the behavior has to do with them and their history and has little or nothing to do with you).
- You disagree with a friend and yet are able to maintain your friendship.
- You realize you’re not responsible for the actions of another.
- You become comfortable in receiving as well as giving.
- You are able to be appropriately assertive – no longer shrinking due to fear of becoming aggressive.

Techniques for reclaiming your sense of identity:

- Stay with your feeling – Allow yourself to feel it fully. Remind yourself that it’s none of your business what the other person is feeling.
- Express your emotions – You have a right to express all your emotions. Say how you feel out loud. Share your feelings with others at every opportunity.
- State your preferences – “I’d rather eat at a different restaurant.” “I would prefer to take my own car.” This helps you to maintain clarity about your own choices and priorities.
- Set limits – “I can drive you to your class this week, but I can’t drive you every week.” “I love you, but I can’t come over tonight.”

These limits will help you give to others within healthy boundaries, so that you don’t overextend yourself.

Don’t be afraid to disagree with someone. Acknowledge the other person’s opinion and restate your own. Don’t resort to pretending or accommodating in order to keep the peace.

Talk about your own experience, such as how you handled an incident, rather than how the other person ought to do it.

Bill of Rights

- I have numerous choices in my life beyond mere survival.
- I have the right to grieve over what I didn't get that I needed or what I got that I didn't need or want.
- I have the right to follow my own values and standards.
- I have the right to recognize and accept my own value system as appropriate.
- I have the right to say no to anything when I feel I am not ready, it is unsafe or it violates my values.
- I have the right to dignity and respect.
- I have the right to make decisions.
- I have the right to determine and honor my own priorities.
- I have the right to have my needs and wants respected by others.
- I have the right to terminate conversations with people who make me feel put down and humiliated.
- I have the right not to be responsible for others' behavior, actions, feelings or problems.
- I have the right to make mistakes, and I don't have to be perfect.
- I have the right to expect honesty from others.
- I have the right to all of my feelings.
- I have the right to be angry at someone I love.
- I have the right to be uniquely me, without feeling that I'm not good enough.
- I have the right to feel scared and to say "I'm afraid".
- I have the right to experience and then let go of fear, guilt, and shame.
- I have the right to make decisions based on my feelings, my judgment or any reason that I choose.
- I have the right to change my mind at any time.
- I have the right to be happy.
- I have the right to stability, i.e., "roots" and stable, healthy relationships of my choice.
- I have the right to my own personal space and time needs.
- I have the right to be relaxed, playful and frivolous.
- I have the right to be flexible and be comfortable doing so.
- I have the right to change and grow.
- I have the right to be open to improve my communication skills so that I may be understood.
- I have the right to make friends and be comfortable around people.
- I have the right to be in a non-abusive environment.
- I have the right to be healthier than those around me.
- I have the right to take care of myself, no matter what.
- I have the right to grieve actual or threatened losses.
- I have the right to trust others who earn my trust.
- I have the right to forgive others and to forgive myself.
- I have the right to give and receive unconditional love.
- I have the right to determine who touches my body and how.
- I have the right to stop any interactions that make me feel uncomfortable.
- I have the right to disagree with others.

(Excerpted from Boundaries and Relationships: Knowing, Protecting and Enjoying the Self by Charles L. Whitfield, M.D.)