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Setting boundaries

Learn how to say 'no' when you need to

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Are your feelings hurt a lot? Do other people take advantage of you all the time? Does it feel like you're working constantly? Do you regularly have conflict with the people in your life?

If you answered "yes" to these questions, the problem might be that you don't establish healthy boundaries, which can lead to turmoil in your relationships and leave you feeling emotionally drained.

JUST WHAT ARE BOUNDARIES, ANYWAY?

Everyone talks about having boundaries, but what are they? According to psychologists, boundaries act as a security system that we put around our body, our mind and our heart. When we're

using them the way we should, boundaries can protect us from being hurt—physically or emotionally—because they help us stand up for ourselves when others step over the line of our comfort zone.

The consequences of poor boundaries ...

...IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. In romantic situations, having poor boundaries can make you feel like you need to take the relationship further and faster than you want

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it to go—emotionally or sexually. Also, poor romantic boundaries can make you vulnerable to the kind of people that healthy limits can protect you from. “Setting boundaries that are clear and consistent helps to ward off people who want to manipulate or violate others,” said Humphries. “Clear communication tells such a person that they will have a difficult time taking advantage of you.”

...IN THE WORKPLACE. If you’re overworked already, the last thing you want is to be bogged down with even more responsibilities. But if you don’t maintain healthy boundaries, you won’t be able to say “no” when your boss or your coworkers ask for more of your time. “Everyone needs to be able to say ‘no’ to an employer—whether it is in regard to being overworked or being asked to do something that is inappropriate or unethical,” said Tallahassee-based counselor Angela Turner. “If you are overwhelmed by all you have to do, you may end up doing a lot of things with mediocrity, rather than a few well-chosen projects done well. Having the security of knowing that you can say ‘no’ on the job gives us a sense of security in knowing that our employers prefer a job well done.”

...FOR YOUR HEALTH. Having bad boundaries can lead to low self-esteem, and can reduce the quality of life and happiness that you experience. In many cases, says local family therapist Stacy Stoddard, low self-esteem can be linked to depression. “Most people who struggle with depression also have pretty poor boundaries because people who are depressed internalize a lot,” she says. “They say a lot of negative things to themselves, and they’re saying those negative things because they’re not able to push back what people say to them.”

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“Boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that establish who we are as a person,” says Linda Humphries, a Tallahassee therapist and counselor. “Our boundaries tell us the difference between our feelings and someone else’s feelings, our problems and someone else’s problems, our responsibilities and someone else’s responsibilities.”

“Our boundaries as individuals are about our bodies, our minds, our spirit, our possessions and our rights. They define the limits we need to set in our lives to protect what is most important to us, and identify reasonable and safe ways for other people to behave around us.”

But boundaries can only keep us safe if they’re appropriate. If your boundaries are too weak, you may have trouble setting limits and allow others to dump their problems and emotions on you—which you may soak up like a sponge. If your boundaries are too rigid, you may have difficulty connecting with other people. This can lead to loneliness and feeling isolated from others.

HOW TO DEVELOP BETTER BOUNDARIES

Although healthy boundaries are generally developed in our formative years, it’s never too late to learn how to create better boundaries. The following tips can help you do this, which will ultimately lead to healthier relationships.

BE CLEAR. Before you can set clear boundaries with others, you have to be in touch with your emotions enough to know what they are. After scanning your feelings for what makes you uncomfortable, you should clearly let other people know what your boundaries are—and stick to them during challenging situations.

TAKE FIVE. Do you have trouble saying no?

When you’re asked to do something, take five minutes to consider the request. This will give you the opportunity to scan your feelings about a favor and decide if it is in line with your comfort zone.

BUILD A BUBBLE. People who have healthy boundaries know who they are and don’t internalize the negative things that people say to them. If you need help with this, try imagining a huge bubble around your body when someone insults you. Instead of taking in their words, allow them to bounce off of your protective bubble and disappear.

ASK FOR HELP. If you know someone who has the type of boundaries that you’re working toward, get some advice from them

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about how they deal with others. Also, a therapist can help you identify where your weaknesses are and give you tips on how to set healthier limits.

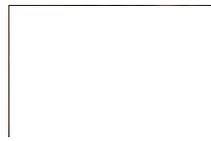
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