

# What Are Personal Boundaries? How Do I Get Some?

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If you have difficulty saying no, override your needs to please others, or are bothered by someone who is demanding, controlling, criticizing, pushy, abusive, invasive, pleading, or even smothering you with kindness, it's your responsibility to speak up.

## Types of Boundaries

There are several areas where boundaries apply:

- **Material boundaries** determine whether you give or lend things, such as your money, car, clothes, books, food, or toothbrush.
- **Physical boundaries** pertain to your personal space, privacy, and body. Do you give a handshake or a hug – to whom and when? How do you feel about loud music, nudity, and locked doors?
- **Mental boundaries** apply to your thoughts, values, and opinions. Are you easily suggestible? Do you know what you believe, and can you hold onto your opinions? Can you listen with an open mind to someone else's opinion without becoming rigid? If you become highly emotional, argumentative, or defensive, you may have weak emotional boundaries.

- **Emotional boundaries** distinguish separating your emotions and responsibility for them from someone else's. It's like an imaginary line or force field that separates you and others. Healthy boundaries prevent you from giving advice, blaming or accepting blame. They protect you from feeling guilty for someone else's negative feelings or problems and taking others' comments personally. High reactivity suggests weak emotional boundaries. Healthy emotional boundaries require clear internal boundaries – knowing your feelings and your responsibilities to yourself and others.
- **Sexual boundaries** protect your comfort level with sexual touch and activity – what, where, when, and with whom.
- **Spiritual boundaries** relate to your beliefs and experiences in connection with God or a higher power.

## Why It's Hard

It's hard for some individuals to set boundaries because:

1. They put others' needs and feelings first;
2. They don't know themselves;
3. They don't feel they have rights;
4. They believe setting boundaries jeopardizes the relationship; and
5. They never learned to have healthy boundaries.

Boundaries are learned. If yours weren't valued as a child, you didn't learn you had them. Any kind of abuse violates personal boundaries, including teasing. For example, my brother ignored my pleas for him to stop tickling me until I could barely breathe. This made me feel powerless and that I didn't have a right to say "stop" when I was uncomfortable. In recovery, I gained the capacity to tell a masseuse to stop and use less pressure. In some cases, boundary violations affect a child's ability to mature into an independent, responsible adult.

## You Have Rights

You may not believe you have any rights if yours weren't respected growing up. For example, you have a right to privacy, to say "no," to be addressed with courtesy and

respect, to change your mind or cancel commitments, to ask people you hire to work the way you want, to ask for help, to be left alone, to conserve your energy, and not to answer a question, the phone, or an email.

Think about all the situations where these rights apply. Write how you feel and how you currently handle them. How often do you say “yes” when you’d like to say “no?”

Write what you want to happen. List your personal bill of rights. What prevents you from asserting them? Write statements expressing your bottom line. Be kind. For example, “Please don’t criticize (or call) me (or borrow my . . .),” and “Thank you for thinking of me, but I regret I won’t be joining (or able to help) you . . .”

## Internal Boundaries

Internal boundaries involve regulating your relationship with yourself. Think of them as self-discipline and healthy management of time, thoughts, emotions, behavior and impulses. If you’re procrastinating, doing things you neither have to nor want to do, or overdoing and not getting enough rest, recreation, or balanced meals, you may be neglecting internal physical boundaries. Learning to manage negative thoughts and feelings empowers you, as does the ability to follow through on goals and commitments to yourself.

Healthy emotional and mental internal boundaries help you not to assume responsibility for, or obsess about, other people’s feelings and problems – something codependents commonly do. Strong internal boundaries curb suggestibility. You think about yourself, rather than automatically agreeing with others’ criticism or advice. You’re then empowered to set external emotional boundaries if you choose. Similarly, since you’re accountable for your feelings and actions, you don’t blame others. When you’re blamed, if you don’t feel responsible, instead of defending yourself or apologizing, you can say, “I don’t take responsibility for that.”

## Guilt and Resentment

Anger often is a signal that action is required. If you feel resentful or victimized and are blaming someone or something, it might mean that you haven't been setting boundaries. If you feel anxious or guilty about setting boundaries, remember, your relationship suffers when you're unhappy. Once you get practice setting boundaries, you feel empowered and suffer less [anxiety](#), resentment, and guilt. Generally, you receive more respect from others and your relationships improve.

## Setting Effective Boundaries

People often say they set a boundary, but it didn't help. There's an art to setting boundaries. If it's done in anger or by nagging, you won't be heard. Boundaries are not meant to punish, but are for your well-being and protection. They're more effective when you're assertive, calm, firm, and courteous. If that doesn't work, you may need to communicate consequences to encourage compliance. It's essential, however, that you never threaten a consequence you're not fully prepared to carry out.

It takes time, support, and relearning to be able to set effective boundaries. Self-awareness and learning to be assertive are the first steps. Setting boundaries isn't selfish. It's self-love – you say “yes” to yourself each time you say “no.” It builds self-esteem. But it usually takes encouragement to make yourself a priority and to persist, especially when you receive pushback.