



Boundaries

What are Boundaries?

At its most basic, boundaries separate one object from another. A helpful way of understanding this is to think of fences. They tell us where one property begins and another ends. They establish what belongs to one person and what belongs to another. Interpersonal boundaries function similarly. Boundaries tell us where we begin and where we end; they help us understand what belongs to us, and what belongs to someone else. Boundaries exist in all relationships, whether in friendship, romance, work, or family. There are several different types of boundaries:^{1,2}

Type of Boundary	Definition	Example of Boundary Violation
Physical and Sexual	Boundaries related to your personal space, privacy, or body, and who or what you allow within that space and when that occurs.	Having someone stand too close to you or touching you without your permission.
<i>Emotional</i>	<i>Boundaries that help distinguish your emotional responses versus what belongs to someone else.</i>	<i>Blaming someone else for unpleasant feelings in response to a disappointment.</i>
Spiritual	Boundaries that determine what you personally believe about God, spirituality, etc.	Someone telling another that he or she is God's will for his or her life.
<i>Mental</i>	<i>Boundaries that protect the integrity of your own thoughts, values, and opinions.</i>	<i>Being told by a friend or family member what you do or do not like, whether or not you agree.</i>
Financial	Boundaries that help you decide where and how you want to use your money.	One spouse restricting the use of money by the other, regardless of who contributes financially.
<i>Material</i>	<i>Boundaries that maintain the distinction between items that belong to you or to someone else.</i>	<i>Someone takes a lawn mower to "borrow" without the permission of the owner.</i>

It is important to remember that boundary violations can happen both ways, they can be directed to ourselves, or directed by us towards others.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Boundaries

People have different boundaries and needs. Part of developing relationships is determining what is acceptable. When boundaries are respected, it feels safe to connect. When boundaries are violated, people feel unsafe and unsure. Healthy boundaries and unhealthy boundaries (rigid and/or porous) impact how relationships develop.

	Healthy Boundary	Rigid Boundary	Porous Boundary
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What is it	Boundaries that separate self and others well and where there is room for flexibility.	Boundaries that are too firm, without room for negotiation and restrictive.	Boundaries that are “holey,” where there is little or no distinction between self and other.
What it looks like	Being able to respect that other people have opinions that are not the same as yours.	Having rules believed to be self-evident (e.g. no one can touch my _____) and becoming offended when this “rule” is violated even if it has never been shared.	Inability to distinguish between your own and someone else’s emotions, either taking on what others feel or casting your emotions on another.
Some Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerates grey space and recognises that different people or situations may call for different boundaries • Feelings of safety and comfort while allowing space for others to come in and out of your life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling lonely, disconnected, or isolated • Alienating the people you love • Cannot relate to others by pushing them away or putting up walls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being taken advantage of by others • Sharing too much about yourself too soon, making others uncomfortable • Resent saying yes to someone but cannot say no

One way to understand this is through Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Goldilocks found that one bed was too soft (porous boundary), the other too firm (rigid boundary), and the final bed was just right (healthy boundary).

How to Develop Healthy Boundaries³

Consistency is key to developing boundaries. Introducing boundaries where none have existed before is often met with resistance, generating disagreeable responses. An important note is that boundaries is not about getting our way, it is about helping others, and ourselves, interact with respect and honour.

- ***Get to know yourself.*** Learn about what you like or don’t like, what situations make you feel safe or unsafe and what you need or how you want to be treated under each circumstance.
- ***Be clear about what you need.*** Let people know what you need from them. Sometimes, boundary violations are the result of misunderstanding or lack of communication.
- ***Be specific and direct.*** Having vague or unclear boundaries leaves room for interpretation and uncertainty. Being clear with what is acceptable helps others know what to expect and how you will respond.
- ***Be clear about your love, while being clear about your boundaries.*** Boundaries can feel painful, especially when they are new or unexpected. Communicating boundaries with calmness and from love is more effective than coming from anger.
- ***Find a safe place and safe people to start practicing setting up and maintaining boundaries.***ⁱⁱ Learning to develop boundaries can be difficult. Build up your comfort with smaller boundaries and, if possible, with safe people before moving on to the bigger boundaries.
- ***Understand where your boundaries come from***ⁱⁱ. Often, boundaries are learned growing up. Experiences can also shape the way boundaries are defined. Traumatic experiences can alter boundaries as feelings of safety are replaced with fear and mistrust. For example, someone who is

assaulted may distance themselves from everyone even though they used to be warm and welcoming. Core issues can be identified and addressed to assist with developing healthy boundaries.

What does the Bible say about Boundaries?

The Ten Commandments set limits and expectations for how people are to relate to God and each other. God laid out the physical boundaries for the nation of Israel (Numbers 34) and gave instructions on their interactions with other nations (e.g. Deuteronomy 23:7-8). Jesus demonstrated healthy boundaries, taking time for himself to recharge with God (Matthew 14:13), even when many called for his attention. He did not allow the agenda of others to dictate his actions, becoming known as the “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). Jesus’ example shows us that there is a need to take care of ourselves and stand on God’s truth and will for our lives.

Additional Resources

Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (1992). *Boundaries*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**For more information or counselling support, please contact:
Christian Counselling Services**

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¹ Lancer, D. (2016). What are personal boundaries? How do I get some? Retrieved from psychcentral.com /lib/what-are-personal-boundaries-how-do-i-get-some/

² Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (1992). *Boundaries*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

³ Tartakovsky, M. (2015). Why healthy relationships always have boundaries and how to set boundaries in yours. Retrieved from psychcentral.com /blog/archives/2015/02/25/why-healthy-relationships-always-have-boundaries-how-to-setboundaries-in-yours/