

Boundaries - Protection for Heart, Mind and Soul

I have yet to meet somebody who says to me "My parents taught me how to take care of myself and get my needs met. I know how to say no when I really mean it and how to stop people from hurting me in any way. I know how to honor myself!" If you are able to say that, you are very fortunate and definitely in the minority.

What I usually hear is people telling me they don't know how to stand for themselves or get the things they need from others. In fact, most often people don't even appreciate that they have the right to say, "NO!", or "You can't treat me that way!" It's a sad commentary that we pay more attention to the needs of others than to making sure we have what we need ourselves.

There is hope, though. It's never too late to learn skills for protecting your heart, mind and soul. While a simple concept, it's not easy to make the changes in your life to make the difference. I'm talking about boundaries - those invisible lines we draw around ourselves to protect us from the harmful behaviors and actions of other people. Boundaries are not walls. Rather, they are filters that allow in supportive and nurturing behaviors while keeping out the rest. ...and we all have boundaries, whether we recognize them or not.

It is critical to understand that without strong boundaries you miss the opportunity for a healthy, productive and growth oriented life. Boundaries, strong or weak, impact you all the time, with or without your knowledge. If you don't take care of yourself first and foremost, you lose your edge and the ability to be really good for anybody else.

You draw your personal strength from within. You are strongest when your needs are met. Getting your needs met means you stand for yourself, speak your truth and ask for support. You take care of yourself best after you've let go of the belief that other people's wants and needs are more important than yours. (We use "healthy selfish" to describe putting yourself first, always, in a healthy way.)

Boundaries are a new concept to many. The realization that you have boundaries at all is sometimes a revelation. A participant in one of our workshops on boundaries had a breakthrough when she realized that it wasn't that she didn't have any boundaries. Her issues were more about not knowing how to stand for herself and assert her boundaries. This is a very common response.

So where do you begin? How do you become stronger and take better care of yourself? First, identify the specific behavior that another person is doing that feels like a personal violation. Second, tell them to stop!

Also it is important to be aware that as you make changes in your life, all the relationships you are in will change. Some people will leave your life and others will honor and respect your growth. Either way, what is most important is to keep your focus on how best to take care of YOU and your needs.

This means, in the beginning, you start identifying specific behaviors of others. This allows you to target exactly what people do around you that upsets you, ie smoking, drinking, using foul language or biting nails. You know it's an upset by how you react to the behavior. For example, when off-color jokes are shared in my presence, I feel very uncomfortable. For me it's a very visceral reaction. That response tells me there is a boundary violation happening.

I identify the specific behavior as "telling off-color jokes". This is a behavior I want stopped in my personal space. In boundaries language, I'd say, "It's not okay for me when people tell off-color jokes in my presence." Key for this process is to be sure the message is about what's okay or not okay for you. Keeping the message about you prevents the other person from reacting to your words. You aren't pointing fingers, blaming or making them wrong. You are stating a fact that's true for you - a specific behavior that doesn't work for you.

Establishing strong boundaries and standing for yourself is a process. It takes time, energy and commitment. Start a list and carry it with you. Whenever anybody behaves in a way that feels like a violation of your personal space, write that behavior on your list. Be specific and use the languaging, "It's not okay for me when....." The purpose here is to become very focussed on what you are allowing to occur around you that drains your energy and causes you upset.

Next month, I'll share how to stand for yourself and establish strong boundaries using language that does not alienate others. For now, begin the process with a new awareness of your life. Imagine your life when all your relationships are supportive, loving and nurturing. It is possible!

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Extreme Self Care Begins With Strong Boundaries

Boundaries. Those invisible lines we draw around ourselves to protect us from damaging behaviors of others. The challenge is establishing and extending them in a way that they provide protection to you - your heart, mind and soul.

Last month, I shared with you how to identify the behaviors of others that were somehow damaging to you - violations of your boundaries. I asked you to keep a list of those behaviors. This may have been a difficult process for you, especially if you're not in the habit of taking care of your own needs, standing for yourself and saying "No" to what doesn't work for you. It is, however, the first step in establishing strong boundaries that protect you!

This month my intent is to give you the rest of the process for taking care of yourself - the plan for what to do when your boundaries are violated. When this happens you will need to respond to the violation in some way. You will have to take some action that requires you to say something, do something or leave the situation.

I will use one of my own boundaries as an example, "It's not okay for me when people don't show up on time for appointments." (Remember, from last month's article, that it's important to make it clear that the undesirable behavior is about what's not okay for you.) I identify this as a boundary violation since I feel taken advantage of and disrespected when it happens.

Identifying the boundary is, perhaps, the easiest part of this process. The next part is letting people in your life know when they're violating your boundary. Ultimately, the goal is to have them change their behavior when around you.

We teach our clients six responses they can use to establish and extend boundaries. I will explain each of the responses and provide an example using my own boundary of being on time.

Inform. This response allows you to make somebody aware of their specific behavior that's violating you in some way. Often, we do things out of habit and are not consciously aware of what we're doing. This is a soft way to change that awareness. *"Do you know that when you're late for our appointments, I feel like you don't respect me?"*

Request. This response allows you to let somebody else know what it is you want from them. We make assumptions that others know what we want and, if we've not told them specifically, our assumptions are probably incorrect. *"I ask that you arrive for our appointments on time."*

Instruct. This response allows you to tell another person what you need from them. People don't automatically know what new behavior you're asking for unless you tell them. *"What I need from you instead is to respect me by arriving on time for our appointments."*

These first three responses are soft, kind and gentle ways to begin establishing boundaries. They are the responses of choice because they minimize the possibility of alienating your listener. The last three responses are much stronger. They are the ways most of us have learned to take care of ourselves.

Warn. This response is harsher and requires you to be more firm in your message. Sometimes it's necessary to imply there's a consequence attached to an undesirable behavior. *"You may never treat me disrespectfully by being late for appointments!"*

Attack. This response is not so much a personal attack as it is an offensive statement by you about your boundaries being violated. It demands attention where you've gotten none before. *"I demand that you arrive on time for our appointments out of respect for my time!"*

Leave. This is the final choice in responses and sometimes may be the only alternative that allows you really to protect your heart, mind and soul. Even in its severity, you can use this response in a loving way to take yourself out of a situation. *"It's really not okay for me that you are late for our appointments and treat me with disrespect. I'm open to discussing this with you at a later time if you are interested in continuing our meetings. However, I'm leaving now."*

There is no magic in the response you choose to use or in the order you use them. For most of us, our way of handling boundary violations is to let people treat us, and do to us, anything they want. We bury our feelings of being violated and the behaviors are repeated over and over again. Finally we explode and either attack or walk away. Now you have more choices.

It is absolutely okay, even necessary for your well-being, to speak your truth, especially when it involves protecting yourself. Forget what you learned as a child; to be nice, always smile, share your toys, put other's feelings first, and all the other damaging lessons. Start standing for yourself and establishing your boundaries NOW.

Begin establishing your boundaries regardless of the consequences. Treat yourself well by respecting your own boundaries (and making others do so). Great change will occur in your life and you will notice differences in the way people respond to you.

Be aware, also, that this is a new way of behaving for you. Change doesn't happen quickly - give yourself plenty of time and space to learn how to stand for yourself and have your boundaries honored. It is a journey that is made up of many little steps.

Bear in mind that as you are learning to stand for yourself you are also teaching others in your life how you expect them to behave around you. They may not be willing students. Be persistent, consistent and relentless in helping

them to understand what you are asking of them.

It helps a great deal to share with the people you love the path that you are on. People who really care about you will support your efforts and help you. Others will drop out of your life. It's okay and a natural part of this process. At the end of the journey, when you've learned to establish and extend your boundaries, you will be surrounded by caring and loving people who willingly support you, respect you and honor the boundaries you've put in place. It's never too late to begin! Imagine the possibilities!