

“Taking Control of Your Life by Setting Boundaries”

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“The purpose of having boundaries is to protect and take care of ourselves. We need to be able to tell other people when they are acting in ways that are not acceptable to us. A first step is starting to know that we have a right to protect and defend ourselves. That we have not only the right, but the duty to take responsibility for how we allow others to treat us.” ~ Robert Burney

I recently taught a six-week class on boundaries and realized that establishing healthy boundaries in our relationships centers around recognizing where one thing ends and another begins, or “where you end, and I begin”. We are taught to be loving and giving, and to focus on others instead of ourselves, which can lead us to forget our own limits and limitations. Boundaries allow us to have some control, whereas without boundaries, we never know what might happen because we are driven by emotions instead of the need to protect ourselves. Boundaries allow us control over our own actions and feelings, not over others’ reactions to the limits we set. This distinguishes boundaries from manipulation. Through manipulation, we are directive and specific in our actions only in an effort to create a specific outcome. Setting a healthy boundary means letting go of the outcome. Letting go is the first step to gaining control.

All types of boundaries, physical, emotional and spiritual, share one common thread: they are personal property lines that define who you are and who you are not. Gaining control over our lives means first recognizing the lack of and need for boundaries. It is important to remember that establishing and maintaining boundaries is a fluid concept...we may have to renegotiate the terms of our boundaries in response to how others respond to them.

We need to understand that creating and maintaining boundaries is challenging, often because of how they conflict with our expectations of ourselves, and often because of how others resist our efforts because of the ways our boundaries affect them. We wonder if setting boundaries means that we are being selfish, when appropriate boundaries actually increase our ability to care about others. They help us to distinguish between want and need by understanding that we may not necessarily want what we need. Others’ may resist our boundary-setting efforts, because of the discomfort it may create for them. But discomfort does not mean injury. Consider the difference between harm and hurt. What hurts us may not harm us. It is important to remember the difference between the two when considering the effects of your boundaries on others.

We can be plagued with feelings of obligation, and so setting boundaries can cause feelings of guilt. We get so focused on what we can do and assume that if we can, we should. But, this can leave us feeling emotionally depleted and resentful. These feelings can tell us that our boundaries have been violated. But our feelings are our responsibility and it is only through our decision to regain control of our lives that change can truly take place. When we clearly define where we end and where others begin, we can feel a sense of control in our daily lives because we have established our own rules. And we can renegotiate the rules as needed to take care of ourselves.