

# Setting Boundaries with Difficult People

“Good fences make good neighbors”-Robert Frost

## Boundaries Defined

What exactly is a boundary, when it comes to relationships? Simply put, a boundary is a limit or space between you and the other person; a clear place where you begin and the other person ends. Think of it as a fence in your backyard. You are the gate keeper and get to decide who you let in and who you keep out, who you let into the whole back yard, or who you let just inside the gate. You may still be keeping a distance, but you are giving them a chance to prove their trustworthiness both physically and emotionally. The purpose of setting a healthy boundary is, of course, to protect and take good care of you.

Healthy boundaries do not always come naturally or easily. We learn to “be” in all kinds of relationships by modeling. In other words, by watching how others handle relationships. In early childhood, it is our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, babysitters, and whoever else we were around on a regular basis. As we grow into adolescents, we rely less on parents and more on our friends to help us define ourselves and our boundaries or limits in relationships. If you grew up in a dysfunctional family, then chances are you have not learned how to set a boundary or even really know what it is. Learning to set our own healthy boundaries is an exercise in personal freedom. It means getting to know ourselves and increasing our awareness of where we stand and what we stand for. It means letting go of the unhealthy people in our lives so that we can grow into the healthy person that we were meant to be.

## Poor Boundaries Defined

How do you know whether or not you are in an unhealthy relationship? Chances are, if you are in a dysfunctional relationship it will feel “normal” or even “comfortable” to you, if you grew up in a dysfunctional home. You may not recognize the signs, until you are well on your way to giving up your entire self for the other person. Below is a list of some of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy boundaries.

Healthy	Unhealthy
Feeling like your own person	Feeling incomplete without your partner
Feeling responsible for your own happiness	Relying on your partner for your happiness
Togetherness and separateness are balanced	Too much or too little togetherness
Friendships exist outside of the relationship	Inability to establish and maintain friendships with others
Focuses on the best qualities of both people	Focuses on the worst qualities of the partners
Achieving intimacy without chemicals	Using alcohol/drugs to reduce inhibitions and achieve a false sense of intimacy
Open, honest and assertive communication	Game-playing, unwillingness to listen, manipulation
Commitment to the partner	Jealousy, relationship addiction or lack of commitment

Respecting the differences in the partner	Blaming the partner for his or her own unique qualities
Accepting changes in the relationship	Feeling that the relationship should always be the same
Asking honestly for what is wanted	Feeling unable to express what is wanted
Accepting endings	Unable to let go

*Identifying where we lack boundaries is half the battle, for we cannot change what we do not recognize.*

## Setting Boundaries

To set boundaries, first we need to learn to communicate without blaming. In other words, stop saying things like: you make me so angry; you hurt me; you make me crazy; how could you do that to me after all I have done for you; etc. These are the very types of messages we got in childhood that have so warped our perspective on our own emotional process. Instead use “I statements”: “I feel frustrated/angry when you \_\_\_\_\_ or when xyz happens”.

Along with good communication, is honesty. Learn to say how you feel. Beating around the bush will not help you or your relationship in the long run.

It is impossible to set boundaries without setting consequences. If you are setting boundaries in a relationship, and you are not yet at a point where you are ready to leave the relationship then don't say that you will leave. Never state something that you are not willing to follow through with. To set boundaries and not enforce them just gives the other person an excuse to continue in the same old behavior. For example: “If you call me names I will confront you about your behavior each and every time and will share my feelings with you. I will not tolerate verbal abuse. If you continue this behavior, I will weigh my options, including leaving this relationship. I do not deserve this and I will not put up with it any longer”.

“If you continue to break your plans with me by not showing up or calling me at the last minute to cancel, I will confront you about this behavior and share my feelings. If this behavior continues, I will consider it to mean that you do not respect me or this relationship and I will have no contact with you for a month, until we can both evaluate and figure out our priorities. If I chose to get back in touch with you, and the behavior continues, we will no longer be in any type of relationship together”.

“When I ask you what is wrong, and you say “nothing”, but then proceed to slam doors or kick the wall, and seem to be angry, I feel angry or frustrated that you refuse to communicate properly with me as if I am supposed to read your mind. If something is bothering you, I will trust you to let me know after you have spent some time cooling off alone. If you continue to punish me with your silence or fits, I will tell you how it makes me feel. If this behavior continues, I will weigh my options for this relationship. I do not deserve this type of behavior and will not put up with it any longer”.

Setting boundaries is not about making threats. It is about giving them choices and then consequences for the poor decisions they make, much like we do with our parenting skills. We cannot be in a healthy relationship without appropriate boundaries.

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