

My Boundaries Tell Me So

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What is a boundary?

A boundary is a system of setting limits that allows a person to create a sense of self while owning his or her life in a way that inspires self-responsibility, and therefore personal freedom, authentic connections and self-control.

The following is a limited overview of possible boundaries.

Physical boundaries: physical closeness, money, gifts, food, energy, property, eye contact, sexual behavior, touching, clothes, shelter, safety, space, noise, smoke pollution, time

Mental/Emotional boundaries: beliefs, feelings, choices, thoughts, ideas, decisions, projections, needs, sexuality, love, confidences, roles, rules, interests, relationships, responsibilities, respect, intuition

Spiritual Boundaries: religion, spiritual practices, and our connection to our Inner Self and our Higher Power, spiritual path, spiritual practices, spiritual preferences and beliefs

Why do we need boundaries?

Boundaries are the gatekeepers of our energy.

Boundaries are the gatekeepers of the energy we allow in and the energy we allow out of our life.

Boundaries offer us the opportunity to decide who, what, when, and how we will allow people, places and things to access *the property of me*. They are a check point, like a guard at the gate, who decides who has access to me, and who does not. Likewise, this check point determines the amount of energy, and the form in which we express that energy, with others.

Do you have a reliable guard at your gate?

When you hear yourself saying, “I just don't have enough time to do everything, ” you might as well add to that sentence, “...because I have over-committed, can't say no, or a deeper (less conscious) motivator is influencing my choice to over extend myself.”

How many times have you said, “I am stressed,” and thought to yourself, *how am I ever going to get caught up, or get everything done?* How often do you find

yourself thinking that there are not enough hours in the day? How often do you find yourself needing to be at two places at once? How often do you wake-up thinking, “why did I agree to do this? ” about something you've committed to do that day? How often do you cancel plans and disappoint others because what you wanted to say in the first place was simply, “no thank you?”

If you think about yourself in terms of units of energy, it is very revealing to realize just how in charge we are of how our life unfolds.

Everything we do requires energy. We even burn calories (the unit that determines just how much energy we are burning) while we sleep. Though sleeping is a necessary activity for energy renewal, it actually takes some energy to renew our energy.

We can expand the units of energy we have available to us through healthy living such as proper nutrition, regular exercise and good sleep, however there is a point at which we can not create more units of energy. Our energy, though renewable, is limited. We only have so much energy to work with in a day's time.

Sometimes our bodies slow us down without our conscious consent. We experience major withdrawals in

our units of energy, such as when we catch a cold, or if we experience seasonal or chronic health issues such as diabetes, asthma, or allergies.

Anyway you look at it; we are all the sole manager of the units of energy that make up who we are, what we do and how we do it.

The units of energy available to us in our life, and what we do with them, define our capacities for involvement in our life. We can only participate in life as fully and as completely as the units of energy we possess allow for. However, *how* we participate in our life, or rather, how we divvy up our units of energy among the various parts of our life is entirely up to us!

What are the top three most important priorities in your life?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2. Do you feel like the decisions you make about how you invest the units of energy available to you create the best life for you? ___ Yes ___ No

If you answered yes, how do you currently use the units of energy available to you to reach your three goals?

If you answered no, what decisions can you make today to change how you use your units of energy to better reach your goals?

What do boundaries do for us?

Boundaries define us. Boundaries are created through a relationship with our self. In order to create boundaries, we must know what it is we are defining. Boundaries define where one person ends and another begins. Boundaries define our interests, wants, comforts, likes and dislikes. They inform us about what is possible, and about what is probable.

If you find yourself more concerned about the wants, needs, likes and dislikes of important others in your life then your boundaries are probably not solidly in place.

In this case, your boundaries do not serve to define you as separate from those around you. You simply fold yourself into others in a way that leaves you without your own identity, your own sense of individuality, and without ever claiming your right to exist as a separate entity in and of yourself.

You are entirely unique, a one-of-a-kind, and there will never be another quite like you. The boundaries you create and maintain around the one-of-a-kind you

determine how this world will experience the uniqueness you have to offer.

If you do not do the work of separating yourself as an individual, identifying your likes, dislikes, interests, wants, needs, goals, dreams, skills and abilities as uniquely yours, your existence will simply become an extension of whatever it is you involve yourself in.

Without boundaries, there can be no real clear understanding of who you are and what you stand for. Without boundaries, the world misses out on the unique contributions you have to offer, and so do you!

Boundaries reveal our authentic intentions. A boundary is not your actual opinion, want or beliefs. *A boundary is a mechanism that encourages or discourages the expression of our true self.* In order to encourage the expression of your true self, you must be able to access and define your true self.

For example, if you believe in the right for women to have an abortion, your boundary is not the actual belief. Your boundary is how you express or address this belief.

Imagine that you are among a group of friends talking to some people you have just met. The topic turns to the issue of abortion. Your friends are expressing an adamant belief in the right to life, and though you have not said anything about this issue so far, your friends are communicating from a perspective of “we,” suggesting that you too believe as they do.

How you respond to this is a reflection of your boundary. Your boundary isn't that you believe differently than your friends do about abortion. The boundary issue is the misrepresentation of what you believe. How you address this is a reflection of your boundaries around this belief.

You may choose to let it go because the energy investment is not worth it to you. Or you may speak up and state your beliefs directly as a way to respect the intellectual boundaries of what you believe and how you feel about the topic. Neither response is “right” nor “wrong,” rather it is simply a reflection of your boundaries around this belief of yours, and your wish to be known authentically for your beliefs about abortion.

Intention on the surface is a wish, a desire, a purpose or a goal. Authentic intentions are what we believe we will experience, or want to experience, as a result of working

toward the realization of our wish, desire, purpose or goal.

For example, your intention may be to get fit by working out every day. However, your authentic intention (your deepest hope in doing so) may be to attract or retain a partner whom you believe won't love you if you are not fit. The point is, rarely do our intentions stop at the surface of what they appear to be. We are almost always committed to something deeper, and it is that deepest (often unconscious) commitment we have that drives most of our choices.

Our priorities are revealed through our choices. Sometimes the intention behind our choices may not be obvious, though the reality of our priority is deeply imbedded in the decisions and choices we make every day. Often our priorities clash.

For example, someone who wishes to be a good provider for his family may find that in order to do so, he must work many hours and forgo time with his loved ones to achieve the financial goals he has set. If he has a goal to also prioritize time with his family he will have to make a decision about which is more important. Is it more important to provide financial security for his family, or is it more important to be available to the family and able to

participate fully in their lives? Many people face these competing priorities.

Another common example for gay men and women revolves around self-disclosure. Do I prioritize my self-respect and value by owning my whole self, sexual orientation included, or do I censor and conceal the aspects of me (my sexual orientation) to prioritize my need for acceptance? The priority dilemma becomes a struggle between the desire for authenticity and the desire for acceptance. For some the struggle is between authenticity and safety.

If you find yourself resistant to having an open boundary around the disclosure of your sexual orientation, ask yourself what your deepest, most authentic intention is.

Do you perceive you are protecting your loved ones from feeling hurt or responsible, or perhaps could you feel so ashamed about being gay that you are protecting yourself from the pain of being seen for who you really are? Challenge yourself to be as honest as possible. *When you can identify your authentic intentions, you regain some power over your life choices and the boundaries you exercise.*

Boundaries allow for authenticity. We are all a unique combination of strengths, skills, characteristics, abilities, and challenges. Exercising our authentic boundaries will reveal the truth in our relationships as we learn how others react to our real selves.

Our boundaries determine what we will let the world see of whom we are, and what we will keep hidden. *Setting different boundaries in different situations does not change who we are, it simply determines the level of transparency we offer* - what we allow others to see of us.

Different relationships require different boundaries. When, for example, you go for a job interview the boundaries around that exchange (by law) require that the potential employer must stay within appropriate bounds which do not include inquires about your relationship status, your ethnicity, your religion, or other variables about your self that are considered private.

In a social setting with friends, however, it is not only common, but often it is appropriate to exchange information about different aspects of your self. Our boundaries protect our authentic self by giving us the flexibility to reveal the parts of ourselves that we desire to

in the situations where we feel safe to do so, and to protect the parts of our self that are not safe in certain settings so that we can keep our authentic self unharmed.

Boundaries guide us. *The essence of boundaries is taking responsibility, and at the center of responsibility is choice.* Like the lines on the highway, the handrails on a staircase, or the tracks for a train, boundaries serve as guides to keep us on within the lines of our own life.

Boundaries are about self-care, self-definition, self-respect, and self-identity. Boundaries are not always visible like lines on a football field. Some boundaries are internal and can only be seen by those who possess them. The internal boundaries serve as a moral compass, an inner guide which informs us of our abilities and our limits.

Boundaries allow us to get where we want to go while being who we want to be.

Boundaries keep us safe. Boundaries are limits that can be as flexible as a rubber band, as transparent as a window, or as solid as a brick wall. Some boundaries are sharp - like an electrically charged barbed wire fence that

can keep criminals in or criminals out. Others are sharp like a cutting sarcastic remark or a cold, hurtful insult.

Not all boundaries are respectful. In fact, many people use hurtful behaviors to serve as a boundary. Pointing a gun at someone is an example a boundary. The gun serves as an extreme boundary of self-protection. Some less extreme, but also hurtful boundaries include criticism, sarcasm, misdirected anger, physical abuse or violence, and one of the most common, silences.

Silence is a blatant boundary. Silence, the kind where someone is silent *at* you, not with you, is a clear boundary that says, “what is going on inside of me is not accessible to you right now - I don't trust that you are safe to share my feelings with.” The message could also be, “My silence is your consequence for crossing a line that I did not want crossed. I’m taking control of how I will or will not be treated by not giving you any access to me right now.” Access closed. Stay out.

Boundaries teach others how to treat us. Boundaries are external guidelines that inform others how to treat us, and reveal to others how we treat ourselves. When you

begin to feel mistreated by others, first examine how you are treating yourself.

Most people learn how to treat us by observing how we treat ourselves. They examine what we will tolerate, won't tolerate and how we respond to the events of our life to determine what is safe to try with us or not try with us. If you are a person who continuously overextends herself, taking on more than you can deliver, being available to everyone and everything, then you are sending a loud message to the world - I'll do it, I'll do anything.

Think about your work environment. Inevitably there is always someone at work who will do whatever everyone else does not want to. That person is the first to be asked when something needs to be done. Her boundaries are not strong enough to protect her time and energy. That person is also the same person who likely goes home and says to her partner, “I get no respect at work.” Unfortunately, the lack of respect for herself starts within.

Inevitably there is also someone at work who operates on the other extreme - that is the person who no one approaches, everyone fears and it's easier to not deal with them than to involve them in projects. Their boundaries are too rigid - not flexible enough to allow people

appropriate access to them. We teach others how to treat us through our boundaries. Ideally we operate from a place of flexibility. Boundaries serve to protect us from harm, and while opening us up to possibilities of life.

Boundaries encourage responsibility. In order to take responsibility for our lives, we must own what is ours. In order to gain control of our feelings, behaviors, choices and the like, we must first realize that they are ours and no one else's. They reside in our own souls. Ownership implies responsibility.

Boundaries teach us that since the feeling is on my property, I have to own it, and once I own it, I can do something about it. The greatest violation to our self is not so much when someone else ignores our boundaries; it is when we do not honor our own boundaries (with or without the other person's cooperation.) Boundaries can only be as clear and only as strong as the extent to which we support our own wants, limits, choices and values.

Boundaries allow for growth. They may be moveable because they are weak and can't withhold the strain of pressure, or they are moveable because they are strong enough to flex when necessary to allow us to grow.

Boundaries must be permeable enough to allow for new information which supports growth and change. When we are inflexible in our boundaries, we are at risk of becoming isolated and stunting our growth. When we allow our boundaries to receive new information, open our minds to new thought processes, allow ourselves to take risks and participate in new experiences, we learn and grow.

Our boundaries are what determine the extent to which we allow new information, experiences, and opportunities into our life. Make room for new experiences so that you are sure to continue growing and learning.

Boundaries Create Margin. Author of *Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves you Need*, Richard Swenson writes in great detail about the concept of margin. He describes how we have made so many technological advancements in our society that we have essentially become so efficient that we have left no margin for the unexpected events that arise in our life, the need for relaxation and renewal, or other pleasures that are considered "inefficient."

The concept is simple. The less margin we have in our lives, the less room there is to breathe. Margin is defined as the space between our responsibilities and our abilities/capacities. [*Capacity - Responsibility = Margin*]

Margin is the unclaimed space in our lives (emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, financially, and socially) that we have the option to use however we choose. Margin is the opposite of stress. Margin is plentiful, unspoken for time and energy, a reserve of sorts.

Here are some concrete examples of margin. A time margin is leaving 15 minutes earlier than you need to, *just in case*. A financial margin is saving extra money from each paycheck so that you have a reserve of money should an unexpected expense arise, or an opportunity for something enjoyable (such as a vacation!) surfaces in the future. Mental margin is leaving enough mind-space to just be - to not be full of lists of things to do, or worries about what you have to do tomorrow or how you should have done this or that today.

On a scale of one to ten, ten being a lot, one being very little, how much margin do you operate with in your life on a regular basis? _____

If your number is 2 or less, what do you think your authentic intention (the unconscious motivation) for your choices to fill your life so full?

What would you do with an entire 24 hour period of time that was completely stress-free, obligation-free, and was without an agenda of any sort?

What is the benefit to you by not allowing the margin for these opportunities in your life?

How do I know if my Boundaries are working?

Recognize Your Unrecognized and Unexercised Boundaries. Resentment, fear, depression, anger, or the feelings of loss of personal power are all clues about your unrecognized boundaries. Anger is a natural emotional response to any boundary violation. Whenever we feel wronged or betrayed in some way it is a signal to our brain (via our emotional response) that we have been harmed in some way, to some degree (emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, or spiritually).

The signal of anger communicates “danger” to our self. The very best thing we can do in response to our anger is listening to the hurt to determine the exact boundary violation that has occurred. When we uncover the boundary that did not serve to protect us, we can begin taking responsibility for strengthening the weak link in our boundary system.

Exercise Your Unrecognized Boundaries

Make a list of your current frustrations, hurts, and upsets. For each item on your list, complete these sentences.

Pick one situation and complete the following:

1. What upsets/frustrates/hurts me is...

2. This upsets me because...

3. I participate in this happening by...

4. The boundary I need to work on here is...

5. Specifically what I need to do to reinforce this boundary is...

6. A competing priority of mine that interferes with my setting this boundary is...

7. In order for my behaviors to match what is most important to me, I need to...

Example: What upsets me is being late. This upsets me because I feel irresponsible and disrespectful to our friends when we don't arrive when we agreed to. I participate in this happening by not taking responsibility for my part in being on time. The boundary I need to work on here is honoring my own agreements to other people and doing what it takes to be on time. Specifically what I need to do to reinforce this boundary is to commit to activities on my behalf only, not yours, and allow you to take responsibility for your own commitments. If I must leave without you in order to arrive on time, I will need to do so. A competing priority for me is that I do not want to upset you or cause you to be mad at me. In order for my behaviors to match my priorities I need to be willing to upset you in order to be true to myself and my word.

Make Boundary Statements. You can use the following formula to help you communicate a limit to someone.

Take the example above (if applicable) and complete the following:

1. **If you** - a description of the behavior we find unacceptable (again being as descriptive as possible.)

2. **I will** - a description of what action you will take to protect and take care of your self in the event the other person violates the boundary.

3. **If you** continue **this** behavior - a description of what steps you will take to protect the boundary that you have set.

Example: **If you** are unable to get ready on time for the next event we are invited to, **I will** leave at the time we agreed to leave (with or without you) so that I am on time. **If this behavior continues** I will have to re-evaluate whether or not I want to continue making shared plans with you.

Make your “Yes” Count. The boundary-challenged person has such difficulty saying “no” that what happens is his “yes” begins to lose its power. If everyone begins to expect that you will say “yes” then a “no” is less likely to be respected or honored. Say “No” when you mean “no” and “yes” when you mean “yes.”

There is no “yes” without a “no.” If every time someone asked something of you and you always responded with “yes” eventually no one will know which “yes” means you really want to, and which yes means, “of course I will even though I don't want to because I always say yes.”

How can I better define who I am?

your thoughts or opinions about something you've read

Know Yourself. In order to clearly define yourself and your boundaries you must develop an authentic understanding and appreciation for who you are. These are some tips to help you develop a deeper connection with yourself by showing interest in your own thoughts and feelings.

- ***Keep a journal*** in which you write your thoughts and feelings on a daily basis - uncensored, whatever comes to mind, no holding back
- ***Assert your opinion*** (respectfully) when you have one during conversations with others. Engage in discussions that help you formulate more clearly what you do think and how you do believe about something
- ***Read the paper***, watch the news, or subscribe to online news-ezines. Stay current about what's happening in our world and make a point to comment at least once a day to someone about

- ***Take risks to do new things.*** The more experiences you have in life, the more you engage in the world around you, the more clearly you will become about what works for you and what doesn't. Open yourself to new people, places and things. Invite those things you enjoy and appreciate into your life and cut out those things which do not contribute to your highest good.

Reading Suggestions

Boundaries: Where you End and I Begin | Anne Katherine, M.A.

Broken Toys Broken Dreams: Understanding and Healing Boundaries, Codependence, Compulsion and Family Relationships | Terry Kellog, MA

Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need. Dr. Richard Swenson

Boundaries and Relationships: Knowing, Protecting and Enjoying the Self | Charles Whitfield, MD