

# Setting Healthy Boundaries

**Healthy boundaries create healthy relationships.** Unhealthy boundaries create dysfunctional ones. By establishing clear boundaries, we define ourselves in relation to others. To do this, however, we must be able to identify and respect our needs, feelings, opinions, and rights. Otherwise our efforts would be like putting a fence around a yard without knowing the property lines.

**Those of us raised in dysfunctional families** have probably had little experience with healthy boundaries. Therefore, learning how to establish them must be an important goal in our personal growth. In order to achieve this, however, we must overcome low self-esteem and passivity; learn to identify and respect our rights and needs; and become skilled at assertively taking care of ourselves in relationships. This process allows our true selves to emerge, and healthy boundaries become the fences that keep us safe - something we may never have experienced in childhood.

**Boundaries can be physical or emotional.** Physical boundaries define who can touch us, how someone can touch us, and how physically close another may approach us. Emotional boundaries define where our feelings end and another's begins. For example, do we take responsibility for our feelings and needs, and allow others to do the same? Or do we feel overly responsible for the feelings and needs of others and neglect our own? Are we able to say "no"? Can we ask for what we need? Are we compulsive people pleasers? Do we become upset simply because others are upset around us? Do we mimic the opinions of whomever we are around? The answers to these questions help define the "property lines" of our emotional boundaries.

Together, our physical and emotional boundaries define how we interact with others, and how we allow others to interact with us. Without boundaries, others could touch us in any way they wanted, do whatever they wished with our possessions, and treat us in any way they desired. In addition, we would believe everyone else's bad behaviors are our fault, take on everyone's else's problems as our own, and feel like we have no right to any rights. In short, our lives would be chaotic and out of our control.

**Boundaries can be too rigid or too loose.** Those whose boundaries are too rigid literally shut out everyone from their lives. They appear aloof and distant, and do not talk about feelings or show emotions. They exhibit extreme self-sufficiency, and do not ask for help. They do not allow anyone to get physically or emotionally close to them. It is as if they live in a house surrounded by an immense wall with no gates. No one is allowed in.

**Those whose boundaries are too loose** put their hands on strangers and let others touch them inappropriately. They may be sexually promiscuous, confuse sex and love, be driven to be in a sexual relationship, and get too close to others too fast. They may take on the feelings of others as their own, easily become emotionally overwhelmed, give too much, take too much, and be in constant need of reassurance. They may expect others to read their minds, think they can read the minds of others, say "yes" when they want to say "no," and feel responsible for the feelings of others. Those with loose boundaries often lead chaotic lives, full of drama, as if they lived in houses with no fences, gates, locks, or even doors.

**Those with healthy boundaries are firm but flexible.** They give support and accept it. They respect their feelings, needs, opinions, and rights, and those of others, but are clear about their separateness. They are responsible for their own happiness and allow others to be responsible for their happiness. They are assertive and respectful of the rights of others to be assertive. They are able to negotiate and compromise, have empathy for others, are able to make mistakes without damaging their self-esteem, and have an internal sense of personal identity. They respect diversity. Those with healthy boundaries are comfortable with themselves, and make others comfortable around them. They live in houses with fences and gates that allow access only to those who respect their boundaries.

**Learning to set healthy boundaries can feel uncomfortable**, even scary, because it may go against the grain of the survival skills we learned in childhood - particularly if our caretakers were physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive. For example, we may have learned to repress our anger or other painful emotions because we would have been attacked and blamed for expressing the very pain the abuse had caused. Thus, attempting to set healthy boundaries as an adult may initially be accompanied by anxiety, but we must learn to work through these conditioned fears, or we will never have healthy relationships. But this process of growth takes time, and our motto should always be, "*Progress not perfection.*"

**Here are some tips for setting healthy boundaries**, modified from the book, *Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin*, by Anne Katherine:

- When you identify the need to set a boundary, do it clearly, preferably without anger, and in as few words as possible. Do not justify, apologize for, or rationalize the boundary you are setting. Do not argue! Just set the boundary calmly, firmly, clearly, and respectfully.
- You can't set a boundary and take care of someone else's feelings at the same time. You are not responsible for the other person's reaction to the boundary you are setting. You are only responsible for communicating the boundary in a respectful manner. If others get upset with you, that is their problem. If they no longer want your friendship, then you are probably better off without them. You do not need "friends" who disrespect your boundaries.
- At first, you will probably feel selfish, guilty, or embarrassed when you set a boundary. Do it anyway, and tell yourself you have a right to take care of yourself. Setting boundaries takes practice and determination. Don't let anxiety or low self-esteem prevent you from taking care of yourself.
- When you feel anger or resentment, or find yourself whining or complaining, you probably need to set a boundary. Listen to yourself, then determine what you need to do or say. Then communicate your boundary assertively. When you are confident you can set healthy boundaries with others, you will have less need to put up walls.
- When you set boundaries, you might be tested, especially by those accustomed to controlling you, abusing you, or manipulating you. Plan on it, expect it, but be firm. Remember, your behavior must match the boundaries you are setting. You can not establish a clear boundary successfully if you send a mixed message by apologizing for doing so. Be firm, clear, and respectful.
- Most people are willing to respect your boundaries, but some are not. Be prepared to be firm about your boundaries when they are not being respected. If necessary, put up a wall by ending the relationship. In extreme cases, you might have to involve the police or judicial system by sending a no-contact letter or obtaining a restraining order.
- Learning to set healthy boundaries takes time. It is a process. You will set boundaries when you are ready. It's your growth in your own time frame, not what someone else tells you. Let your counselor or support group help you with pace and process.
- Develop a support system of people who respect your right to set boundaries. Eliminate toxic persons from your life - those who want to manipulate you, abuse you, and control you.
- Setting healthy boundaries allows your true self to emerge – and what an exciting journey that is.