

Change Your Way To Health!



Establishing and maintaining healthy personal boundaries

Personal boundaries can best be explained as the physical and emotional limits we set to let others know how we want to be treated. They allow us to say what we mean instead of saying what we think other people want us to say. To set personal boundaries means to preserve our integrity, take responsibility for who we are, and to take control of our lives. When we let people know what they can and cannot do around us, we also need to let them know what we will or won't do if they don't respect our boundaries. In simplest terms a personal boundary helps us define where we end and others begin.

This month we take a look at how we establish and maintain healthy boundaries, and what happens when we fail to establish and communicate what these boundaries are. Having clear established boundaries helps us enjoy healthy relationships with the people we care about.

Tips

Having healthy boundaries requires that we recognize our own emotions, needs, and values – as well as the emotions, needs and values of others. Just as we would want others to respect our boundaries, we should also respect theirs.

We need to identify the behaviours we find unacceptable, and let others know what those behaviours are in a clear and firm manner, without being aggressive. Then we must be willing to do whatever it takes to enforce these boundaries.

Maintaining healthy personal boundaries requires understanding that we not only have the right but the duty to take responsibility for how we allow others to treat us. In doing so we need to believe in ourselves and trust that we know what is best for us, while understanding that other people's needs and feelings are not more important than our own.

To ensure we maintain healthy boundaries, we need to let others know when they have crossed a line, acted inappropriately, or have been disrespectful in any way.

Once we have established our boundaries, we can expect that some people will test them. If other people feel they have something to lose, they may push even harder until they realize that we do mean what we say.

If we feel our boundaries have been crossed we should let the person know he or she has done so by preceding statements with "I feel." When we use these words, we affirm that we have a right to our feelings and we take responsibility for ourselves.



When we aren't clear about what our boundaries are or we don't let others know if they are acting in ways that aren't acceptable to us, we can end up feeling hurt or used. An example might be if our adult child continually assumes we will babysit our grandchildren without asking if we have other plans, and we fail to communicate that this is not acceptable.

Learning to establish and maintain healthy boundaries takes thought and practice. At first setting limits is hard, but it does become easier with practice. Often we learn about the value of having healthy boundaries through experiencing the consequences of failing to establish and communicate them clearly. Here are some signs of unhealthy boundaries, and tips on how to improve the situation.

Tips

A sure sign that we have unhealthy boundaries is if we continually feel bad or guilty when saying "no." People generally have a hard time saying no because they fear losing something such as approval, status, love, or opportunities. We must always take an honest look at the situation.

We are not maintaining healthy boundaries when we continually ignore our own discomfort, anger, anxiety, or fear so that someone else can be happy and comfortable. When we dismiss our feelings in this way we soon begin to feel increasingly stressed, guilty, angry, or resentful. Keep in mind it is not necessary to explain or justify our requests unless we are asked and we want to. Excuses weaken our power.

We do not have good boundaries when we go against our personal values or rights in order to please others. For example, we allow someone to take as much as he or she wants from us. Maintaining healthy boundaries requires that we do not let someone 'guilt' us into changing our minds.

If we are "people-pleasers" – always wanting to accommodate everyone – chances are we don't have healthy boundaries. We need to learn that it is okay to be selfish sometimes, and to firmly say "no." If we do say "yes" then we must do so without resentment.

We have weaker boundaries if we accept advances or intimacies we don't want, or repeatedly refuse to see flaws or weaknesses in others. If this is true for us, we need to look at our self-esteem and take steps to feel better about ourselves.

If there is a lack of equality and trust in our intimate relationships, it is likely we have failed to establish healthy boundaries. Having a healthy relationship with a partner requires sharing responsibilities and power, and expecting reciprocity in the relationship.

We want your questions, comments, and suggestions.

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