How to Establish Boundaries

**Step 1: Reflecting on Our Boundaries**

Use the following reflections/activities to reflect on what boundaries you need to set in your life to be well. Prior to doing this reflection, using grounding strategies if needed to make sure you are present in your body.

- Make a list of the people you interact with in your life. Notice how you feel in your body when you read each name and reflect on each of the following questions.
  - When I spend time with the people in my life, how does it make me feel? Do I gain knowledge, support, and care or do I gain hurt and a headache? Am I energized or drained? Why do I spend time with the people that I do?
  - What things have people said and done that makes you feel drained emotionally?
  - When the people in your life invite you somewhere, how does the invitation make you feel? Elated? Joyful? Heavy? Hopeless? Why?
  - When the people in your life call you, do you pick up the phone with a smile, do you sigh and roll your eyes, or do you take a deep breath? What do my reactions mean?
  - Do I have any relationships in my life that are established on a foundation of “I’ll tolerate this a little longer?” If I am tolerating the relationship, why is that?
  - Do the people in my life make or use derogatory, discriminatory, harmful, and/or hateful comments language? How do I feel when they do and what is my usual reaction? If I ignore it or pretend to accept it (e.g. laughing at a joke you view as hurtful), do I understand how my silence has perpetuated a cycle?

- Create a boundary chart. Take a piece of paper and draw a line through the centre horizontally and vertically to create 4 quadrants. In each quadrant, write the name of a different category of people that you interact with in your life (e.g. friends, family, parents, siblings, coworkers, partners, volunteer community, parent community, athletic community, arts community, white people, able-bodied people, heterosexual people, cisgender people, the top 1% socioeconomically, etc.). Use phrases like “when these people do this, it makes me feel …” Make a list of what you will not tolerate from this person/group.

- Create a willing and able chart. Reflect on what people or groups you have the most boundary issues with. Choose 1. Take a piece of paper and draw a line through the centre horizontally and vertically to create 4 quadrants. Add one of these 4 titles to each quadrant – willing and able, willing and not able, not willing and able, not willing and not able. Make a list in each category.

- Reflect on your insecurities and fears that might be causing you to project those insecurities onto others or refrain from setting boundaries. Make a plan to work through this (e.g. reading, therapeutic writing, courses, webinars, therapy, group therapy, etc.). Carry your own bag!

Adapted from the works of Anne M. Katherine and McKensie Mack
**Step 2: Basic Boundary Setting**

**Boundary mistake** – the other person did not realize a boundary was there and accidentally crossed it; when a boundary is set, they respect it

**Boundary violation** – the person knows the boundary is there and chooses to disregard it intentionally

1. Communicate the boundary – you may start off being polite, but if the person does not respond, you may have to be more direct in your phrasing. *E.g. I don’t like it when people touch my arm please vs. Do not touch my arm.* (see boundary continuum on back of handout). You may, but do not have to, repeat this more than once.
2. If a boundary mistake or violation is made, repeat the boundary, reiterate what you will and will not allow, and explain the consequence of them not respecting the boundary. This is not a threat or ultimatum. It is expressing a truth. *E.g. It’s okay if you stand near me, but I do not want you to touch me. If you continue to touch my arm, I am going to leave.* You may, but do not have to, repeat this more than once.
3. If the boundary continues to be ignored and/or violated and possible and safe to do so, set a physical boundary by exiting the situation.
4. If you’re practicing boundary setting, reflect on how the interaction went.
   a. How did you feel during the interaction?
   b. Was your boundary respected or not?
   c. Did the other person carry their own baggage?
   d. Did I feel like I had to carry the other person’s baggage for them?
   e. Is there any baggage of my own that came up that I need to work through?
   f. Is there something I’d like to do differently next time?
   g. If they did not respect the boundary, is this a person I want in my life? Why?
5. Celebrate the ways in which you held your space.

**Example:**

*Daughter:* Mom, it’s not okay with me that you always make comments about my weight. Please stop.

*Mom:* Honey, it’s my job to make sure you’re healthy! If I can’t comment about your weight, who is going to make sure you’re healthy!

*Daughter:* Mom, I’m an adult. My body and health is my responsibility. I need you to stop commenting about my weight and if you don’t, it’s going to make me not want to spend time with you anymore. I value our relationship and want to feel comfortable coming to visit without feeling self-conscious.

*Depending on how close and safe the relationship is, you may want to share more or less with the other person when explaining the consequence of a boundary violation and why it’s important to you. See continuum on the back.*

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Consequences of Not Establishing Boundaries:

Boundaries are easiest to set early in a relationship and the first time a mistake occurs, but are important to set regardless of how long the relationship has gone on.

When you do not set a boundary when violated, you are teaching yourself that your natural instincts are not valuable and that your body/mind/heart are tools that others get to use. You are also teaching the violator that the behaviour is acceptable. What we refuse to call out in our relationships, we agree to perpetuate. The exception is in abusive circumstances in which you are forced into something unwanted, which is never your fault.

What to do When We Can’t Set a Healthy Boundary in the Moment:

1. Withhold a relational paywall in the moment if one exists. Relational paywalls are reciprocal interactions that are verbal or non-verbal that we use to either extend or withhold mutual understanding and acceptance. Examples:
   - Thanking someone who just held the door for you
   - Shaking someone’s hand when they extend theirs to greet you
   - Laughing at someone’s joke
   - Continuing to listen and respond to a person who is talking to us

   When it is difficult to set a clear boundary in the moment one way that we can still make what is okay with us and what is not okay with us clear and set a mini-boundary is by not engaging in the relational paywall. Examples:

   *If someone in my family makes a hurtful joke in front of me, but I feel too paralyzed by the fear of rejection to speak up in that moment, I can choose not to laugh to disrupt the social norms and make it clear that I did not find the joke funny.*

   *If my partner treats me in a hurtful way but my body and brain are too overwhelmed by intense emotion to speak up for myself, I can choose to walk away to give myself space and as a signal that they way they are threatening me is not okay.*

2. Come back to the conversation and set a boundary after the fact if able (and it’s safe to do so). It’s okay to take time to reflect, especially if you’re feeling overwhelmed or paralyzed in the moment. If you are able to and it’s appropriate, in the moment use a phrase like “I hear what you’re saying and I need some time to think about how I feel about that and how I want to react. Let me get back to you.”

3. Reflect on what is preventing you from boundary setting in the moment. Make a plan to work through your baggage, so that you can be effective at boundary setting and thus, protect your wellbeing over the long-term, especially in relationships you want to maintain. It is okay to let go of some relationships that aren’t healthy and change the nature of current relationships (e.g. create more distance, change roles, etc.). It’s also okay to work towards healthier relationships assuming the person with whom you are in a relationship with is willing to do the work they need to as well.

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Boundary Setting Continuum

Gentle

Factors:
- with someone we know well
- with someone who treats us with care and respect
- when the boundary violation/mistake is very small and not harmful
- when the person respects the boundaries you’ve set

Very direct and assertive

Factors:
- with a stranger
- with someone who does not treat us with respect or care
- when the boundary violation/mistake is harmful and/or serious
- when the person does not respect a boundary you’ve just set

How gentle or direct we are with our boundary depends on factors such as the individual circumstance and who we are setting the boundary with.