

Maintaining Personal Boundaries in Relationships

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Your personal boundaries protect the inner core of your identity and your right to choices: "There lives the dearest freshness deep-down things."
—Gerard Manley Hopkins

Our journey began at birth with no sense of boundaries. We did not know where mother ended and we began. We felt omnipotently in control of our need fulfillment and of its source.

Our first growthful realization was separateness. Our first task was letting go, i.e., acknowledging a personal boundary: I am separate and so are those who care about me. This was a departure and a struggle.

It may have felt like abandonment. From the beginning of life, we may have equated letting go of attachment with loss of power and security.

The mystery about why we hold on so fiercely today may stem from this original, terrifying and illusory event.

Adults learn that separateness is not abandonment but simply a human condition, the only condition from which a healthy relationship can grow.

With boundaries comes interdependence rather than dependence. With boundaries comes personal accountability, not entitlement to be taken care of unilaterally. From boundaries comes the mutuality that exchanges control of another in favor of honor of another.

Boundaries do not create alienation; they safeguard contiguity. Boundaries are what make it possible for us to have closeness while we safely maintain a personal identity.

Giving up personal boundaries means abandoning ourselves! No relationship can thrive when one or both partners forsake the unique core of his/her own separate identity. Love happens when two liberties embrace, salute and foster one another.

In a healthy person, loyalty has its limits and unconditional love can coexist with conditional involvement. Unconditional does not, after all, mean uncritical. You can both love someone unconditionally and place conditions upon your interactions to protect your own boundaries. "I love you unconditionally and I take care of myself by not living with you." This is shrewd fondness!

The essential inner core of yourself must remain intact as relationships begin, change, or end. The journey never violates our wholeness. When you are clear about your personal boundaries, the innate identity that is you is not bestowed by others nor do you let it be plundered by them.

It is building a functional healthy ego to relate intimately to others with full and generous openness while your own wholeness still remains inviolate. It is a great boost to self-esteem to be in-touch and intact. This is adult interdependence.

*I know I have lost my boundaries and become co-dependent when:
"I don't let go of what doesn't work"
and it feels like*

"I can't let go of what could work."

Co-dependency is unconditional love for someone else that has turned against oneself.

How to maintain your personal boundaries:

- Ask directly for what you want. This declares your identity to others and to yourself.
- Foster inner self-nurturance (a good parent within oneself). This builds an inner, intuitive sense that lets you know when a relationship has become hurtful, abusive, or invasive. It is built as a result of the work you do on your childhood issues. The ongoing support of honest feedback from friends, self-help programs or therapy will help maintain self-nurturance.
- Observe others' behavior toward you—taking it as information—without getting caught in their drama. Be a fair witness who sees from a self-protected place. This is honoring your own boundaries. It empowers you to decide—uninfluenced by another's seductive or aggressive power—how much you will accept of what someone offers you or of what someone fires at you.
- Maintain a bottom line: a limit to how many times you allow someone to say no, lie, disappoint, or betray you before you will admit the painful reality and move on. This includes confronting addiction and/or futureless relationships in which you continue to look for happiness where there is only hurt. In addiction, our illusory belief compensates for the diminished reality.
- Change the locus of trust from others to oneself. As an adult you are not looking for someone you can trust absolutely. You acknowledge the margins of human failing and let go of expecting security. You then trust yourself to be able to receive love and handle hurt, to receive trustworthiness and handle betrayal, to receive intimacy and handle rejection.

A Checklist on Boundaries in a Relationship

When you give up your boundaries in a relationship you:

- Are unclear about your preferences
- Do not notice unhappiness since enduring is your concern
- Alter your behavior, plans, or opinions to fit the current moods or circumstances of another (live reactively)
- Do more and more for less and less
- Take as truth the most recent opinion you have heard
- Live hopefully while wishing and waiting
- Are satisfied if you are coping and surviving
- Let the other's minimal improvement maintain your stalemate
- Have few hobbies because you have no attention span for self-directed activity
- Make exceptions for a person for things you would not tolerate in anyone else/accept alibis
- Are manipulated by flattery so that you lose objectivity
- Try to create intimacy with a narcissist
- Are so strongly affected by another that obsession results
- Will forsake every personal limit to get sex or the promise of it
- See your partner as causing your excitement
- Feel hurt and victimized but not angry
- Act out of compliance and compromise
- Do favors that you inwardly resist (cannot say no)
- Disregard intuition in favor of wishes
- Allow your partner to abuse your children or friends
- Mostly feel afraid and confused
- Are enmeshed in a drama that is beyond your control
- Are living a life that is not yours, and that seems unalterable
- Commit yourself for as long as the other needs you to be committed (no bottom line)
- Believe you have no right to secrets

When your boundaries are intact in a relationship you:

- Have clear preferences and act upon them
- Recognize when you are happy/unhappy
- Acknowledge moods and circumstances around you while remaining centered (live actively)
- Do more when that gets results
- Trust your own intuition while being open to other's opinions
- Live optimistically while co-working on change
- Are only satisfied if you are thriving
- Are encouraged by sincere, ongoing change for the better
- Have excited interest in self-enhancing hobbies and projects
- Have a personal standard, albeit flexible, that applies to everyone and asks for accountability
- Appreciate feedback and can distinguish it from attempts to manipulate
- Relate only to partners with whom mutual love is possible
- Are strongly affected by your partner's behavior and take it as information
- Integrate sex so that you can enjoy it but never at the cost of your integrity
- See your partner as stimulating your excitement
- Let yourself feel anger, say "ouch" and embark upon a program of change
- Act out of agreement and negotiation
- Only do favors you choose to do (you can say no)
- Honor intuitions and distinguish them from wishes
- Insist others' boundaries be as safe as your own
- Mostly feel secure and clear
- Are always aware of choices
- Are living a life that mostly approximates what you always wanted for yourself
- Decide how, to what extent, and how long you will be committed
- Protect your private matters without having to lie or be surreptitious