

Boundaries

- by Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

“Good fences make good neighbours”. – Robert Frost

This subject has certainly been coming up a lot lately and I see boundaries being broken with great frequency. By both people who are aware of them but appear to cross the line anyway, and by those who aren't aware. So, here's a little review.

Boundaries are the limits we set with people both with how they affect us and how we affect them. You have every right in the world to be treated with dignity and respect. You have the right to set personal boundaries that define what others cannot do to you or around you. Boundaries are an essential part of any healthy relationship. They're about self-determination and self-respect. They define your right to keep some part of yourself separate from the relationship, and also to expect that others will treat you with respect. When these individual boundaries are intact and in place, you feel respected and cared for and not taken for granted. When they are broken you end up feeling mis-

treated, your self-respect plummets and over time this can lead to emotional difficulties such as depression or anxiety.

Also, you can never presume to know another person's boundaries unless they tell you. Boundaries are unique to each person. What one person experiences as acceptable behaviour may be received as a boundary violation by another. The best policy is to proceed carefully and, when in doubt, ask questions. The more you know a person, of course, the more you may be familiar with their limits. The less you know them, the less you know their limits. Each person has unique ideas, feelings, values, wishes and perspectives – and that's okay. Keep in mind, also, that your personal boundaries only concern you. If another person's behaviour does not directly impact you then it may not be a boundary issue. For example, if you don't like how your neighbour dresses, that's not a boundary issue. It has nothing to do with you. If your neighbour is calling you names, that is a boundary issue.

Weak boundaries include:

- Low self esteem
- Finding fulfillment through other peoples experiences (i.e. living vicariously through their children)
- Poor listening skills
- Poor judgement
- Engages in inappropriate interactions with others
- Mind reading (assuming to know what another is thinking or expecting the same in return)
- Projection of feelings onto another (assuming that what we feel is what another feels)
- Blaming
- Offering unsolicited advice
- Assuming that inappropriate behaviour is acceptable because of familiarity with that person
- The inability to say no or be assertive
- Victims
- Abusers
- Receiving personal gain at the expense of another



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- Insulting or critical of self or others
- Intolerant of differences
- Assuming, demanding, commanding or imposing your will onto others
- Meddling or involving self in the affairs of others uninvited
- Over sharing personal information with others

Strong boundaries include:

- The right to say no
- The freedom to say yes
- Acceptance of differences
- Permission for expression
- Assertiveness
- Strong self worth
- Living one's own life to the fullest
- Listening with empathy
- Doesn't read minds (or expect others to do the same)
- Accepting personal responsibility for ones own life, feelings and behaviours
- Being empowered
- Taking care of ones own needs
- Respect others and their privacy
- Demonstrates good judgement and common sense
- Has appropriate relationships with others
- Sets limits
- Doesn't offer unsolicited advice
- Self sufficient (and able to ask for or receive help when appropriate)
- Intolerance of inappropri-

ate behaviour towards self or others regardless of the nature of the relationship

Over-caring: Sometimes we can be over-caring about another person. This is another boundary violation. Whether they are ill, have addiction issues, are passive, hot-tempered or possess any number of qualities that leave them appearing helpless it is possible to become over-involved or under-involved in the lives of people you care about. It is important to remain helpfully involved which means having healthy boundaries. This may mean safeguarding their dignity, autonomy and privacy while

"Make sure your cup is full and only give from the overflow".

lyanla Vanzant

remembering that you are a person with certain rights. A critical element for resolving boundary issues is to set limits that respect both of you. If you find that your "helping" role is becoming overwhelming or just too much, that is an important signal that you've gone beyond your limits. It's time to rein in a little.

What are your boundaries?

In defending your boundaries, it's really important to know what your own personal limits are. Know yourself. Get in touch with what you want from your relationships with friends, family, and coworkers. Sometimes it's helpful to make a list of what you won't tolerate and plan on what you will do about it beforehand.

That way you don't have to think up something on the spot – you're prepared. Then it's okay to stand up for yourself and say, "I don't think I deserve to be treated this way."

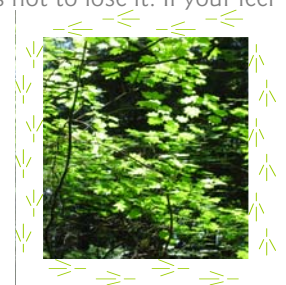
While you're at it, have a look and see if you are following your own rules. Sometimes people feel that as long as others provoke them, then they can't help their response or they're not responsible. This is just another way of saying that you are not accountable for your own actions and worse, you have a double-standard.

Conversely, failure to meet someone's expectations does not necessarily mean you have violated a boundary. You cannot nor should not be all things to everyone. It's okay and important that you have limits. It may be a good opportunity for them to learn how to treat you or what to expect. You get to choose what you will give. Not others. Some people will try to manipulate you or "guilt" you into seeing things their way. These are forms of poor boundaries. Stand your ground! Don't give in. Remind yourself you have rights and don't wish to cultivate a relationship based on guilt or manipulation.

Sometimes we can tell by our bodies what our boundaries are. For example, have you ever had someone come up to you and get really close to your face while they're talking? You might find your body kind of tensing up a bit. Your shoulders may head north.

Your stomach may knot up. You may lean back a little or scrunch up your face. This is your body feeling defensive or threatened. The body wants to retreat or defend itself. It's important to pay attention to our body and what it's telling us. It sometimes gives us good signals that our boundaries are being crossed and we need to take action.

Sometimes, you might feel resentful, burnt out, or taken advantage of. Use this as a lesson. Next time, decide on setting a limit and communicate that beforehand. Some individuals remain passive for fear of the other person's response or feel pity or sympathy or guilt – as if they are rejecting or judging the entire person. This isn't about rejection or judgement; this is about setting limits about specific behaviours – not the entire person. Some people are afraid of the possible repercussions. Will this person yell at me? Judge me? Reject me? People may very well judge, reject or react. None of us escapes that but we can control how we react or communicate to people. We can defend ourselves. Strong feelings can arise when someone criticizes you or acts aggressively. It's important to channel your own feelings of hurt or anger in a way that you can use them effectively. The key is not to lose it. If your feel-





ings are very powerful, you could try saying, 'I'm feeling too angry, too upset etc. to talk to you now.' Or you could take a few deep breaths to compose yourself so that you could respond in a calm, measured way. If we're talking about a stranger, it's perfectly natural to feel a little fear – you don't know this person. You don't know how they'll respond. Nonetheless, it doesn't mean you give up your rights. Don't be a victim. Be a defender. It is also completely and perfectly acceptable to physically move away from someone – running to safety, shouting "Stop that!" or fighting back if necessary. Remember this; it is a sign of respect and caring to be open and honest about yourself. Acting out of silence or fear only supports rudeness and disrespect.

What you can say: Once you have decided what your personal boundaries are, you need to communicate and be upfront about them. You are sending a message that says, "I respect you enough to believe you can handle what I'm about to say." You are suggesting to them that their behaviours may need modifying. Not to mention that honest and forthright relationships tend to thrive and advance while relationships filled with silent grudges and sore toes tend to struggle and fade. You want to

explain both what your boundaries are and how best to honour them. Try setting your boundaries by using the words, "I ask that..." followed by a description of what you want to have happen. Sometimes, I'll even follow up by saying, "Are you willing to do that?" This elicits a commitment from them.

Examples: "I am concerned about my health and ask that you not smoke in my house. If you wish to smoke I would appreciate it if you would step outside. Would you be willing to do that?"

"When you make jokes about my weight it hurts my feelings. I ask that you not make any further jokes about my physical appearance or my weight."

The first time you state your boundaries you may not be taken seriously, especially if the behaviour you are trying to protect yourself from is one that you have tolerated in the past. Even those who truly love and care about you may violate your newly-set boundaries when acting out of habit, in a desire to "test the limits" of your new resolve, or because they do not clearly understand how important your boundaries are to you. You need a direct, but gracious, way to handle such boundary violations. You can say something like, "This is important to me and it's important to me that you respect my wishes. Are you willing to do that?"

Boundary violations will also occur because there will be many individuals you come into contact with who have never heard about your

boundaries. For these situations as well it is important to have a simple process to stop any violations and clearly state what you need. One simple method is to simply tell them that you do not like when they do that and that you will not tolerate it again.

It is essential that you mean what you say. Otherwise you won't be taken seriously.



Here is a seven-step process you can use when someone violates your personal boundaries.

To illustrate how the process works in the context of a real-life example, let's assume you have set a personal boundary that says no one has the right to yell at you at any time, for any reason. Suddenly someone starts yelling at you. Here is how you can respond effectively:

1. "Inform" them of what they are doing in a calm, level voice (i.e., how they are violating your boundary): "Do you realize that you are yelling at me?"
2. Request that they stop: "I ask that you stop yelling at me now."
3. Add some instruction as to how they can respect your boundary: "I ask that you speak to me in a conversational tone."
4. Thank them for their cooperation: "Thank you for respecting my wishes." The trick to making this process work is to say all of these things using a neutral tone of voice. Think

of saying these things with the same lack of emotion that you would say, "The sky is blue." Often, by the time you have reached Step 4, the person will realize what they're doing and stop the offending behaviour. If they don't, then go to Step 5.

5. Demand or insist that they stop: "I insist that you stop yelling at me now." Remember to continue speaking in a neutral tone of voice. If at this point the person still has not stopped the behaviour then you move on to the next step.

6. Leave the door open: You can leave the door open to speak again by telling them that "I will continue this conversation at a later time when we are both able to communicate at a calmer level so please let me know when you are able to discuss this with me without yelling or screaming."

7. Leave. In some situations (for example, when you are in your own home or office) it may be more appropriate for you to ask the other person to leave.

Again you want to take this step accompanied by words spoken in a neutral tone of voice. For example you might say, "I can't continue this conversation while you are yelling at me. I am going to leave the room."

Tell them how you feel.

Another effective way to set boundaries is to tell people how you feel. Often time's people aren't aware of how their actions or words affect others and it's helpful to the relationship if they know that.

For example, “*When you ask me personal questions about my life, I feel uncomfortable. I don’t like talking about my personal life.*” Or, “*When you call me at home, I feel a little angry. It’s important to me that my privacy is respected.*”

Language assertion. This is a three-part statement, and very useful for dealing with negative feelings: It can help you in constructively focusing your anger and in clarifying your own feelings. It includes:

1. When you do... (describe the behaviour)
2. The effects are... (describe how the behaviour affects you)
3. I’d prefer... (describe what you want) *Be specific.*

For example:

“When you met us last night without the tickets, we couldn’t get into the concert. I’m really feeling angry. Next time, when you agree to do something like that, I would prefer that you bring the tickets with you.”

“When you play your music late at night I can’t get to sleep, and I feel miserable the next day. Please turn your music down after 10 pm.”

Empathetic assertions. This is usually in two parts, with the first conveying that you understand where the other person is coming from, followed by a statement where you stand up for your rights: For example:

‘I know you have been really busy, but I want to feel that our relationship is important to you. I want you to make more time for me and for us.’

How can I say ‘No’? Saying

no to a request that conflicts with your own needs and desires is honest. You have a right to say no, without feeling bad. Usually saying ‘no thank you’, ‘no, I’m not interested’, ‘no, I’ve decided not to should work. However if someone persists, then repeat yourself... but don’t apologize! If you want to give an explanation, then:

- Acknowledge the request by repeating it.
- Say no and explain your reason for refusing.
- Optional... suggest an alternative on which you can both agree.

Practice saying no over little things with safe people to test out the no response.

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS

Research suggests that 7% of our communication is verbal, 93% is non-verbal (i.e. tone of voice, facial expression, body language).

- Say what you want clearly and specifically, using a minimum number of words - e.g. let’s meet at 7 and go for a meal rather than *How about meeting later on, if you haven’t arranged something else to do.* Where possible avoid using *if, but, perhaps* or *maybe*. Clearly stating your preferences is not selfish. There is no reason why you should always do what others want.

- Try not to be manipulated or side-tracked, even if the other person becomes aggressive. This is often a defence and an attempt to bully you into giving up your rights. State that you want to stick to the point and will deal with

other issues later. If need be, repeat yourself. Try to avoid being forced into making an aggressive response. Don’t use manipulative behaviour (i.e. don’t plead or whine).

- Listen carefully to the other person. They have a right to their point of view, even if you don’t agree.
- Ask for feedback, e.g. ‘am I being clear?’ This helps to promote a dialogue, rather than a statement of demand.

Practice, practice, practice! Rehearse these skills, initially, in a non-threatening situation, first on your own and then with a friend whom you trust.

Offer a substitute or alternative behaviour in place of the inappropriate behaviour.

For example, you could say, “Instead of a hug, how about a hand shake?” or “Instead of yelling, why don’t you go home and yell into a pillow and then come back and talk to me when you’re calm.”

Is it possible to have too many boundaries? This is a tricky question and highly subjective however I believe that some people do go too far. In fact, sometimes they go so far as to appear as if they have gone full circle to no boundaries at all. They take most of what everyone else does or says around them personally. These are the individuals who appear to make it their business to report on the wrongdoings, infractions or mistakes of everyone they encounter. They take every minor action to heart. It’s almost as if they appear to seek out things to be offended

by even when they are not directly involved or impacted. If you find yourself doing this many times a day with many different people then either your circumstances may need to be changed or your views may need reassessing.

Is it too late? Often times I’ll hear people’s stories of how they realized minutes, hours or days later that something someone did was offensive to them. I believe it’s perfectly acceptable to go back to the person and say, “I’ve been thinking about what you said the other day and have had time to give it some thought. I wanted to tell you that what you said hurt my feelings..... etc.” If the person confronts you with, “Why didn’t you say something at the time?” it’s okay to say, “Yes, I wish I had but it took me some time to realize it or I needed time to think about it.” Don’t let your timing become the issue, stay focused on your point.



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