

## **Boundaries**

### **Why talk about boundaries?**

Boundaries are an essential part of relationships, just as laws are an essential part of a society. Without them, people's rights may be violated, and ultimately it becomes very difficult to function. If you're reading this, it may be because someone suspects your boundaries are not what they need to be. This could lead to you being emotionally or even physically hurt, taken advantage of, or doing more than your fair share of work to maintain the relationships that are important to you.

### **What happens if I have insufficient boundaries?**

Without strong, reliable boundaries, you may find yourself feeling guilty or selfish when you do such things as:

- Take time out for yourself.
- Disagree with other people's opinions.
- Get angry.

### **You may find yourself in relationships where:**

- You tend not to voice your opinions in front of the other person.
- You routinely put the needs of the other person above your own.
- You make efforts to hide your feelings from the other person.
- You sometimes feel lonely even when you are in the company of others.
- You find it hard to identify what you want in a given situation, even when asked.
- You worry about relationships ending without warning, or for no reason.

### **What do effective boundaries look like?**

People with effective boundaries are free to enjoy their relationships. They realize that:

- They are accepted for who they are, not what they do.
- They can offer the other person the same acceptance.
- They have rights that are respected.
- It is safe to say when their rights are being ignored or forgotten.

### **How do I establish sufficient boundaries?**

1. Grab a pen or pencil.
2. Turn this page over.
3. Make a list of as many universal human rights as you can think of. Here's three to get you started:
  - All people have a right to adequate health care.
  - All people have a right to a point of view, even if it's different to other people's.
  - All people have a right to say no to things they really don't like (and they don't need to give a reason).
4. Once you are happy with the list, go through and circle the specific rights that you feel are not being upheld in your life.
5. You now know where the gaps in your personal boundaries are. In order to establish effective boundaries, you need to set about ensuring that all your individual rights are being upheld, in all your relationships, no matter what.

### **How will changing my boundaries affect me and others?**

Certainly, any change, even small change, creates ripples in the pond. Establishing boundaries means changing the often long-established, unwritten rules of relationships. However, if you are truly thinking of your boundaries, you will realize that the responsibility for managing these changes is in fact shared between both people in the relationship.

## **Other questions:**

### **Should my boundaries be the same with all my relationships?**

Not really. As a rule of thumb, the size and strength of boundaries is dictated by the power you have in the relationship. It is very important to establish strong and safe boundaries with people who you feel are more powerful, pushy or dominant. It is equally important to keep boundaries flexible with people who you feel are less powerful than you, such as your children (although children need to know where they stand in relationships too). Your human rights are fundamental, so your boundaries must always be there – you just need to use your judgement to decide when, and with whom, you have to reinforce them more strongly.

### **What about this guilt I'm feeling? Surely I'm hurting the other person by setting a boundary?**

As the saying goes: "this will hurt me more than it hurts you". The important things to consider are:

- It might upset the other person in the short-term, but how will setting clearer boundaries affect the relationship in the long-term?
- Of course their feelings may be hurt if you start "acting tough", but are their feelings ultimately your responsibility, or theirs?
- How can you help them manage their feelings, without suppressing your own?
- What sort of reassurance might be helpful for them? Does setting a boundary for yourself mean you no longer love them?

These are not easy questions to answer, but addressing them will help you re-negotiate the rules of the relationship with the other person, and ultimately reward you both with a stronger, more fulfilling relationship.

### **Are there any places to go to learn more about this stuff?**

#### **Websites:**

<http://www.coping.org/innerhealing/boundary.htm>

<http://www.healthyboundaries.com/>

#### **Books:**

**Nina Brown: "Children of the Self-Absorbed"**

**Nina Brown: "Loving the self-absorbed"**

**Nina Brown: "Working with the Self-absorbed"**

**Paul Mason & Randi Kreger: "Stop Walking on Eggshells"**