How to Set Boundaries in Your Relationships [abridged]

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Boundaries can help you retain a sense of identity and personal space, and they're easier to create and maintain than you might think. You'll find boundaries in every kind of relationship — from friends and family to colleagues and brief acquaintances. While they're important in all areas, boundaries come up a lot in romantic partnerships.

Boundaries are clear guidelines that are established to help you clearly communicate behavior you will accept from other people and behavior other people can expect from you. You can't see them, but these lines help you stay "you" and provide a sense of mutual respect, protection, expectations, and support.

Healthy relationship boundaries

While there are some basic rules to consider when building and maintaining healthy boundaries, what works for one person might not be so ideal for someone else.For example, your partner may have different expectations of:

- the amount of time you spend together
- the frequency of communication when you're apart
- what's considered to be cheating in a committed relationship
- lines being crossed when discussing finances

And this is likely to change throughout the relationship. It can be helpful to discuss what your guidelines are and set clear boundaries that align with both of your needs. To do this, it's important that you honestly communicate your expectations, and focus on how honoring those boundaries can help you create a relationship that allows you to feel safe.

Examples of healthy boundaries in relationships

The following examples apply to romantic partnerships, but also any frequently communicative relationships where there's responsibility and expectation on both sides, like business partners, co-parents, or in-laws. In healthy relationships, both people:

- ask permission
- take one another's feelings into account
- show gratitude
- are honest
- give space for autonomy and avoid codependence
- show respect for differences in opinion, perspective, and feelings
- sit with the other person's communication of emotion
- take responsibility for their actions

Boundaries that don't work

While it's a good idea to set some boundaries, some don't work and can ultimately have a negative effect on one or both partners. These tend to be founded in control when one person tries to restrict or command the actions of the other — and there are some definite red flags to look out for.

"Anything that limits a person's options" is an unhealthy boundary, Preece explains. "It could be around time, the way they act, even the way they dress." Crossing these lines, he adds, "can be dangerous."

This is something Gabb agrees with. "We shouldn't confuse boundaries and control — they're not the same thing," she says. "If someone feels a partner is putting up boundaries in a controlling way — 'These are my boundaries, and this is what you must do' — then there's a problem with communication around boundaries being established."

How to set boundaries in a relationship

There are a variety of different ways you can go about setting boundaries. Here are four approaches to get you started:

1. Begin early

It's much easier to introduce boundaries at the start of or earlier on in a relationship, rather than years down the road — especially once habits and routines have been established and both partners are more emotionally invested. But if it's a little late for that tip, don't worry. Installing boundaries at any point is still better than imposing upon each other until it frays your bond completely.

2. Conversation is key

No matter how awkward you might feel talking about your emotions or [bringing up trickier subjects](#), a two-way discussion is vital in boundary setting. "Communication is key to relationships," Gabb says, and "you do need to have [conversations], even if they're really difficult things to talk about. Not only do these discussions help both partners understand the extent and rules of the boundary, but they provide an opportunity to explain *why* you value a particular boundary.

3. Use 'I' statements

"I think all communication should start with 'I feel,'" Gabb states. If you lead with superlative or accusatory statements (like "you always" or "you never"), then "you're going to be hit with a brick wall of 'That's not what I think.'" And once those defensive barriers come up, it can be hard to get the conversation back on track. Treat others how you like to be treated, so aim to set boundaries with kindness.

4. It's OK to ask for space

Whether you're just starting out with a partner or have been with them for a while, it's totally acceptable to desire —and ask for — some [me time](#).

"It might be that you have a really demanding job, and you need half an hour of debrief time when you come home where you don't talk," Gabb says. "It's about 'This is what I need, how can we make it happen?'"

There's a chance your partner might see this request as a form of rejection, so it's important to take their feelings into account and explain this isn't the case.

"Talk about why you need it and why it's meaningful to you," suggests Gabb. "Recognize how the other person may feel, and work with them [through] that."