



How to Figure Out Your Boundaries

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Boundaries are vital for healthy relationships.

They also give “us room and safety to live the beautiful, loving lives — and world — we came to create,” according to Jan Black, author of *Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life*.

But you might be so used to saying yes and focusing on other people’s needs and happiness that you’re unsure about the boundaries you’d actually like to set.

Your early environment often colors your conception of boundaries. “If the bathroom door was always open, your paychecks went to your parents, and your diary was fair game for everyone, your starting point was one of permeable boundaries,” said Ryan Howes, Ph.D, a clinical

People also might be oblivious to the types of boundaries they can set, because they weren’t aware that there were other options, and they weren’t taught to be reflective, he said.

For instance, if you were taught that anger is always bad – it’s usually a sign that your boundary is being violated – then you’ll ignore your emotional response and let your limits get crossed, without resisting, he said.

So how do you start defining your personal boundaries when you don’t have much practice? Here are four strategies to try.

1. Tune into your emotions.

According to [Howes](#), the strongest indicator of our boundaries is our emotions. For instance, he said, how do you feel when your partner criticizes you, when you go to work or when you get a call from an unidentified caller?

“Just knowing your response to these interactions can help you discern your boundaries.”

Julie de Azevedo Hanks, LCSW, founder and executive director of Wasatch Family Therapy, referred to emotions as a compass. “[They] give us information to guide us in our lives and relationships.” Like Howes, she believes that tuning into your emotions helps you better understand the people, interactions and boundaries that you’re comfortable with and the ones that aren’t working for you.

How can you become more attuned to your emotions? Hanks suggested simply pausing every day and asking yourself: “How am I feeling right now?” or “What is my body trying to tell me?”

Emotional discomfort, like physical pain, is a sign that you need to attend to something, she said. “Likewise, pleasurable emotions let us know what we want more of, who we want to spend more time with, what boundaries we should continue to set.”

2. Tune into your thoughts.

Like emotions, thoughts also give us information, said Hanks, author of *The Burnout Cure: An Emotional Survival Guide for Overwhelmed Women*. Evidence-based guidance, up-to-date resources, and first-hand accounts to help you in your mental health journey.

For instance, maybe you have more self-critical thoughts when you're with a certain friend. After some reflection, you realize that you let her have too much sway over your self-worth, and you decide to set emotional boundaries, she said. Or "you decide that you want to spend less time with her."

3. Ask others.

Hanks suggested observing other people's boundaries, which gives you examples of the boundaries you might like to set.

Howes also suggested comparing notes with your friends, who may have very different boundaries.

For instance, you might've been brought up believing that you should let a loved one's needs override your own, or loan large amounts of money to anyone who asks, but your friends may think otherwise, he said.

4. Get clear on your values.

Sometimes, we're unsure about the boundaries we'd like to set because we're unsure of what's important to us, Black said. That's why she suggested first identifying what matters most to you and then rearranging things to make that happen.

For instance, one person's values are to travel to Belize, pay off her student loans in five years, learn to play guitar, volunteer at a food bank, spend more time with her brother and surround herself with interesting individuals, Black said.

To spend more time with their brother, this person decides to set boundaries around not participating in negative conversations about him, cutting out excuses not to reach out and rejecting the belief that their past activities have to resemble their present ones, she said.

In another example Black shared, in order to engage with interesting people and keep learning, this same person sets boundaries around their time on Facebook, replacing it with watching TED talks. They also stop hanging out with individuals who sap their energy and work through their fear of talking to interesting people.

Black compared boundaries to rearranging furniture. “You do it so the room works better for what you want it to do.”

Some boundaries may be rigid and final, such as not letting abusive people into your life, she said. But most boundaries will be flexible. You’ll be able to move them “around to fit your new desires, understanding and deepened values.”

“Also, like furniture, you sometimes remove certain boundaries and bring in new ones.”

If you’ve had pretty loose boundaries over the years, and you’re tightening them, expect resistance from your family and friends, said Howes, also author of the blog [In Therapy](#).

“They may even fight you and resent you for it.” They might say you’re being selfish, and not being yourself. And they may want the old you back, he said.

That’s because they’ve gotten used to you dropping everything to attend to their needs. “When you start saying ‘no’ and prioritizing your own needs, that makes their life less comfortable. They will need to meet more of their own needs now.”

Remember that you’re not harming anyone by saying no, he said. “You haven’t become a boundary violator, just someone who is making a point of taking care of yourself. They’ll get used to it.”