

Using Boundaries to Limit an Attack

Adapted from Katherine, A. (2000). Where to draw the line: How to set healthy boundaries every day. New York, NY: Fireside.

When we are in conflict with someone, usually active listening, paraphrasing, and telling them how what they said impacted us before we respond helps to slow the conflict down and reduces the likelihood of the interpersonal gap playing a role in the conflict. However, this is only true if the other party is willing to engage and is not attacking us.

How to tell if you are being attacked:

Example: Alex and Sage live together. Sage is in the living room watching tv when Alex gets home from work.

Alex: What in the hell is going on in there? Are you purposely trying to piss me off again tonight?

Sage: I'm not sure what you're talking about Alex. It sounds like you're angry. What's going on?

Alex: You bet I'm angry! I'm angry that you're in there sitting on your ass turning the tv up so loud that I can't even hear my thoughts when I get home!

Pause: How can we tell that active listening won't work here because Alex is on the attack?

Look at Sage's response. Sage was using active listening and trying to attend to Alex's feelings. Sage was willing to listen to what was going wrong for Alex and support Alex.

Clue that it's an attack: The attacker turns every the focus constantly outside of their/her/himself.

How to set boundaries during an attack:

Example: Continue the dialogue from above.

Sage: Alex, I'm not deliberately trying to anger or annoy you here. If something went wrong for you today, I'm happy to listen, but please stop making accusations.

Alex: Accusations? All I'm saying is the truth and if you can't handle that it's your problems! All you do is try to get me going!

Sage: Either tell me what the real issue is or stop.

Alex: You don't get to control me!

Sage: I'm leaving this space for the moment then.

Pause: What did Sage do?

1. First attempt at asserting a boundary – it is not okay for Alex to make accusations, but Sage is willing to listen if Alex will stop and share the real problem
2. Secondary boundary attempt – more direct and to the point with clear options for Alex
3. Boundaries in the relationship/of communication are not being upheld; Sage sets a physical boundary by leaving

It is NOT OKAY to be treated like this in a relationship. It is clear that Alex just wants to dump his/her/their bad feelings on Sage as opposed to deal with them. Doing so is not healthy for either parties, nor is it a sign of a healthy relationship. The hope is that by setting a boundary the attacker will recognize the boundary (“It’s not okay for you to talk to me like that”) and pivot into a direct expression of their feelings (“I’m sorry, I had a really hard day at work and am feeling really disappointed in myself”). Do this as early in relationships as possible to set a precedence.

If this type of attack continues even though the attacker clearly knows that it is violating your boundaries each time, this is abusive behaviour and it’s best to exit the relationship if possible (and as early in the relationship as possible). This is ideal.

That being said, life is complex and that may not be possible. If you are unable to exit the relationship at this time, you can use this model to prevent yourself from getting wrapped up in an attack. **Remember: Only try asserting a boundary if it is safe to do so. If it is not, set a physical boundary and remove yourself from proximity as soon as possible.**