

Healthy Boundaries

By Larry L. Winckles

We often set up boundaries without thinking about it – for example, we all have a sense when someone is standing too close for our comfort. The interesting thing is that the amount of personal space that a person seems to need varies widely from culture to culture. Americans tend to like at least two feet of separation between people in a line, while Paraguayans may be comfortable with only six inches of separation. Is one culture right and the other culture wrong? Indeed not, they are just different.

It is important that we be intentional about the boundaries that we establish in our relationships. Healthy boundaries help individuals to choose words, behaviors, and actions that support and build up relationships. They are not intended to control or manipulate. When we talk about setting healthy boundaries we are talking about setting our own, personal boundaries rather than setting limits for someone else. It is up to the other person to respect the boundaries that we have established. By the same token, they have a right to expect us to respect the boundaries that they have established. This cannot happen without clear communication. Healthy boundaries are useless if they are not communicated and understood by all parties involved. It is rarely good for them to be given by pronouncement or ultimatum.

What is the purpose of healthy boundaries?

- **Healthy boundaries preserve and enhance relationships;** they do not attack, tear down, or destroy other people. They guard against developing co-dependencies.
- **Healthy boundaries serve to protect and respect an individual's private space and personal needs;** they are not intended to force others to have those same requirements or needs for themselves.
- **Healthy boundaries expect the best of everyone;** they do not anticipate the worst.
- **Healthy boundaries are not defensive in nature;** their purpose is not to build up walls between people.
- **Healthy boundaries are not offensive in nature;** they are not intended to be weapons to use against other people.
- **Healthy boundaries help establish a fair playing field for everyone.** Basketball, baseball, soccer, and many other sports have a clearly marked playing area. These markings help the players and the spectators to know when an action is appropriate or "fair", and when an action is "out of bounds" or "foul". Healthy boundaries serve this same purpose, helping others to know what kind of words and actions are appropriate and acceptable and what are unacceptable.

What happens when boundaries are violated?

Assuming that boundaries have been appropriately communicated and understood, when boundaries are violated, consequences must be expected. However, as when learning any new behavior, there is a learning curve. This means that mistakes can be expected. When boundaries are overstepped, there must be clear and open communication about the violation. People may not be aware of what they have done, and simple, calm communication may be all that is needed to rectify the situation. If the violations continue, then there may have to be stronger consequences. Using the sports analogy, this may be somewhat like the progression of first being issued a yellow card by a referee in soccer, and upon a second offense being issued a red card and being ejected from the game.

How to set healthy boundaries

Management consultant Marcia Francois¹ suggests that the process of setting healthy boundaries starts with completing the following three statements:

1. People may not...
2. I have a right to ask for...
3. To protect my time and energy...

Completing these statements help to define our personal space, and from these, realistic boundaries can be set up. *It is important to note that the purpose of healthy boundaries is NOT to get other people to change, but rather to determine what will and what will not be tolerated in our lives and being able to express this to others kindly, firmly and consistently*². The behavior, attitudes, thoughts, and actions of others may or may not change as a consequence of this, but that is immaterial to the benefit of having our boundaries respected.

Boundaries are not set in concrete, but rather are fluid and flexible. We need to be aware that our boundaries will change over time, as we ourselves grow and change or as we find ourselves in new situations.

Once again, we need to understand that others in relationship with us will have boundaries of their own. We may have behaviors, attitudes, words, or actions that violate their space or sensibilities. Just as we expect our boundaries to be respected, so we must also respect the boundaries of others.

1 <http://takechargeofyourlife.blogspot.com/2008/08/how-to-set-healthy-boundaries.html>

2 <http://www.mommd.com/settingboundaries.shtml>

Examples of Healthy Boundaries

I value quality time with my immediate family,
therefore my time cannot be monopolized by others in the evening when
we are at home together.

And so,

I can choose to tell others that I will call them back at another time or will
schedule a time to call or visit with them.

I value good relationships with my family and friends,
therefore I will not listen to gossip and neither will I pass on gossip to
others.

And so,

I can choose to break off a conversation or leave the room when people
begin to gossip.

I value being able to schedule my week and guard my time and energy so as to
meet my personal needs as well as the needs of my family and my work,
therefore my agenda cannot be controlled by others.

And so,

I can choose NOT to drop everything at a moment's notice because
someone else has a different agenda or changed plans.

I value being able to order my own life and my home as I want, without outside
interference or criticism,
therefore I will not be influenced by the negative statements of others.

And so,

I am free to tell others when they have been hurtful or controlling.