

SEVEN TIPS FOR CREATING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES



Unfortunately, a boundary isn't something you can just keep in your head in the hope that everyone will magically know about it. Like it or not you have to express it to others, otherwise how will they even know it exists?

However, it's also possible to set boundaries politely, respectfully and lovingly — and by doing so, your relationships can become healthier as there will be much less room for simmering resentments. As Brené Brown points out in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 'When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated.' And while you might experience feelings of guilt or unease at first, the more you practice your 'no' the easier it will become to say it (and the more others will get used to hearing it too).

1. State your feelings and set limits

Explain calmly how a particular behaviour affects you, then follow this by putting a clear boundary in place. For instance, 'When you make jokes about my weight, I feel terrible. Please stop.' Continue to repeat this as often as you need to until the person gets the message, but remember to keep your cool while doing so. If they refuse to stop, then it is possible that the relationship is bullying or abusive and you may need to seek support.

2. Be short and to the point

If you set a boundary in a way that's overly complex or convoluted, then people might not even understand what you're saying at all. While it's fine to want to be polite, subtlety can sometimes be the enemy of being heard. So aim to keep it simple, beginning with statements like 'I'd like...', 'I need...' or 'I expect'. This has the benefit of being straightforward and also keeps the focus on you instead of the other person, meaning that they are less likely to feel attacked.

3. Never apologise

It's all too easy to feel that every 'no' must be followed with a 'sorry', but that's not the case at all. You have a right to your boundaries and don't need to apologise for them. In fact, saying 'sorry' can sometimes weaken the effect of setting a limit, as it suggests that you think you are doing something wrong. Instead, aim for polite but firm statements like: 'Thanks for the invite, that sounds like fun but I'm not free.'

4. Don't let people poke holes in your 'No'

If you find it hard to refuse people, then you might feel you have to offer detailed explanations for doing so. But the problem is that when you over-explain, people can use it as a way to find weaknesses in your boundary. So don't say, 'Thanks for inviting me to your party, but I can't make it as I'm not drinking alcohol right now for health reasons, you know?'

If you say this, then you run the risk of your friend promising to make you tasty mocktails and nagging you until you change your mind.

Instead say, 'Thanks for inviting me to your party, but I can't make it.' It's not necessary to explain why you can't make it. If the person pushes you for more details then you don't have to give them, however if you decide to, keep it short and sweet.

5. Be resilient to guilt trips and manipulation

There might be some people in your life who simply can't handle the word 'no'. They might needle and wheedle until they get their way, throw tantrums, give you the silent treatment or just ignore your boundary altogether.

If this happens, remind yourself that boundaries help to keep relationships healthy, so you will both benefit from having them in place. It's also worth remembering that people can take time to get used to new boundaries and might test them for a while, especially if they are very close to you.

However, if you feel that you are struggling to maintain boundaries with certain individuals then you might benefit from seeking advice from a counsellor.

6. Get comfortable with negative emotions

Stating boundaries — especially when you're not used to doing so — can bring up feelings of guilt, fear, shame, panic, unease, sadness or awkwardness. Learn to expect this as a natural part of setting new limits in your interactions with others, rather than as a sign that you were 'wrong' to put one there. If it helps, you could create rituals for processing any feelings that come up, such as talking to a friend, meditation, journalling or simply going for a long walk.

7. Create consequences for boundary violations

For instance, 'From now on, if you raise your voice at me on the phone, I will hang up' or 'If you don't pay me back the money on the date we have agreed on, I won't be able to lend you any more in future'. However, it's important that you follow through with your promises or your boundary won't get taken seriously. Also, accept that you might have to uphold your limit several times until the person gets the message, especially if their problem behaviour is longstanding. Sometimes, it just takes patience, persistence and resilience. Remember that if someone crosses a clear boundary then this is their responsibility, not yours, so they will have to deal with any consequences.

Learning to set limits with people isn't easy, so try not to be too hard on yourself if you don't do it 'perfectly' at first. Also, don't be surprised if you get a bit of pushback, feel overwhelmed with guilt or find yourself apologising. Like any other interpersonal skill this is something that you will refine over time. But it's all well worth it as when you develop stronger boundaries, your life starts to thrive. For instance, you might feel less burned out, have more time for your passions and just communicate better in general.

Boundaries are about having your needs honoured by others, but they are also about honouring your own needs. So while setting healthy limits can improve your relationships, remember that by practicing the art of saying 'no', you can also improve your relationship with yourself.