

Boundaries – What are they? Do I need them? How do I set them?

By James Makischuk

Are you struggling with feeling overwhelmed, resentful, or like you lack control over your life?

A big contributor could be the way you're setting boundaries. Don't worry!! Boundaries are something we all struggle with or have in the past. So, what are they?

According to Nedra Tawwab (MSW, LCSW), boundaries are expectations and needs that help us feel secure in our relationships. She lists six types of boundaries:

Intellectual boundaries - What it's okay to talk about, and the ways that we talk about things.

Emotional boundaries - How much is okay to share and when, addressing your own and others' emotional needs.

Sexual boundaries - Where, when and how conversations about sex occur, consent related to sex or sexually suggestive acts (words, touch, jokes).

Time boundaries - How you use your and others' time, needs or preferences related to time.

Material boundaries - Treatment and lending of belongings, preferences or needs related to physical items.

Physical boundaries - Personal space, touch, privacy.

Boundaries put a healthy barrier up between the end of you and the beginning of other people and the world. It is important to figure out where this line is. We cannot be constantly available, helpful, willing, or able. That would be exhausting!

Have you ever heard of *grind culture*? If not, the mentality is that you need to always be moving towards your goals and operating at 100%. The thing is, this does not set you up for success. This is a recipe for unhealthy relationships – with yourself, with the world, with other people. In our culture, our value often feels equal to how productive we can be – for society, for other people. This makes it difficult to set boundaries, but it's important to do what we can.

You are a human being. This comes with a limited amount of physical and mental energy. This is not a debatable fact. Not only that, but everyone is different! Some

people have more capacity in areas of their life that others have a very low tolerance for, and the opposite. We were all raised in different ways, and our parents or caregivers all taught us differently about what we can expect from other people, boundaries that will be respected or will not, things we are allowed to do, say, talk about or ask for.

Having *weak* or *ineffectively communicated* boundaries might look like:

- Not being able to say “no.”
- Oversharing.
- Feeling burnt out, or constantly over-extended.
- Losing your sense of self.
- Resenting other people.
- Avoiding conversations in case they are taxing.
- Avoiding people in case they need something.

You might frame it to yourself and others as being an “easy-going” or a “go-with-the-flow” type of person. This might feel important to your sense of self or be a large aspect of your personality, but try asking yourself:

Am I *not choosing* because I truly don’t care?

Maybe you learned somewhere along the way that decisions you made wouldn’t have any effect, that your needs do not matter, and will not be met. Maybe having no expectations seems better than experiencing rejection or disappointment. The issue with this is that you might be lacking a sense of self or struggling with feelings of guilt or shame that could be avoided.

We all have preferences. Maybe you’re a person who hasn’t had a lot of options in their life, but *not choosing* is contributing to the problem. A lack of decisions, whether you frame this way of life as *your choice* or not, can lead to feeling helpless. Embracing the chaos is easy, but it is also *exhausting*.

You cannot help the way you were socialized, or what the world taught you before you noticed yourself becoming more detached or feeling less confident or in control. Maybe you don’t notice a problem at all. Either way, what you *can* do is start setting small goals and boundaries for yourself, and then sticking to them if you’re not already. This builds self-reliance, and everyone absolutely deserves to experience that and is worthy of that.

As for those of us who fall more into the people-pleasing, radical kindness category, unfortunately this can also be quite unhealthy and damaging to your sense of self.

There is a fine line between being kind and overextending yourself or being disrespectful to your own capacities. The only person who knows where that line is is you! Pay attention to how you feel when someone asks you to do something –

uncomfortable? Resentful? Immediately overwhelmed? Do you *really* have the capacity to say yes?. Think about your own needs before you offer help, or at least check in with yourself a few times a day. Look for physical cues – tightness in your body, frustration, listlessness. Do you ask for help from others? You might be so willing to take on other people's problems, but deeply uncomfortable or lacking motivation when addressing your own. This really comes down to self-worth. Why are other people worth so much effort and care? Why don't you feel as cared for?

Usually, when someone offers to help, or says yes to helping, we assume that they have the capacity – the time and energy - to do what they have offered or agreed to. You have the power to let someone know that *you do not have the capacity* for something. If you continuously say yes, people see you as a person who is *always* willing to help. It feels good to be that type of person, but it's *just as good* as someone who is always willing to help *if they are* able. Try to tell yourself that. The difference is having respect for your mental health and well-being. Our actions and how we treat ourselves let other people know how we would like to be treated. We need to celebrate the accomplishment of goals set by ourselves, for ourselves - we need to be able to set these goals and boundaries, and stick to them, or else we end up only being validated by other people!

Notice how our discussion of boundaries thus far has mostly been focused within. This is because boundaries begin with *you* understanding that you are worth respecting. You deserve some stability, to know what to expect, to feel a bit more comfortable, to have needs, to be able to communicate your needs to yourself and other people, and for those needs to be respected.

The *goal* here, is to be able to live in a way that takes your personal *values* into account. If you are able to see that you are worthy of living purposefully, and that you *can* do so, then you can start setting boundaries with people that align with your values. These boundaries save other people from embarrassment and uncertainty, they save you from exhaustion and a loss of self, and they generally reduce conflict.

You might agree to a hang-out when you know you should be studying. You might let someone give you a hug when you prefer a handshake. You might laugh at a joke when it makes you uncomfortable, or let someone talk to you in a way that you don't like.

As an aside – yes, we all have to do things we don't like, say, at work, school, or in professional relationships. This can be exhausting. This is exactly why work is an area of life where boundaries come in handy. If work and work relationships are realms that you are not able to act in ways that align with your values - in action, conversation or

behaviour – it is important to set boundaries like time, emotional or intellectual boundaries, and to know where the line is.

Examples of Boundaries to do with work or school:

- “I’d prefer not to talk about that at work/school.”
- “I will only devote two hours of my time today to this project”
- “I need to make time to do something I enjoy tonight”
- “I would prefer things explained in a different way.”
- “I am unavailable for work-related messages after 5pm.”

These are reasonable boundaries that help you maintain your sense of self, value your time more deeply, and maintain a healthy line between work and the rest of your life. This is important for situations where there are power imbalances.

Now, on to something less talked about - boundaries that are *too strict*. This can look like:

- Struggling to be vulnerable.
- Saying “no” to new experiences.
- Controlling behaviour.
- Putting walls up, lacking true friendship and intimacy.
- Feeling like you can’t relate to others.
- Feeling like no one knows the real you.

You might have boundaries that keep people at a distance. This can arise from fear of rejection or embarrassment. There is also the risk that you might engage in some controlling behaviour. Setting rules for yourself is important, but if they aren’t flexible, if there is no door in the walls between you, everyone else and the world, there is no opening for things like connection, community, understanding, or even Joy!

Steeped in Hope has a useful list of what someone with especially rigid boundaries might look like.

Others might view this person as:

- A perfectionist.
- A know-it-all, tending to feel that the way they think things should be is self-evident
- Jealous.
- Uncomfortable with the unfamiliar, unwilling to try things outside of their comfort zone.

- Not having intimate relationships.

You might have boundaries that are too strict, mixed with boundaries that are too weak. For example, you might overshare socially, or make yourself overly available to other people, while closing yourself off to having new experiences. These things might even feed into each other. Devoting your time, energy and resources physically, emotionally, intellectually and materially to others is good in moderation, as is everything. Protecting yourself from uncomfortable feelings and interactions is also good in moderation, but there is a fine line that needs to be maintained on both fronts. This line is much easier to discern when you are able to reflect and become self-aware of your healthy boundaries, and ones that limit your opportunities for personal growth and connection.

So, how do you figure out where this line is? You pay attention to your own feelings and needs, set boundaries, and then check in with yourself to see if they need to be adjusted.

Counsellor Katie Laird suggests some feelings that are usually signs that you need to set a boundary:

- Physical reactions like increased heart rate, sweating, tightness in your chest, stomach or throat.
- Emotions like resentment, annoyance, hurt or anger – you may feel taken advantage of.

Laird suggests that it can be difficult to draw a healthy line if you grew up with unhealthy boundaries and learned these from your parents or other relationships. In these cases, it might be helpful to ask yourself: “Would I find this acceptable if it happened to a friend?” It is also important to pay attention to what your friends and loved ones tell you – if they seem especially concerned about the way you are being treated, it is important to listen with an open mind.

Judith Belmont, a licensed psychotherapist, identifies some basic rights that everyone has that can guide you towards setting healthy boundaries:

You have the right to:

- To say no without feeling guilty.
- Be treated with respect.
- To make your needs as important as those of others.
- To be accepting of your own mistakes and failures.
- To not meet others’ unreasonable expectations of you.

Some examples of what someone might say if they are setting a boundary:

- "That made me uncomfortable."
- "I am not going to do that again."
- "I prefer ____."
- "I am going to ____."
- "No."
- "I don't like that."
- "I'm feeling _____. I need ____."
- "Please don't do that again."

What people often struggle with the most when setting a boundary is being assertive and communicating it in the right way. Remember that your boundaries need to be respectful of other people's rights and autonomy. It's also important not to think of boundaries as limits. Instead of navigating life and relationships unintentionally, boundaries help us follow a path – the one that is most true to *who we are*, what we expect of others, and what our capacities are.

Try to use "I" statements, and don't focus on blame. Explain why you need this boundary set, but do not spend too much time explaining what the other person has done wrong. Instead, explain how their actions made you feel.

For example:

Instead of "I hate it when you do that! You're so obnoxious!"

Say: "I feel _____ when _____ because _____. What I need is _____."

The first statement is coming from a place of hurt and anger. It can be difficult in many situations not to come from these places, but it is important to try to come from a constructive or neutral place. You are probably setting this boundary because you care about the relationship that needs it, whether that be with yourself, others, or the world around you. Try to remember this when you are asserting your boundaries.

So, boundaries affect all areas of life. They are a way to let other people know what to expect from you, how you would like to be treated, and what values you need to be able to embody to maintain your sense of self.

If you notice that you are really struggling to set boundaries, it might be a good idea to speak to a professional. They can help you with an outside perspective on what is limiting or overly draining, and what is healthy.

Resources on Campus:

Counselling Services:

- counsell@uoguelph.ca
 - 519-824-4120x53244

Maplewoods Centre:

- <https://maplewoods.ca/>
 - 519-824-4120, ext. 52020 or email at info@maplewoods.uoguelph.ca

Gender based violence services:

- svinfo@uoguelph.ca
 - 519-824-4120x53020

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