
What Boundaries Are (and Aren't)

For a long time, I misunderstood what boundaries really were. I thought setting a boundary meant telling someone what I needed them to do differently and expecting their behavior to change. I imagined that if I could communicate my limits clearly enough, the people and circumstances that troubled me would eventually fall into line. It seemed reasonable at the time, although it rarely worked out that way.

Looking back, I can see that much of what I called boundary-setting was actually an attempt to control situations and people. I wasn't necessarily aware of it then, but beneath my insistence that something needed to change was often a feeling of fear, inadequacy, or discomfort that I didn't know how to manage. I wanted someone else to behave differently so that I could feel better. And when they didn't, I was left with the same uncomfortable feelings, now accompanied by resentment and disappointment.

Through experience, and with the help of some wise people along the way, I've gradually come to understand boundaries differently. A boundary isn't something I impose on another person. It's a limitation I recognize and uphold within myself. It isn't a way of determining what someone else is allowed to do, but rather a way of deciding how I will participate in a situation, what I am willing to accept, and how I intend to conduct myself when circumstances are not to my liking.

This doesn't mean I shouldn't express my needs or ask someone to treat me differently. Honest communication is an important part of any healthy relationship. But there's a meaningful difference between making a request and attempting to control the response. I can tell someone how their behavior affects me, and I can ask for something different. What I cannot do is make their

willingness to change the condition upon which my own well-being depends.

I've also discovered that many boundaries don't require an announcement. Sometimes they are expressed in the choices I make, the conversations I decline to continue, or the situations I decide to leave. Other times, maintaining a boundary means remaining present without becoming entangled in an argument or assuming responsibility for another person's feelings. There is no need to turn every personal decision into a declaration. Often, the most meaningful boundaries are simply lived.

None of this means that other people's behavior won't hurt or disappoint me. Nor does taking responsibility for my own serenity mean that I should tolerate mistreatment or pretend that difficult experiences don't affect me. It means recognizing that, even when I cannot change what is happening around me, I still have some responsibility for what I choose to do next.

One of the most helpful things I've learned is that I don't have to like a situation, but I do want to like myself in it. That simple reminder has gradually changed the way I understand boundaries. Rather than asking how I can get another person to behave differently, I can begin by asking how I want to show up, what is mine to take responsibility for, and what I may need to let go of.

I'm still learning this, of course. Old habits of trying to manage people and circumstances don't disappear simply because I understand them. But I've found that when I stop treating boundaries as a way to change others and begin seeing them as a way of being accountable to myself, there is often less struggle, less resentment, and considerably more room for peace.