


SET BOUNDARIES, FIND PEACE

a guide to reclaiming yourself

NEDRA GLOVER TAWWAB


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What the Heck Are Boundaries?

Boundaries are the gateway to healthy relationships.

"I feel overwhelmed," Kim said, burying her head in her hands. She had started seeing me two weeks after she had returned from her honeymoon. Newly married and excelling in her career, Kim prided herself on being the best at everything she did, but her worries about *getting it all done* had become all-consuming. She was depleted and dreaded getting out of bed in the morning. She not only was determined to be the best for herself, but she also always showed up as the "best" for others: the best friend, best daughter, best sister, best coworker. Now she wanted to be the best wife. And someday, the best mother. Being the best for Kim meant always saying yes. Saying no was mean. Saying no was selfish. She came to me hoping to figure out how to do more without feeling so exhausted.

On my couch, Kim went down the list of things she had agreed to do for other people in the coming week. She insisted that her friend *needed* her help to move. Her coworker would not be able to manage *his project* without her assistance. Kim was eager for solutions. She was trying to create more time to do all the things she'd signed up for.

As she rattled off everything she was trying to figure out, I asked her to pause. I gently pointed out that it was impossible to create more time. She looked a bit stunned at first. "Don't worry," I said. "I can help you lighten your load instead." From the look on her face, it seemed as though this approach had never occurred to her. I wasn't surprised. I meet so many people—especially women—who give and give so much, only to feel exhausted and even depressed as a result. This is why we live in a culture of burnout.

To start, I encouraged Kim to make a list of everything she needed to do at work and home that week. She already had her week completely mapped out (of course she did). She sketched a schedule for completing each task. She quickly saw that there was simply not enough time to do all the things she had planned.

I asked her, "What do you *really* have to do, and what can you delegate? Do you think your friend might be able to find someone else to help them move?" She mulled it over and said yes, but insisted that she *wanted* to help. At that moment, I could see that Kim had an issue with setting boundaries around how much and how often she's willing to help others and that this was contributing to her anxiety. She meant well, right? All she wanted to do was help people! But her level of willingness to help was impossible to sustain. She desperately needed to do *less*. When I mentioned delegating, Kim dismissed the idea immediately. She knew only one way to help others, and that was to say yes to doing it herself.

Kim's refusal to *say no* had led her to my office and was the root of her worry, stress, and crippling anxiety. According to studies, anxiety is rising. Complicated relationships are among the leading causes of increasing rates of anxiety, and anxiety and depression are the two most common reasons people pursue therapy. Just like Kim, people enter therapy when anxiety is starting to impact their daily life.

I worked with Kim to unpack her need to be present for everyone. I helped her see that saying no would give her the time she was seeking. Saying no would give her the freedom to settle into her role as a wife. Saying no would reduce her worry so that she could get out of bed and face the day without immediately feeling overwhelmed.

My Definition of "Boundaries"

Boundaries are expectations and needs that help you feel safe and comfortable in your relationships. Expectations in relationships help you stay mentally and emotionally well. Learning when to say no and when to say yes is also an essential part of feeling comfortable when interacting with others.

Signs That You Need Healthier Boundaries

Kim's ability to function was impacted by her constantly replaying her thoughts, planning, worrying about having enough time, and dreading getting started. In short, she was stressed out.

Mental health issues such as anxiety can be prompted by our neurological response to stress. When we are stressed, our brain has difficulty shutting down. Our sleep is affected. Dread sets in. As a therapist, I observe poor self-care, feelings of being overwhelmed, resentment, avoidance, and other mental health issues as common presentations of boundary issues.

Neglecting Self-Care

We've all heard the analogy from airplane-safety language: "Put on your oxygen mask *first* before helping others." Simple, right? Nope. *Neglecting self-care* is the first thing to happen when we get caught up in our desire to help others.

I can't tell you how many people show up in my office lamenting, "I don't have time to do anything for myself." After a quick evaluation, it becomes apparent that these people are not making *any* time for themselves. In fact, it often seems like they've forgotten how to take care of themselves. They can't manage to carve out time to eat a healthy meal or find five minutes to meditate, but they spend hours volunteering at their kids' school every week. This type of imbalance is an immediate sign of boundary issues.

The root of self-care is setting boundaries.

Self-care is more than taking a spa day, and it isn't selfish. Saying no to helping is an act of self-care. Paying attention to your needs is self-care. And like putting on the oxygen mask, you'll have more energy for others if you apply it to yourself first. If you think about it, the root of self-care is setting boundaries: it's saying no to something in order to say yes to your own emotional, physical, and mental well-being.

Overwhelmed

Kim sought therapy because she was feeling chronically *overwhelmed*. This is one of the most common manifestations of boundary issues. Overwhelmed people have more to do than the time required for their tasks. They are drowning in thoughts about squeezing more into an already

packed schedule. This type of busyness is endemic in our culture. Everyone is striving to do more and more. Time is an afterthought. But our well-being is the price. Understanding boundaries is a proactive way to gauge what is truly manageable, and it also allows you to give 100 percent to the task at hand without that nagging sense of *feeling overwhelmed all the time*.

Resentment

Feeling taken advantage of, frustrated, irritated, annoyed, and bitter is the result of the *resentment* we feel when we don't set limits. Being resentful impacts the way we deal with people. It doesn't allow us to be our best selves in our relationships. It breeds conflict. It makes us paranoid. It puts up a wall. Long-term resentment affects how we perceive the intentions of others. When we're resentful, we do things out of obligation to others instead of for the joy of helping. Resentment can be palpable.

If a client comes in and says, "I have to take care of my mother, and I feel angry about it," I can immediately pick up on the irritation and resentment. Exploring why they perceive pressure and obligation to provide this care allows me to challenge my client's belief. Yes, they want their mother to be taken care of, but they don't have to be the only person providing that care. Implementing boundaries—through asking for support from other family members and delegating—can help alleviate stress.

Remember the signs that you need boundaries:

- You feel overwhelmed.
- You feel resentful toward people for asking for your help.
- You avoid phone calls and interactions with people who might ask for something.
- You make comments about helping people and getting nothing in return.
- You feel burned out.
- You frequently daydream about dropping everything and disappearing.
- You have no time for yourself.

Avoidance

Disappearing, ignoring, or cutting people off is *avoidance*. Not responding to a request, delaying setting the record straight, or failing to show up are ways that we avoid situations instead of dealing with them proactively. But prolonging issues by avoiding them means the same issues will reappear over and over again, following us from relationship to relationship.

Avoidance is a passive-aggressive way of expressing that you are tired of showing up. Hoping the problem will go away feels like the safest option, but avoidance is a fear-based response. Avoiding a discussion of our expectations doesn't prevent conflict. It prolongs the inevitable task of setting boundaries.

Thoughts of fleeing—"I wish I could drop everything and run away"—are a sign of extreme avoidance. Fantasies of spending your days alone, ignoring calls, or hiding means you are seeking avoidance as the ultimate answer. But creating boundaries is the only real-life solution.

Learning to be assertive about your limitations with others will help you eliminate these symptoms and manage bouts of depression and anxiety. A lack of understanding about boundaries breeds unhealthy habits. So let's break it down.

Understanding Boundaries

Creating healthy boundaries leads to feeling safe, loved, calm, and respected. They are an indication of how you allow people to show up for you and how you show up for others. But it doesn't stop there.

The Meaning of Boundaries

- They are a safeguard to overextending yourself.
- They are a self-care practice.
- They define roles in relationships.
- They communicate acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in relationships.
- They are parameters for knowing what to expect in relationships.
- They are a way that you ask people to show up by upholding your needs.
- They are a way to communicate your needs to others.
- They are a way to create healthy relationships.
- They are a way to create clarity.

- They are a way to feel safe.

A boundary is a cue to others about how to treat you. It can be explicit, such as saying “I’m about to share something that I’d like you to keep between just the two of us.” Or implicit, such as having a basket for shoes and socks right by the front door for guests. As you set your own limits, it’s important to remain aware of the boundaries people are trying to communicate to you as well.

Our family histories and personalities determine how we implement and accept boundaries. If your family operates on unspoken limits or regularly ignores limits, you will probably grow up lacking the communication skills necessary to be assertive about your needs. For instance, adult children of alcoholics can have a difficult time setting limits. Parents with addiction issues often send the message that a child’s boundaries are not more significant than the parent’s addiction. So these children grow up struggling to understand and define limits. If your family of origin communicates and respects healthy limits, you are likely more comfortable defining them in any scenario.

Personality determines our comfort level with respecting and rejecting boundaries. People with anxious tendencies are more prone to overreact when challenged. Emotional regulation is a common issue, as these people are unable to react appropriately given the situation. People who exhibit strong signs of being disagreeable, such as always having to be right, arguing over small details, or struggling to accept differences in others, are more likely to push back against boundaries. Openness (receptiveness to change) and consciousness (willingness to learn and grow) are personality traits of people who are more likely to respect limitations.

Boundaries are essential at all ages. They change in relationships, just as the people in relationships change. Transitions such as getting married, going away to college, or starting a family often require new ones.

THERE ARE ACTUALLY three levels of boundaries. See if any of these sound familiar to you.

Porous

Porous boundaries are weak or poorly expressed and are unintentionally harmful. They lead to feeling depleted, overextending yourself, depression, anxiety, and unhealthy relationship dynamics. Kim from the opening story is an example of how porous boundaries can manifest and damage well-being.

Porous boundaries look like

- Oversharing
- Codependency
- Enmeshment (lacking emotional separation between you and another person)
- Inability to say no
- People-pleasing
- Dependency on feedback from others
- Paralyzing fear of being rejected
- Accepting mistreatment

Examples of porous boundary setting:

- Saying yes to things you don’t want to do
- Loaning money to people because you feel obligated or when you don’t have the funds to do so

Rigid

At the other extreme, rigid boundaries involve building walls to keep others out as a way to keep yourself safe. But staying safe by locking yourself in is unhealthy and leads to a whole other set of problems. Whereas porous boundaries lead to unhealthy closeness (enmeshment), rigid ones are a self-protective mechanism meant to build distance. This typically comes from a fear of vulnerability or a history of being taken advantage of. People with rigid boundaries do not allow exceptions to their stringent rules even when it would be healthy for them to do so. If a person with rigid boundaries

says, “I never loan money to people,” they never stray from that, even if a friend who isn’t the type to borrow money is in a crisis.

Rigid boundaries look like

- Never sharing
- Building walls
- Avoiding vulnerability
- Cutting people out
- Having high expectations of others
- Enforcing strict rules

Examples of rigid boundary setting:

- Saying no harshly as a way to discourage people from asking you in the future
- Having a rule that you never watch your sister’s kids

Healthy

Healthy boundaries are possible when your past doesn’t show up in your present interactions. They require an awareness of your emotional, mental, and physical capacities, combined with clear communication.

Healthy boundaries look like

- Being clear about your values
- Listening to your own opinion
- Sharing with others appropriately
- Having a healthy vulnerability with people who’ve earned your trust
- Being comfortable saying no
- Being comfortable hearing no without taking it personally

Examples of healthy boundary setting:

- Saying no without apologizing because it's the healthiest choice for you at that moment
- Supporting people financially, when appropriate, and when you can do so without causing financial harm to yourself

Two Parts to Setting Boundaries

It's true that setting boundaries isn't easy. Paralyzing fear about how someone might respond can easily hold us back. You might play out awkward interactions in your mind and prepare yourself for the worst possible outcome. But trust me: short-term discomfort for a long-term healthy relationship is worth it every time!

Whenever you identify a boundary you'd like to set, remember that there are two steps to the process: communication and action.

Communication

Verbally communicating your needs is step one. People cannot accurately assume your boundaries based on your body language or unspoken expectations. When you explicitly state what you expect, there is little room for others to misinterpret what works for you. Assertive statements are the most effective way to do this.

Verbally communicating your boundaries sounds like this:

- "When we have a disagreement, I'd like you to use a lower tone and take a break if you feel like you're getting too heated in the argument. Also, I will mention when I'm becoming uncomfortable with your tone."
- "It's important to me that you honor plans that we set up. If you need to change our plans, please send me a text a few hours before."

Action

The process doesn't end with the communication. You must uphold what you communicate through your behavior. Betting on the other person to

read your mind is a recipe for an unhealthy relationship. Action is required. For instance, let's say you've told your friend, "It's important to me that you honor plans that we set up. If you need to change our plans, please send me a text a few hours before." Because you've verbally communicated your boundary, when it's violated, you need to reinforce it with action. In this case, you would let your friend know that you can't accommodate the changed plans because they didn't give you enough notice. You might say gently, "I want to hang out with you, but my schedule won't allow for the adjustment. Let's set up a time to get together next week." It's hard, I know. But honoring your boundaries through action is the only way most people will understand that you're serious, which will help the people in your life become serious about your boundaries, too.

Boundaries Are for You and the Other Person

In my workshops, participants often share how they failed at communicating a boundary. Many people believe that once a limit is set, others will fall in line. Therefore, the person setting it doesn't take action after communicating it. But this lack of action invites continued violations in the relationship. You will have to put in the work to ensure that your boundaries are respected. It's your responsibility to follow through on it.

The biggest fear around this work is how others will respond, so let's get prepared for how that might look.

Common Ways People Respond When You Share Your Boundaries

It's important to consider how people might respond, but don't get too fixated on their possible reactions.

Common Responses to Boundaries

1. Pushback
2. Limit testing
3. Ignoring
4. Rationalizing and questioning
5. Defensiveness
6. Ghosting
7. Silent treatment

8. Acceptance

Pushback

It's typical for people to be resistant to changes in a relationship. It can be confusing at first. However, if someone respects you, they will respect these changes. We all grow and evolve, and our relationships must do the same. Pushback can happen at any time: immediately after you set a boundary or a while after, when the person decides to no longer honor it.

Pushback is a manifestation of the fear that things will be different, of being pushed out of the comfort zone. Even though "different" doesn't mean bad, some people will struggle to deal with new terms in the relationship.

Maybe after Kim tells her friend that she can't help her move, Kim's friend says, "Okay," as if she understands. Then the next day, Kim's friend says, "Are you sure you can't help me move? You're always the person who helps me."

Pushback sounds like

- "Well, I don't know if I can do that."
- "This isn't fair."
- "I have things I need, too, but I'm not making *you* change."

How to Handle Pushback

Acknowledge that you heard the other person's concern. Restate the boundary you initially set.

Examples:

"Thank you for letting me know. However, I'm proceeding with my request."

"I understand that you don't like my boundary, but I need to feel safe in my relationship. Having limits helps me feel safe."

Limit Testing

Kids do this a lot—it's part of forming independence when they are little—but adults do it, too. They heard you, but they want to see how much you're willing to bend. Let's say Kim tells her friend, "I can't help you move." Kim's friend then says, "Well, what about next week?" Her friend is trying to see if Kim has any flexibility. If Kim says, "Okay, next week," she is sending a clear message to her friend that the boundary is flexible.

Limit testing sounds like

- "I don't have to listen to you."
- "I'll check with you again to see if you can help."

How to Handle Limit Testing

Be clear about the behavior you notice. Name it: "You are testing my limits." Express how testing your boundaries makes you feel. "When you don't respect my boundaries, I feel ____." Then restate it. Explaining your boundary leaves room for people to object to your needs. In our attempts to make others feel comfortable, we might be persuaded out of setting healthy limits. Do your best to name your boundary without offering an explanation so that you aren't talked out of it.

Ignoring

People ignore boundaries as a passive-aggressive way of pretending they didn't hear them. But boundaries should be respected. When people ignore our requests, resentment builds. Over time, this erodes respect in the relationship.

Kim says, "I won't be able to help you move." Two days later, Kim's friend says, "When can you come to help me move this weekend?" Kim has a few options here: restate her boundary, go with the flow by helping her friend, or not show up to assist with moving. Assertively, Kim could state, "I mentioned two days ago that I wouldn't be able to help you move." If she's too scared to restate her boundary, she'll likely end up helping her friend move, and her friend will likely ignore the next one Kim tries to set.

Ignoring boundaries looks like

- Doing what they want despite your boundary

- Acting as if your boundary was misunderstood

How to Handle Ignoring

Restate your boundary. Request that the other person repeat back what you stated. Stress the importance of the change moving forward. “I need this in future situations as well.” React to ignoring immediately after you notice the issue. If not, the boundary will disappear.

Rationalizing and Questioning

Since you accepted behaviors in the past that you now deem inappropriate, people will react by asking questions as a way to rationalize their behavior as unproblematic.

In this scenario, Kim’s friend responds with probing questions: “Why can’t you help me move? I would help *you* move.” Questions like these are hard to answer. It’s tempting to start offering excuses or apologies. But it isn’t helpful to say you’re sorry about setting a boundary. Remember that people benefit from you *not* having limits. You have to look out for yourself—no excuses required. People may question your shift when you’ve done things that you are no longer willing to do. It’s okay to let them know that you changed your mind or that the arrangement no longer works for you.

Rationalizing or questioning sounds like

- “Why are you asking me to change?”
- “What’s the point of doing things differently now?”

How to Handle Rationalizing or Questioning

Be careful not to explain yourself. Keep your response short by saying something like “This is what’s healthy for me.” Saying too much will put you in a back-and-forth negotiation.

Defensiveness

This happens when people feel attacked. Being clear in our wording helps minimize defensiveness. However, some people will respond defensively

no matter how you state your expectations and desires. Defensively, people will turn the issue on you because they don't want to be at fault.

In this situation, Kim's friend answers: "It's not like I move all the time, but fine if you don't want to help me." Defensive people aren't listening while you're talking; they're personalizing what you say and crafting a response. Their response has much more to do with them than it does with you. They are focused only on getting their needs met and resisting any change in your dynamic. But healthy relationships are not one-sided. The needs of both individuals are equally important.

Defensiveness looks like

- Turning your request around by making a request of you
- Explaining why they did something
- Accusing you of attacking them
- Bringing up what you've done in the past as a point of reference for your request

How to Talk to People When They're Being Defensive

- Make it about yourself, not them. Use "I" statements.
- Talk about one issue at a time.
- Don't talk about old issues with this person while stating your boundary.
- Use "feeling" words, such as "When you ____, I feel ____."
- Say something in the moment or soon after. Don't let issues fester for days, weeks, or months.
- Know your audience. If you can't talk in person, text or email your thoughts. Truly, some conversations are best had in person. But when you feel you won't be able to set the boundary face-to-face, set it by any means necessary.

Ghosting

Ending things without explanation or disappearing is often called "ghosting" and is an unhealthy response to boundaries. People who are

passive-aggressive use this response. Rather than stating their objection, they try to show you how they feel through their actions. Ghosting happens right away or a few days after you have made your wishes known. It's generally a form of punishment.

For example, Kim says, "I won't be able to help you this weekend." Later that week, Kim texts her friend several times to check in or say hello, as she usually does, and her friend doesn't respond. Kim is sure that her friend is receiving the messages because she sees the read receipt marking them as read.

Ghosting looks like

- Not answering calls or texts
- Canceling plans
- Keeping in touch with mutual friends or contacts but leaving you out

How to Handle Ghosting

Send a precise text message or email mentioning the behavior you're noticing. People are likely to respond because they don't want to seem upset when they are. Express how the ghosting is making you feel and the concerns you have about the relationship. If receiving a response takes a few days, be clear to restate how the ghosting makes you feel. If you don't receive a response, remind yourself that their reaction was not about you. It was about their interpretation of the situation.

Silent Treatment

This response is less extreme than ghosting but still painful. It's also passive-aggressive and a form of punishing you for trying to set the boundary. This person will be noticeably distant after you assert your need. If you try to talk to them, they will offer short responses like yes or no. It's lonely and confusing to be the receiver of the silent treatment. The other person is present, but not really.

If Kim's friend used the silent treatment, it would go like this: Kim sees her friend the following week for a previously scheduled lunch date, and her friend isn't acting like her usual self. She's quiet and seems

preoccupied. Kim tries engaging her friend in conversation, but her friend answers with one-word responses.

Silent treatment looks like

- Going hours/days without talking
- Providing short responses to questions to passive-aggressively express upset

How to Handle the Silent Treatment

Verbalize what you notice: “You seem upset. Can we talk about what I said to you?” Be clear about what you perceive to be the issue. Challenge the behavior of the other person. Perhaps offer feedback about why you set the boundary. “I was overwhelmed and unable to add another thing to an already full plate.”

Acceptance

Acceptance is the healthy way to respond to boundaries and is a sign of a functional, mutual relationship.

In this case, Kim’s friend says, “Thank you for letting me know.” And just like that, Kim is off the hook for helping her friend move. No harm, no foul. Despite all the fear around boundary setting, in my experience most people will graciously accept your requests. When people respond in an unhealthy way, it’s typically a sign that you needed limits a long time ago and that you need to reevaluate the relationship to assess whether your needs are being met satisfactorily.

Most likely, you’ve been denying the issues for far too long. Perhaps your issue is being asked to do things, saying yes, and resenting the other person for asking. Or your issue might be allowing someone to say things to you that make you uncomfortable.

Boundaries are the cure.

Boundaries are the cure to most relationship problems. But both parties have to participate and respect the boundaries on either side.

Signs of an Unhealthy Relationship

- You are unable to express your needs because the other person refuses to listen.
- The other person refuses to meet reasonable requests.
- There's emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.
- You feel sad, angry, drained, or disappointed after most interactions.
- The relationship is one-sided; you give and they take.
- There's a lack of trust in the relationship.
- The other person refuses to change some unhealthy behaviors.
- The other person has an addiction that is harmful to you.

Boundaries grow and expand over time as our needs change.

Areas Where We Commonly Need Boundaries

Once you learn to identify boundary issues, communicate your needs, and follow up with action, you can start implementing boundaries in various aspects of your life. They are valuable in so many different scenarios. Here are the top areas where people struggle. We'll explore each of these in detail in the second half of the book.

Family

This will not come as a surprise to you: family is where people experience the biggest challenges around boundaries, especially within parent-child relationships. Adults are confused about how to navigate interactions with their aging parents. But parents should respect the limits and needs of their children, even when they are young. It's okay for a small child to set limits like not eating meat or feeling uncomfortable around certain people. Parents who respect those boundaries make space for their children to feel safe and loved, and they reinforce the positive habit of articulating needs. When parents ignore these preferences, children feel lonely, neglected, and like their needs don't matter—and they will likely struggle with boundaries as adults.

Siblings can also struggle with boundaries as they grow up. The older sibling may be used to operating in a particular manner, such as looking after younger siblings. But this role may not be needed after the younger

sibling reaches a certain age. Dynamics in parent-child and sibling relationships get further complicated when spouses, grandchildren, and in-laws come into the mix. We will take a deep dive into the family system in Chapter 10.

Work

I see far too many people in my practice who are working way beyond the forty-hour workweek. They come in exhausted and frustrated, feeling powerless. But overwork is often more within your control than you think. It comes from having porous boundaries with your boss, your team, and your time. Limits can help you maintain a healthy work-life harmony. When you're unable to leave work at the office, disconnect on vacation, or shut off from work at a certain hour, you ignore your own boundaries at the expense of your well-being and often the well-being of your family. In Chapter 13, we'll take a closer look at identifying and resolving these issues in the workplace.

Romance

Boundary issues in dating relationships often arise when you oversell and underdeliver. This usually looks like agreeing to things in the beginning and not being able to keep up the pace as time goes on. Then, ultimately, you underdeliver on your promises. If you are shifting the way you're able to show up, verbalize what's causing the change. Be clear, such as saying something like "I won't be able to text frequently during the workday anymore because I have a new boss, and I want to make a good impression."

Boundary issues also come from putting way too many unspoken expectations on the other person. When it comes to love, for some reason we all want our partner to read our minds and know everything we want without having to ask. But this is an impossible expectation!

Being honest and up front (from the beginning, if possible) about what you expect and what you can offer will save you and your partner lots of heartache and arguments. In a long-term relationship, you'll have to set boundaries as each of you grows and the relationship evolves. This is especially true during transitions like moving in together, getting married, and having children. The good news is that whether expressed in the

beginning or after years of being together, boundaries can connect the two of you in a new way and create space for open and assertive communication. We'll get to romance in Chapter 11.

Friendships

Toxic friendships—we've all had them. One day you look around and think, "Why am I even friends with this person? They consistently ____." (Fill in the blank: "let me down," "demand too much from me," "make me feel guilty," "flake on plans," and on and on.) Unhealthy friendships happen as a result of unhealthy boundaries. Friendships where you feel like you're giving more than you're receiving are harmful. Interactions with friends that often end in arguments are harmful.

Friends are your chosen family, and these relationships should bring ease, comfort, support, and fun to your life—not excess drama. In Chapter 12, I'll define a healthy versus an unhealthy friendship and take a look at what's holding you back from having healthy friendships. We'll also explore how to change or navigate out of a toxic friendship.

Technology

Adults and teenagers are reporting higher levels of anxiety and depression due to a fear of missing out (FOMO) and comparison games that arise from social media consumption. Infidelity is on the rise due to inappropriate usage of apps and social media. Technology brings new interpersonal challenges to the human experience—and it isn't going anywhere.

Technology will continue to advance at a rapid rate, so it's necessary to have limits in place to help you protect your happiness and relationships in the face of this pace. You need to determine how you will expand your boundaries to include technology in your life. Setting limits with devices is crucial within relationships and the family system, especially when it comes to children. In Chapter 14, we'll look further into technology boundaries.

Kim's issues were with saying no, but there are so many other ways that boundaries can help us.

Exercise

Grab your journal or a separate sheet of paper to complete the following exercise.

- Think of a time when someone said no to you. How did you react? Could you have reacted in a healthier way?
- Think of a time when you wanted to say no but didn't. How could you have expressed the boundary?
- How do you think people in your life will respond to your boundaries? Is this based on fact or your own assumptions? What about your past makes you think this?
- Where are you in need of boundaries right now? List three places or relationships where you would like to set a new one.

For more insight, take the Self-Assessment Quiz on this page to determine whether your boundaries are porous, rigid, or healthy.

4

The Six Types of Boundaries

It is necessary, and even vital, to set standards, for your life and the people you allow in it.
—Mandy Hale

Alex was known as “the needy one.” Within ten minutes of meeting her, she would tell you her life story. She’d invite you into her life, and she expected you to do the same. When people didn’t reciprocate, she thought it meant there was something wrong with them. In her attempt to connect, she quickly attached herself to others.

Eventually, a close friend told Alex that she needed space from their friendship, and another friend confirmed that Alex was an “over-sharer” and “needy.” That’s when Alex came to me looking for answers.

In addition to answering the written questions I always ask at the initial appointment, Alex wrote a few extra points about herself. Then she spoke fast as she tried to rush through all the details of her life. At the end of our session, I asked, “Why did you give me additional notes outside the questions I asked?”

“I wanted you to know all about me,” she said.

Over the next few sessions, I learned that Alex believed the key to connection was knowing *everything* about someone. Nevertheless, she discussed events and details without much depth or reflection about her feelings. Over time, I found out why.

“My dad told me everything,” she said after a few sessions. He even told Alex the details of her mother’s affair. His model was “We don’t keep secrets.” Yet when Alex tried to share with her father, he immediately told her how to think instead of allowing her to talk.

She consistently asked him for input on her decisions because she didn't trust herself to make the "right" choices without his opinion. But he tended to be critical and dismissive of her feelings.

Alex's friends were overwhelmed by her constant need for connection and feedback about her life. Slowly, they began distancing themselves. Alex had no clue that she was violating other people's boundaries. To her, relationships meant closeness, and to be close, you had to talk often, disclose everything, and rely on others for validation. Although this was normal in her relationship with her parents, it didn't work long-term with her peers.

So our work together consisted of helping Alex identify her feelings, allow herself to make mistakes, and improve her self-esteem about her ability to make healthy decisions for herself. She had to learn how to relay the details of her life appropriately and at a reasonable pace.

In this chapter, we'll talk about the six areas of boundaries: physical, sexual, intellectual, emotional, material, and time.

Physical Boundaries

Personal space and physical touch are your physical boundaries. Your physical space is the perimeter around your body. We all have a certain level of awareness of our bodies and what feels comfortable to us, and everyone's needs in terms of physical space are different. People also have different views as to what physical touch is appropriate. These boundaries vary due to the setting, the relationship we have with the other person, and our comfort level. But we can tell people our preferences about personal space and physical touch.

Examples of Physical Boundary Violations

- Physical abuse
- Forcing hugs, kisses, or handshakes
- Standing too close
- Holding someone's hand in public when they've made it clear they're uncomfortable with public displays of affection
- Touching someone on their body in a way they deem inappropriate
- Reading someone's journal or another form of invasion of privacy

Setting a physical boundary sounds like this:

"I'm more of a handshaker; I don't want to hug."
"Please move back a little."
"I'm not comfortable with public displays of affection/PDAs. I'd prefer it if we saved this until we got home."
"I've asked you not to rub my back. It makes me feel uncomfortable."
"These are my private writings. Please don't look at them, because it's a violation of my privacy."

Here are a few ways to honor your physical boundaries:

1. Verbalize your need for physical distance to others.
2. Be clear with others about your discomfort with certain types of physical touch, such as hugging.

Bear in mind, however, that your boundaries are constantly changing. As your needs in life change, your expectations in your relationships will shift as well. So if you experience discomfort after an interaction with someone, it might be a sign that you need to set a physical limit. Let's say you've allowed someone you know to hug you in the past, but you suddenly find yourself feeling uncomfortable when hugged by this person. You have every right to tell them you no longer want to hug.

Sexual Boundaries

It's never okay to touch anyone's body without consent, and children can never consent to sexual acts. Touching, making sexual comments, or engaging in sexual acts without expressed consent is a violation of sexual boundaries. It's never acceptable for children to be placed in any sexual situation, even a sexual discussion in their presence. Since children can't communicate sexual limits, adults must adhere to appropriate behavior with children.

Unlike other boundaries that need to be spoken to be understood, many sexual ones are unspoken because they are the rules of society. These include rape, assault, and molestation.

Examples of Sexual Boundary Violations

- Sexual abuse, assault, or molestation

- Comments about someone's sexual appearance
- Touching in a sexually suggestive manner
- Sexual innuendos
- Sexual jokes

Setting a sexual boundary sounds like this:

"Your comments about my appearance make me feel uncomfortable."
"I'm not interested in a sexual relationship with you."
"Move your hand off my leg."
"Stop."
"Your comment isn't funny; it's sexually inappropriate."

Here are a few ways to honor your sexual boundaries:

1. Report sexual misconduct that you experienced or witnessed.
2. Don't make excuses for poor conduct.

Intellectual Boundaries

Intellectual boundaries refer to your thoughts and ideas. You're free to have an opinion about anything you want. And when you express your opinion, your words shouldn't be dismissed, belittled, or ridiculed.

However, staying mindful of what topics are appropriate versus inappropriate in a specific situation is another way of respecting intellectual boundaries. When Alex was young, her father told her that her mother had an affair. Although the information was truthful, it wasn't appropriate for Alex to know this at a young age. When a parent has an inappropriate conversation like this with a child, it's an intellectual boundary violation.

Examples of Intellectual Boundary Violations

- Calling someone names for their beliefs or opinions
- Yelling during disagreements
- Ridiculing someone for their views and thoughts
- Dismissing someone because of disagreements
- Demeaning a child's mother/father in front of a child
- Telling children about problems they aren't emotionally capable of handling

Setting an intellectual boundary sounds like this:

"You can disagree without being mean or rude."
"I don't think this is an appropriate conversation to have with a child."
"I won't talk to you if you keep raising your voice."
"That was a mean joke; I'm offended."
"I just said something, and you dismissed me. Why?"

Here are a few ways to honor your intellectual boundaries:

1. If you're a parent, refrain from discussing adult matters with your kids.
2. Be respectful of people who are different from you.

Emotional Boundaries

When you share your feelings, it's reasonable to expect others to support you. For some of us, however, expressing emotions isn't easy. So when someone belittles your emotions or invalidates your feelings, they are violating your emotional boundaries. This can make you feel uncomfortable the next time you want to express your emotions.

Alex tried to tell her father how she felt, but he repeatedly dismissed her or told her how to feel. Eventually, she stopped sharing with him at all and began to distrust her own emotions. She wondered, "Is it right to feel sad about this?" Seeking validation, she asked her friends if what she felt was okay. Because her emotional boundaries had been violated, Alex was handicapped by the opinions of others. She didn't trust herself without feedback from other people.

With healthy emotional boundaries, you express your feelings and personal information to others gradually, not all at once. This also means you share only when it's appropriate, and you choose your confidants carefully. In an Instagram poll, I asked, "Have you ever shared a friend's secret with someone else?" Seventy-two percent said, "Yes, I've shared a secret." I received several DMs explaining why the secrets were shared. Here are a few reasons:

1. The secret was too burdensome.
2. There was a safety concern.

3. “I can’t keep a secret.”
4. “I tell my partner everything.”

Examples of Emotional Boundary Violations

- Sharing too much too soon (oversharing)
- Sharing inappropriate emotional information with children
- Emotional dumping/excessive venting
- Pushing someone to share information they aren’t comfortable sharing
- Invalidating someone’s feelings
- Telling people how to feel, such as “You shouldn’t be sad about that”
- Minimizing the impact of something, such as “That wasn’t a big deal”
- Pushing people to move past complicated feelings swiftly
- Gossiping about the personal details of another person’s life

Setting an emotional boundary sounds like this:

“When I share things with you, I expect you to keep them confidential.”

“I feel uncomfortable sharing my feelings. I would feel better if you acknowledged what I’m saying with a nod.”

“I hear that you have a lot of things going on. I don’t feel equipped to help you. Have you considered talking to a therapist?”

“I don’t feel comfortable talking about that topic.”

“It isn’t okay for you to tell me how I should feel. My feelings are valid.”

“I will take my time processing my feelings. Don’t rush me to move on.”

“It’s okay for me to feel how I feel in any situation.”

Here are a few ways to honor your emotional boundaries:

1. Ask people if they want you to just listen, or if they’re looking for feedback. This will help you determine whether or not to offer suggestions.
2. Share only with people you trust who can indeed hold space for your emotions.

Material Boundaries

Material boundaries have to do with your possessions. Your stuff is your stuff. If you decide to share your stuff, it's your choice. You also have the right to determine how others treat your possessions. If you loan a friend a tool in good condition, it's appropriate to expect the tool to be returned in the same shape. When people give you something back in worse condition, they've violated your material boundaries.

Examples of Material Boundary Violations

- Using things longer than the agreed-on time frame
- Never returning a borrowed item
- Loaning borrowed items to others without permission
- Damaging a possession and refusing to pay for it
- Returning possessions in poor condition

Setting a material boundary sounds like this:

"I will loan you money, but I expect the full amount back by Friday."
"I can't loan you my car this weekend."
"Be sure to return my tool in good condition."
"I can't loan you any money."
"You can borrow my suit, but if you stain it, you'll have to pay for dry cleaning."

Here are a few ways to honor your material boundaries:

1. Do not loan things to people who've demonstrated that they will not respect your possessions.
2. Share your expectations for your possessions up front.

Time Boundaries

In my experience, of the six areas listed, time is the boundary area that people tend to struggle with the most. Time boundaries consist of how you manage your time, how you allow others to use your time, how you deal with favor requests, and how you structure your free time. People with these issues struggle with work-life balance, self-care, and prioritizing their needs. Giving up your time to others is one significant way that you might

violate your time boundaries. If you don’t have time for something that you want to do, you don’t have healthy boundaries with time.

Examples of How We Violate Time Boundaries and How They Are Violated by Others

- Calling multiple times in a row for non-emergencies
- Expecting someone to drop everything in order to provide help
- Calling or sending text messages late when the recipient is sleeping
- Asking others to do things for free
- Overcommitting
- Having long conversations with emotionally draining people
- Requesting favors at a time when it’s clear the other person isn’t available
- Asking someone to stay late at work for no additional pay
- Accepting favor requests from people who won’t reciprocate

Setting a time boundary sounds like this:

“I’m unable to stay late today.”

“I work from nine o’clock to five o’clock, so I’m not available to chat throughout the day.”

“I can’t help you this weekend.”

“I can help you with your taxes, but my fee is seventy-five dollars.”

“I won’t be able to make it to your event on Tuesday.”

Here are a few ways to honor your time boundaries:

1. Before you say yes to a request, check your calendar to make sure you’re not overcommitting. Don’t try to squeeze in another event or task, or you’ll be upset about doing so.
2. When you’re busy, allow calls to go to voicemail and texts or emails to go unread until it’s convenient for you to respond.

Exercise

Grab your journal or a separate sheet of paper to complete the following exercise.

When boundaries are violated, it's critical to have a conversation about what happened and how you felt about it. Because we can't control others, we must focus on what we will say or what actions we can take if the violation is repeated. Below you will find examples of each type of boundary. Read the scenario and consider what you would do or say for each.

Physical boundary example:
Your coworker enters your cubicle while you're busy completing a task. When you don't respond, your coworker persists by leaning over you at your desk.

Consider what you would do or say to set a boundary in this scenario.

Sexual boundary example:
Your friend's husband makes comments about his sexual prowess. He then begins texting you provocative innuendos, which makes you feel uncomfortable.

Consider what you would do or say to set a boundary in this scenario.

Intellectual boundary example:
You just ended a ten-year-long friendship. You're sharing your sadness about it with your partner, who says, "You have other friends. Get over it."

Consider what you would do or say to set a boundary in this scenario.

Emotional boundary example:
You tell your friend a secret, and your friend shares it with one of her friends.

Consider what you would do or say to set a boundary in this scenario.

Material boundary example: A friend asks to borrow your shirt. The last time you loaned them a shirt, they returned it with a hole in it.

Consider what you would do or say to set a boundary in this scenario.

Time boundary example:

You’re under a critical deadline at work. One of your team members asks you for help on one of their projects.

Consider what you would do or say to set a boundary in this scenario.