

Week 17: Activity
Defining Boundaries and Naming blocks to setting them

What are boundaries?

Think of your boundaries like a property line. My friend Chris had a problem with his neighbor that perfectly illustrates how boundaries work. Chris' neighbor would come into his yard and bring Chris' newspaper from the driveway to his doorstep. She'd pick a few of Chris' flowers along the way. Chris felt annoyed, but didn't say anything. Chris figured it wasn't worth making a stink over it. The neighbor probably assumed it was okay for her to move the paper and take a few flowers. Maybe she thought she was doing Chris a favor. Months passed like this. Chris would sometimes find her neighbor's dog in his yard. The dog pooped on his grass and chased away the birds at his bird feeder. Still Chris said nothing. He wanted to be a "good neighbor." He didn't want a reputation for being difficult and he worried his neighbor might get angry at him if he told her to stay off his property. Finally, Chris came home one day to find the neighbor's kids playing in his yard – yelling, running through the bushes, empty juice boxes on his front step, throwing toys around like they owned the place. Understandably, Chris' blood was boiling at this point.

Chris was responsible for not setting and enforcing the boundary. He allowed his neighbor to take advantage of his lack of boundaries. Certainly it seems Chris' neighbor behaved badly. She is, of course, responsible for her own actions, her kids, and her dog. Some behaviors are clearly wrong, but many, like the actions of Chris' neighbor, start out in the gray area – acceptable to some people and not acceptable to others. Chris' neighbor may or may not have known that Chris didn't like her picking the flowers. The point is, when you don't speak up and say that a boundary has been crossed, it gives the impression that you're okay with it. It would have been better for everyone, if from the beginning Chris had said, "Hi Neighbor. I'm sure you didn't realize it, but I like to bring in my own paper and please don't pick the flowers in my yard."

When a boundary is crossed, you need to provide feedback saying it's not okay. The boundary is worthless if you don't enforce it by giving feedback and consequences. Some people will easily accept a boundary and others will continue to challenge and escalate it. So, if Chris' neighbor continued to violate the boundaries, he'd need to address it with her again. The specific consequences depend on the nature of the relationship and the relationship history.

Chris could build a 10-foot-tall fortress around his house. This would definitely keep his neighbor away, but it would also keep out his friends and everyone else he wants to see. Chris needs a flexible boundary, like a fence with a gate, that keeps unwanted people out while still allowing other people in.

Why do you need boundaries? Like Chris, without boundaries, you're going to have dogs sh**ting all over your lawn. You've probably already experienced the human equivalent of this.

1. Boundaries allow you to be your true self

Boundaries create a separateness that allows you to have your own feelings, make your own decisions, and know and ask for what you want without needing to please others.

2. Boundaries are a form of self-care

Healthy emotional boundaries mean you value your own feelings and needs and you're not responsible for how others feel or behave. Boundaries allow you to let go of worrying about how others feel and places accountability squarely with the individual. Boundaries also keep you from overextending yourself. You can't take on every project, work every shift, or be on every committee that you're asked to join. Boundaries mean saying "no" to things that don't align with your priorities.

3. Boundaries create realistic expectations

Whether it's with a friend, spouse, neighbor, or boss, relationships function best when we know what's expected. When you clearly communicate your boundaries, people know how they're expected to behave. When expectations aren't communicated and met, resentment and anger grows.

4. Boundaries create safety

Boundaries provide physical and emotional safety by keeping out what feels uncomfortable or hurtful.

What prevents you from setting boundaries? Now that we've talked about what emotional boundaries look like and why we need boundaries, let's explore why we fail to set boundaries even when we believe they're important.

1. Fear

It's scary to do something different. What are you actually afraid of? How likely is this to happen? What will happen if you set a boundary? What will happen if you don't? By asking yourself questions like these, you can give yourself a reality check and find out if your fear is alerting you of real danger or keeping you stuck.

2. Ambivalence

Similar to fear, ambivalence represents that you aren't 100% convinced that boundaries will solve your problem. Some ambivalence is fine. You don't need to be 100% sure before you act.

3. You don't know how

If you grew up in a family without boundaries, you probably never saw anyone model or teach you healthy boundaries. Setting boundaries is a skill that can be learned. Stay tuned: my next post is going to teach you specific steps for setting boundaries.

4. Low self-worth

Some part of you feels unworthy or unlovable. Therefore, you always struggle to prove your worth by putting other people's needs before your own. You're not used to being treated with respect, so you don't even know what it looks like.

5. People-pleasing

You don't want to ruffle feathers. You don't want to disappoint people. You'll pretty much avoid conflict at all costs.

The truth is that setting boundaries does disrupt relationship systems. You will get resistance. Sometimes this resistance isn't as bad as you imagined. Other times, there is real danger. If you think that setting a boundary will put you in serious harm, please get help.

By Sharon Martin, LCSW

Week 17: Handout B
HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

By Sharon Martin, LCSW

Setting boundaries doesn't come easily or naturally to a lot of people, but you can learn to set healthy boundaries. I'm going to share ten tips that I find helpful.

Examples of Boundaries: Karla and Mark have two young children. Mark's parents have a new dog that seems aggressive, and he doesn't feel comfortable with the dog around his kids. Mark tells his parents that their dog isn't welcome at his house and he will not bring his kids to their house unless the dog stays in the garage.

A roommate agreement (the concept isn't as ridiculous as it seems on The Big Bang Theory) that identifies expectations about cleaning, food, and noise.

Telling your boss that you can't work late tonight.

Having a personal policy of not loaning money to family members.

10 Steps to Setting Boundaries:

1. Clearly identify your boundary.

Get really clear with yourself about what the boundary is that you need to set. Do you need your mother to stop calling all together or can she call you under certain circumstances? If you aren't clear, you won't be able to communicate your expectations. A wishy-washy boundary is not effective. Spend time figuring out what you need before taking action.

2. Understand why you need the boundary.

This is your motivation for setting the boundary. If you don't have a compelling reason, why are you going to follow through with setting a boundary that's out of your comfort zone?

3. Be straight forward.

Don't be cryptic or purposefully vague thinking you're going to spare someone's feelings or avoid a conflict. The kindest and most successful approach is to be direct. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

4. Don't apologize or give long explanations.

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This kind of behavior undermines your authority and gives the impression that you're doing something wrong that requires an apology or justification.

5. Use a calm and polite tone.

Keep your own anger in check. Don't try to set boundaries in the middle of an argument. You want your message to be heard. Yelling, sarcasm, or a condescending tone all put others on the defensive and distract from the real issues.

6. Start with tighter boundaries.

It's always easier to loosen up tight boundaries than it is to tighten loose boundaries. I see so many people making this mistake.

When you meet a new friend or start a new job, naturally you want to make a good impression, be agreeable, and fit in. As a result you're likely to over-extend yourself, agree to commitments or viewpoints that don't sit well with you. People-pleasing results in loose or weak boundaries that are hard to tighten up later.

For example, you set a clear expectation with your ex that you don't want her coming into your home when she returns the children. From this firm boundary, it's easy to later invite her in if you feel it's appropriate. It's much harder to later tell her she can't come in when initially you'd given her free access to your home.

7. Address boundary violations early.

Small problems are always easier to manage. Don't wait until someone's violated your boundary a dozen times before you speak up. It's not fair to assume that others know your boundaries until you've explained them. Nor is it fair to "change the rules" and abruptly tell your cousin that you're not going to help pay her rent after you've done it with a smile on your face for the past three months.

8. Don't make it personal.

Setting a boundary isn't a personal attack. Gina generously agreed to drive her coworker Maggie home while Maggie's car is in the shop. Gina likes to leave promptly, so she's grown resentful that she's waiting 10-15 minutes after shift as Maggie chats and socializes. After three days of this she snaps: "Maggie you're really inconsiderate. Can't you see I'm waiting for you? You're so ungrateful! Just take the bus home!" Notice the difference when Gina uses an "I statement" and leaves the personal attack out. "Maggie, I need to get home straight after work. I'm happy to give you a ride, but I can't wait more than five minutes for you. So, if you need more time, I won't be able to drive you home."

9. Use a support system.

Starting to set boundaries is tough! It can bring up a lot of questions, uncomfortable feelings, and self-doubt. Having a support system is invaluable whenever you're doing something challenging.

10. Trust your intuition.

Be sure to slow down and tune into yourself. Pay attention to what you're feeling. What is your gut telling you? If it feels wrong, make a change.

Following these ten steps will help guide you toward setting and maintaining healthy boundaries. And remember that healthy boundaries are not only good for you, but they're good for everyone.

You might also like to read:

[Why You're Saying Yes, When You Really Mean No](#)

Signs of Unhealthy Boundaries

posted by H. Dan Smith, EDD, MFT

- Trusting no one - trusting anyone - black and white thinking
- Telling all
- Talking at intimate level on first meeting
- Falling in love with a new acquaintance
- Falling in love with anyone who reaches out
- Being overwhelmed by a person - preoccupied
- Acting on first sexual impulse
- Being sexual for partner, not self
- Going against personal values or rights to please others
- Not noticing when someone else displays inappropriate boundaries
- Not noticing when someone invades your boundaries
- Accepting food, gifts, touch, sex that you don't want
- Touching a person without asking
- Taking as much as you can get for the sake of getting
- Giving as much as you can give for the sake of giving
- Allowing someone to take as much as they can from you
- Letting others direct your life

- Letting others describe your reality
- Letting others define you
- Believing others can anticipate your needs
- Expecting others to fill your needs automatically
- Falling apart so someone will take care of you
- Self abuse
- Sexual and physical abuse
- Food abuse