Personal and Professional Boundaries

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Personal and Professional Boundaries

What are boundaries and what is the purpose for boundaries?

The purpose of having boundaries is to protect and take care of ourselves and others. We need to be able to tell other people when they are behaving in ways that are not acceptable and know when we are not honoring the boundaries others have set. The purpose of setting boundaries is learning to take care of ourselves, no matter what happens, where we go, who we're with or what we are doing. The goal of having and setting boundaries isn't to build thick walls around ourselves, but rather to gain enough personal security and sense of self to get close to others without the threat of losing ourselves or smothering others, trespassing on boundaries, or being taken advantage of. When we talk about needing space, setting limits, determining acceptable behavior, or creating a sense of autonomy, we are really talking about boundaries.

Boundaries are:

- The emotional and/or physical space between you and another person
- The demarcation of where you end and another person begins
- The limit or line over which you will not allow another to cross
- An established set of limits over your physical and/or emotional well-being which you expect others to respect in their relationship with you
- The emotional and physical space you need in order to be the "real" you without the pressure from others to be something that you are not or to behave in a way that is not appropriate for your own beliefs
- The emotional and/or physical limits of your life which is currently or has been violated if you have been emotionally, verbally, physically and/or sexually abused or witnessed such abuse on a relative or close friend
- A healthy emotional and physical distance you can maintain between yourself and another person so that you do not become overly enmeshed or dependent
- An appropriate amount of emotional and physical closeness you need to maintain so that you do not become too detached or overly independent from human contact
- Well-balanced emotional and/or physical limits set on interacting with others so that you can achieve interdependent relationships with others, where no one loses their personal identity, uniqueness and autonomy in the process

Boundaries emerge from:

- A deep feeling about what we believe we deserve and don't deserve
- A belief that what we need and want, like and dislike, are important
- A deeper sense of our personal rights, especially the right we have to take care of ourselves and to be ourselves
- Learning to value, trust, and listen to ourselves

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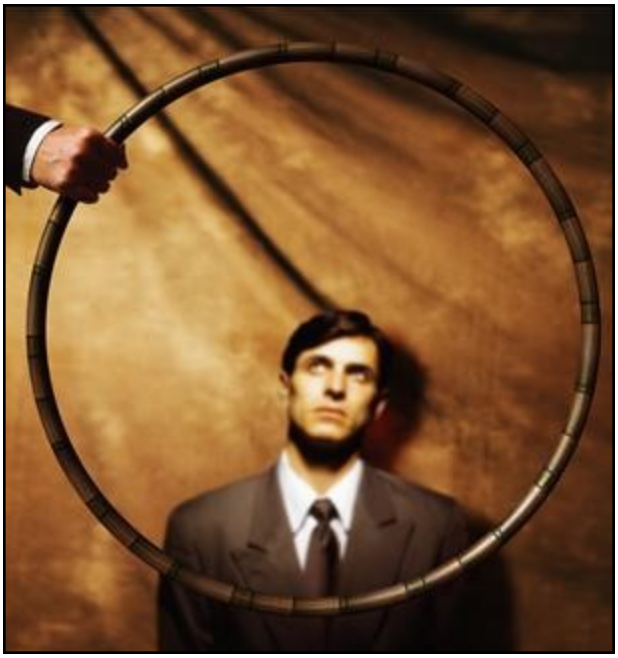
Setting boundaries properly requires that you look inward. If we are not honest with ourselves about our own behaviors and past issues, then it will be impossible to truly identify, set, and implement boundaries. Learning how to set boundaries is, in effect, a way to show love and respect for ourselves. It is our responsibility to take care of ourselves and to protect ourselves when it is necessary. It is impossible to learn to be loving to ourselves and take care of ourselves without knowing ourselves and owning our beliefs and responsibilities. It is important to state our feelings out loud and not expect someone to know what are our boundaries. Boundaries are unique to each individual. Do not assume that because you have a particular boundary that another person has the same one or that the boundary is at the same level as yours. Setting boundaries should not be a more sophisticated way of manipulation. It is impossible to have a healthy relationship with someone who has no boundaries and who cannot communicate directly, and honestly.

In order to establish healthy boundaries between yourself and others you must:

- Identify what boundaries are currently being, or have been, violated or ignored
- Identify the irrational or unhealthy thinking, and beliefs by which you allow your boundaries to be ignored or violated
- Identify new, more rational, healthy thinking, and beliefs which will encourage you to change your behaviors so that you build healthy boundaries between you and others
- Identify new behaviors you need to add to your healthy boundary-building-behaviors rin order to sustain healthy boundaries between you and others
- Implement the healthy boundary-building beliefs and behaviors in your life so that your space, privacy and rights are no longer ignored or violated

Using a journal to record which of the following symptoms exist for you is a good way to be sure you are evaluating yourself honestly. For each symptom identified, describe what the stimulus was in your past for this behavior and how this symptom affected your life. You may see a pattern of behavior you never knew existed.



Often people who struggle with low self-esteem have an unobtainable desire to have the "perfect" or “ideal” relationship. As a result they are often in competition for control within the relationship to make their reality become what they think it should be.

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Basic Violated Boundaries Include:

- Over-Enmeshment
  This symptom requires everyone to follow the “rules”. Everyone must do everything together and everyone must think, feel and act in the same way. No one is allowed to deviate from the family or group norms, which are usually set by this person. Thinking differently is a direct violation even if no action is taken on the thought

- Disassociation
  This symptom involves “checking out” during a stressful or emotional event. They feel that their physical and/or emotional space being violated and will tell themselves: "It doesn't matter." "Ignore it and it will be over soon." "No sense in fighting it, just endure it, if you fight it, it will be worse." This “checking out” behavior results in being out of touch with their feelings. Severe or prolonged disassociation may result in an inability to actually remember events, called Dissociation Disorder

- Detachment
  This symptom occurs when an individual is unable to establish any blending of emotions. They are totally independent from others emotionally and/or physically. There does not seem to be anything that bonds them together with another person. They lack a common purpose, goal or rationale for existing with others and at the base of their feelings, there is a lack of desire to draw together to form a union for fear of loss of their personal identity or for fear of rejection or pain. They often have a difficult time identifying with others

- Victimhood or Martyrdom
  In this symptom, they see themselves as a victim and become overly defensive to avoid further violation. They can also reach a level of acceptance of their victimization and continue to be knowingly victimized and then tell others of their plight in an attempt to receive sympathy and love, but not for the purpose of aid and therefore become a martyr

- Chip On The Shoulder
  Unresolved anger and pain from past violations of emotional and/or physical boundaries have produced a "chip on the shoulder" that aggressively challenges another person to try to violate them again so they have the opportunity to react either the same way they did in the past or in a more aggressive manner, which most often, is an enormous over reaction to the situation

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- Invisibility
  This symptom involves withdrawing or over-controlling feelings so that others never know how they really feel or what they are really thinking. Their goal is not to be seen or heard so that their boundaries are not violated. While this gives them a sense of security, it is a false sense of security in that prolonged exposure to feeling invisible often leads to anger and depression and does not allow for a healthy one-on-one connection

- Cold and Distant
  This symptom builds solid walls and barriers to insure that others do not pervade their emotional and/or physical space. This can be a defense, due to previous hurt and pain or from having boundaries that were violated. It can also be a sign of insecurity and not wanting others to see the real person for fear of being rejected or ignored. It is a clear message that they have created another world within themselves that is open by invitation only

- Smothering
  This symptom results when one person is overly consumed with another person's desires, needs and interests. This fixation consumes them so they lose a sense of themselves and do not know where they begin and another person ends. It can be so overwhelming to the person being smothered that they can even physically feel like they are being held too tightly or have such a lack freedom that they feel like it is difficult to breathe. Smothering is often an indication that one feels insecure and unsafe in the relationship and that unless they are with each other constantly or share the exact same interests they will be forgotten and abandoned

- Lack of Privacy
  This symptom is present when a person feels that they can have no private thought, feeling or action. They are expected to report to another all the detail and content of their feelings, reactions, opinions, relationships and dealings with the outside world and are often not left alone until they do so. They begin to feel that every experience they have must be shared and have no private space emotionally and/or physically. They begin to hide things and develop an "alternative life" where they can escape

Just as you have done a self-assessment on ignored or violated boundaries in your life, you must also identify which healthy boundary behaviors exist and work on strengthening those which do not. If you experience difficulty in identifying which boundaries exist for you, consider asking a trusted person who knows you, but most importantly will be honest with you. Ask them for specific examples of what boundaries they see that you have clearly set and which boundaries you have violated. Give them time to reflect upon your request and schedule a time where you can meet with them in a private location where you are free to converse. Bring your journal with you and document their comments and your reactions to them. Remember not to be defensive or argue with them when they are providing the feedback to you. The intent of the exercise is not to offend or hurt you, but to offer constructive observation to allow an opportunity for growth and personal development.

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Healthy Boundary Behaviors Include:

- Building Trust
- Practicing Patience
- Handling Insecurity
- Handling Fear of Rejection
- Overcoming the Need for Approval
- Becoming a Safe Risk-Taker
- Becoming Vulnerable
- Handling Intimacy
- Practicing Understanding and Empathy
- Goal-Setting in Relationships
- Overcoming Fears
- Improving Appropriate Assertive Behavior
- Accepting Personal Responsibility
- Handling Conflict
- Overcoming Guilt
- Overcoming the Role of Victim or Martyr
- Managing the Use of Power and Control
- Handling Confrontation
- Practicing Forgiving and Forgetting
- Creating a Healing Environment
- Developing Detachment
- Eliminating Over-Dependency
- Eliminating Manipulation and Replacing it with Influence
- Eliminating Passive-Aggressive Behavior
- Tempering Survival Behaviors
- Developing Self-Control
- Practicing How to Respond and Not React
- Practicing Active Listening Skills

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Boundaries mirror the internal strength by which a person has a barrier to protect their beliefs and provide safety for themselves. This is the means by how you filter and interpret all outside influences.

Strong Boundaries
Strong boundaries are those which enable you to dictate who gains access. Picture a door with a knob only on the inside of the room, so those on the other side of the door cannot access the room without you opening the door for them.

Weak Boundaries
Weak boundaries are those which you have limited control over who gains access to them. Picture the same door and room, except that there is a knob on both sides of the door, giving access to either party on either side of the door.

Broken Boundaries
Broken boundaries are those which you do not have control over who gains access to them. Picture a large open room with no doors, there is no space defined and access is granted to all. When there are no boundaries there can be no sense of control or safety from inside or outside.

Without boundaries, we cannot take ownership or pride in what is ours. What if there were no property lines or established social behavior? Life would be chaos. Clarity in our boundaries provides clear guidelines for who takes responsibility for what. Any confusion about responsibility or ownership is a boundary violation. Once we have identified what we are personally responsible for, then we can focus our energy and skills on that and let go of that which is not ours. It is impossible to control or change another person and trying to do so will only end in vain.

Think of a circle as your life. You are responsible for everything that happens in that circle. You are responsible for what you think, eat, do and act. You are not responsible for what happens outside that circle: what someone does to you or says to you. Yet how many times do we waste our time and energy trying to control what goes on outside the circle, when all we really need to focus on, is inside the circle? How often do we blame others for what happens inside our circle? That we didn't eat healthy, exercise or get enough sleep. That someone made us feel guilty, bad, ashamed or unloved. The reality is that we ONLY CONTROL what happens inside the circle and we have NO CONTROL on what happens outside the circle.

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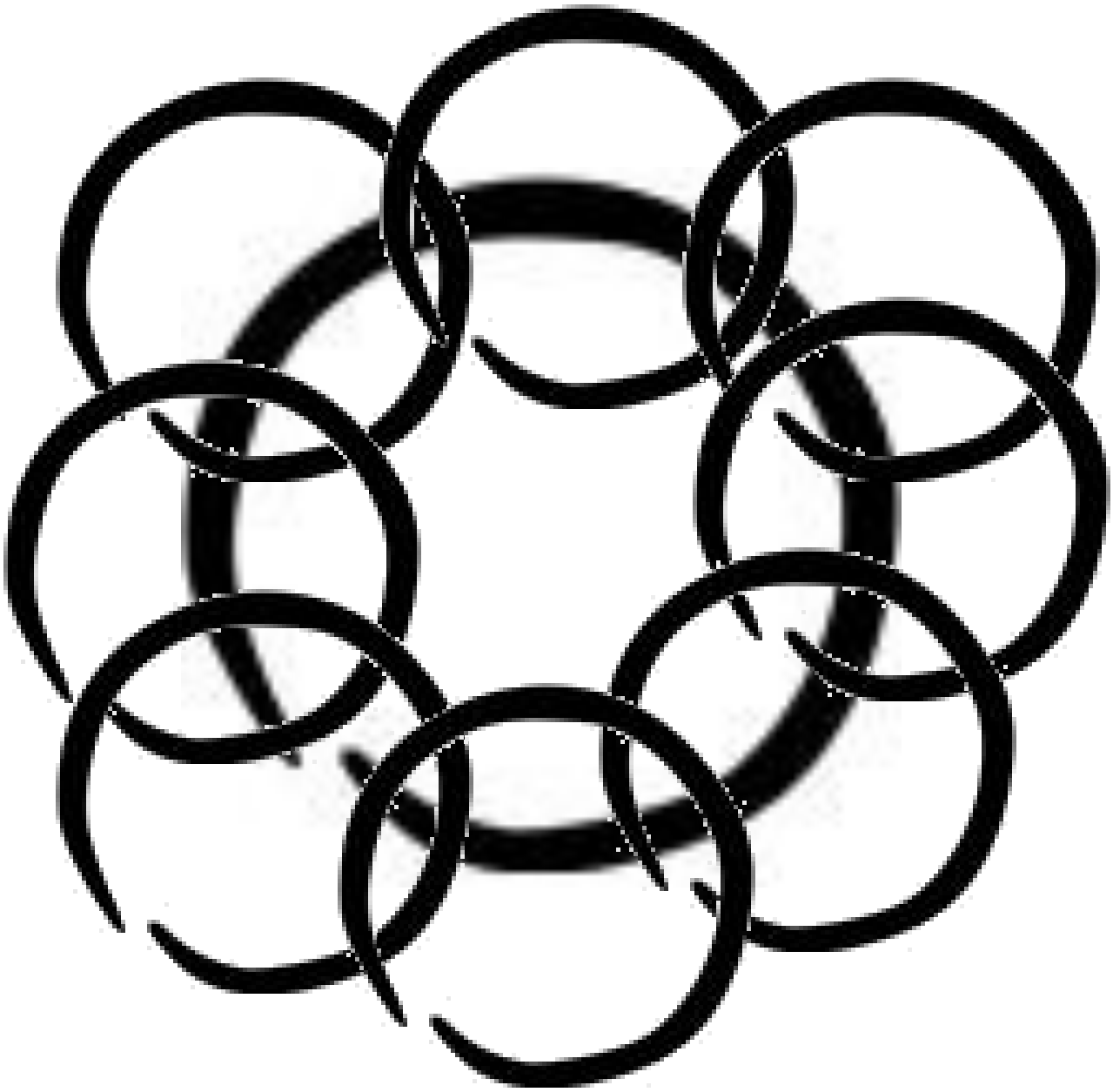
Fill in your boundaries, using the center circle for the areas you can control and the attached circles for those boundaries you have partial control over and the white space outside for those you have no control over.



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When expressing your boundaries to others, it is important to focus on communication. No one can really know what you are thinking and therefore when you are trying to communicate what someone has done and how it makes you feel, follow these two steps:

Step One:

Say, “When you”.

Give a specific example of what the person does that makes you upset or uncomfortable. Do it at the time the incident occurs if possible. If too much time passes between the incident and your encounter, the other person does not have a fair part of the conversation and true boundaries cannot be set. Can you honestly say you even remember much less understand what someone is upset about several days, weeks or even months after the event? Let’s face it, we have a hard time remembering what we had for breakfast on certain days, so play fair.

Step Two:

Say, "I feel."

This is referred to as owning the feeling. It is as important to do this for ourselves, as it is for others. By stating the feeling out loud we are affirming that we have a right to those feelings. We are affirming it to ourselves and taking responsibility for our reality. The other person agreeing with or understanding how you feel is not as important as hearing it ourselves and understanding that we have a right to our feelings. It is vitally important to own our own voice.

Then follow up the two steps with telling the person what you want. Set your boundaries. Just because you tell someone what you do not like, does not mean you have communicated what you like and how you would like the situation to be handled.

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Professional Boundaries

Professional boundaries are not much different than personal boundaries except that the lines are drawn more strongly. There are parameters in which the relationship between the Personal Care Worker staff and the client occurs. In addition to safety, boundaries make relationships professional, give the Personal Care Worker and client a legitimate sense of control in the relationship and result in the client getting the maximum benefit from the care being provided. They are the line between the self of the Personal Care Worker and that of the client.

Setting Healthy Professional Boundaries

When we talk about professional or workplace boundaries, it can sometimes be a difficult concept to grasp because it isn't always defined in a job description. However, just because we can't identify and set all boundaries within a job description, doesn't mean that they aren't there or that they aren't important. Boundaries are present whenever a person or company interfaces with another person or company. It is a general misconception that having good boundaries will distance you from others or make you appear unprofessional. On the contrary, the truth is that when you know where you end and others begin, you can then closely engage with others because you won't feel overwhelmed or unprotected. Having a sense of autonomy prevents the need to distance ourselves from others with a barrier.

Professional boundaries are important because they define the limits and responsibilities of the people with whom you interact in the workplace. This is particularly important when your workspace is in someone's home or a facility. When everyone involved is made aware who is responsible for what, healthier workplace environments are created. It then becomes very difficult for someone to blame others for their failed or inadequate performance and good job performance can clearly be identified.

Providing quality service and developing compassionate relationships with clients is the main goal of a Personal Care Worker. At times, self discloser is a means of making a close connection. **However, sharing too much information can be damaging for both the Personal Care Worker and the client.**

Active listening places proper focus on your client's needs and creates an environment of trust. It allows your client to safely communicate their feelings, concerns and goals while maintaining your position as a professional and not just a friend.

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Establishing and Maintaining Professional Boundaries

An individual's professional boundaries can often be defined in terms of a job description, as long as it clearly outlines basic responsibilities and reporting relationships. However, many times job descriptions define work responsibilities in terms that are too broad and general to clearly identify boundaries. In such cases, specific clarification of an individual's duties and responsibilities will be required before an effective and efficient workplace environment can be created.

Problems in your professional boundaries can become more clearly identified when you answer these questions honestly:

- Who gives you your assignments and to whom do you report?
- Do you try to arrange and control your schedule and assignments with your client outside of your company's scheduler?
- Who gives you feedback on your work performance and sets your workday priorities?
- How are you and your company keeping your client's personal information secure?
- Do you understand and feel that you are not a lone provider of care but part of a team and must be an integral part of the coordination of care?
- Are you performing tasks outside of the company's scope of service because you believe it is beneficial for the client regardless of the liability for you, your co-workers and your company?
- Do you commit to assignments because you feel obligated to say "yes" but then either back out of your commitment or give less than 100% to the client and the assignment?
- Do you openly and honestly admit the areas in which you need additional training?
- Are you sharing too much personal information with your client, caregivers and/or co-workers?
- Do you behave and conduct yourself in a professional manner on every assignment, every time?
- Do you report incidences where you have personally made errors even if they may never be discovered?

An organization which clearly establishes boundaries both for employees and clients, demonstrates their commitment to success. An effective organization understands that failing to define boundaries, having no boundaries, or having inappropriately rigid boundaries can have an unfavorable impact on their organization and employees. Interpersonal boundaries are essential to maintaining professional boundaries. Professional and interpersonal boundaries substantially impact the workplace environment. Interpersonal boundary parameters include:

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- The tone of voice people use with each other
- The attitude and approach people use with each other
- The ability to focus on work objectives even with people you don't like or with whom you are having personal conflict
- The ability to effectively set limits with others who have poor boundaries
- Clearly defining the consequences when a boundary is violated and sticking to those consequences

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Denial and Manipulation

It is easy to become overly involved in a client's life. We see their struggle, wipe their tears, listen to their pain and ultimately become attached beyond the healthy professional boundaries. No matter how big or how small the offense, every person who works in the health care industry at one point or another has become too close to a client and the lines have been fuzzy and boundaries were crossed.

There are two areas of real danger:

The first, is not being able to identify that you have become too close and crossed the boundary lines. Many Personal Care Workers make excuses for their feelings and actions. By denying or failing to identify the boundaries which are weak or broken, fuel is added to an out of control fire. Personal Care Workers who can identify and admit their violations can take the steps to stop the action and correct the boundaries which have been violated, therefore, restoring the healthy professional boundaries necessary for the proper care of the client.

The second, is when manipulation is involved. A Personal Care Worker who has been with the same client for months or years can easily become too close over time. When too much personal information is exchanged the client can become aware of personal issues such as financial hardship. Although inappropriate, the client can feel compelled to help the Personal Care Worker and offer them a gift of money. Many times the Personal Care Worker will state, that they never asked the client for money and in most cases it is probably true. However, just because the client offers them money without being asked, it is still inappropriate to accept. Are there clients with whom you have overstepped your boundaries and how will you change them going forward?

Boundaries lead to healthy relationships, personal independence, self confidence and success. Although, it is a process and not a quick fix, identifying, establishing, communicating and maintaining both personal and professional boundaries in your life will no doubt promote the freedom and reassurance of a life well defined and lived.