

How to Set Healthy Boundaries in Close Relationships

Teach people how to treat you by letting them know what you'll tolerate.

KEY POINTS

- Setting and communicating boundaries can be a valuable skill in healthy relationships.
- Attachment styles sometimes inform the boundaries people set and how they set them.
- The goal of boundary-setting is to protect oneself and stay connected to others at the same time.

Boundaries are the space between you and another person. Boundaries may include physical, emotional and mental limits that you establish in order to help you define what you are comfortable with and how you would like to be treated by others. Setting and communicating boundaries are necessary in order to create and maintain healthy relationships as we teach people how to treat us by what we tolerate, and also what we won't.

For the past couple of weeks, I have had several conversations with clients ranging in age about a consistent theme: how to set healthy boundaries while maintaining their connections with others who matter to them. These conversations have not been about the kind of boundaries that need to be set with those with whom my clients have unhealthy relationships. Instead, these relationships were with friends and family members who my clients want to remain connected to, and whose presence in their lives is generally valued and welcome.

The conversations with my clients included how to manage boundaries with a roommate who was being both dismissive and passive aggressive, older siblings who “only want to help,” with unsolicited advice, a boyfriend who had different values and priorities, and parents who are navigating the challenging path of letting go as their daughter transitions to university.

Why Attachment Styles Can Help You Draw Boundaries

An attachment style is the particular way in which a person relates to others. Formed at the beginning of a person's life, it sometimes plays out in how a person relates to other people in relationships for the rest of their life.

Generally speaking, there are four main types of attachment styles: secure, anxious-attachment/preoccupied, dismissive/avoidant, and fearful-avoidant.

These styles can vary in degree and may change over time. Making an effort to understand the attachment style of the person or group you are trying to establish boundaries with can help you be more successful in your endeavour.

Self-Compassion and Boundaries

"Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves, even when we risk disappointing others." —Brene Brown

Setting boundaries is a form of self-compassion. Taking care of yourself with values-based decision making is the ability to create the experiences you want for yourself. Additionally, self-compassion will give you the capacity to show compassion to others, strengthening your connections and relationships. Saying "no" is an act of self-compassion, and it can limit emotional pain and suffering.

Not everyone will like you. You can't be all things to all people, family and friends included. You also won't be invited or included in all of the things that you wish you were. Setting and communicating clear limits or boundaries is necessary for all healthy relationships. Here are some tips for setting boundaries with those in your close relationships:

1. **Identify.** Notice how you're feeling when you're with the person or group. Notice how you feel when you're not with them. Trust your gut. If something feels "wrong," it probably is. For example, a 20-something client of mine moved to a new city with new roommates. Every night the roommates went out she came too, not wanting to miss out on anything or the opportunity to have new friends. All of the late nights made her start to feel exhausted and overextended. Identifying that her body needed some rest, she stayed home a few times and joined her friends when she was ready.
2. **Define and Label.** What space do you need to create? Recognize what you need and label it as a boundary. For instance, a college senior client reported feeling overwhelmed. With academics, athletics, social interests, and work, anything additional started weighing heavily on her. She started choosing which activities were her highest priority or most valued, and she set her boundaries accordingly.
3. **Communicate.** How you communicate your boundaries matters. Teach others how you want to be treated by communicating what you tolerate and what you don't.

Keep the focus on you and clearly express what you need. For example, a high school senior client was discussing her unhappiness in her relationship with her boyfriend. The writing was on the wall — he had clearly moved on. He wasn't spending time with her, prioritizing friendships over their relationship, and he seemed emotionally unavailable. After we talked through it, she decided that they needed to set up an in-person discussion where she could share these feelings. After she communicated that she was unwilling to be in a relationship where she and the relationship were not a priority, they ultimately decided that they were both looking for different things at that point in their lives in terms of a relationship and they ended theirs.

4. **Seek Support.** How to speak your truth and manage your reactions is a learned behaviour. With friends and family, you can practice setting boundaries together and hold each other accountable. If you are setting your boundaries alone, think of someone you know who models healthy boundaries and learn from their behaviour. Working with a coach, mentor, or therapist who has expertise in this area can be life-changing. I recently worked with my client, a college junior, who was receiving unsolicited advice from her older sisters. Together we devised a way to express her boundaries with her sisters, carefully allowing her to speak her truth and distance herself when they behaved in that way.
5. Setting boundaries can sometimes be confused as a cut-off. Boundaries might also be perceived as being rigid. That's not wholly true for healthy boundaries. The goal of boundaries is to protect yourself and stay connected at the same time. Creating healthy boundaries is important, but it's also important to note that so many of my clients come to me with situations that have varying degrees of nuance. These tips are a simplification of a delicate process. Setting boundaries, especially within close relationships, can be tricky at best.
6. Noticing your own feelings, understanding the attachment style of the other person/group, and communicating your needs clearly will help you start to set the healthy boundaries you want.