

Boundaries

The Polyamorous Misanthrope

I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that each and every one of the relationship problems I have ever had can be traced to one single thing. Now me? I'm usually suspicious of the "silver bullet" or the "instant solution" or the "single answer" to anything. I like things to be black and white – simple. Thing is, they're usually not, so I rarely permit myself to get excited or happy when some genuinely is, always looking for the catch.

But this time, it's true. Every single relationship problem I have ever encountered in my life has been because of a lack of appropriate boundaries.

Okay, note the qualifier "appropriate". We have that little shade of gray that makes it acceptable after all. <grin>.

So what is a boundary? At its simplest, it is a line that says, "This is me. This is my locus of control and where I have total say." A big and obvious boundary that many people have is, "I will not permit myself to be hit. If I am hit, I will leave the relationship. If you pursue me, I will take legal action to protect myself." A small and subtle one might be, "It is important to me to be on time to an event. If you are not ready in time to go to an event, we can work out an alternative –among which could include separate cars or me getting a ride with someone else who also finds it important to be on time."

Notice in both cases you're not telling the other person what to do. You're saying what you will do. You're also not telling the person how to act. You're not judging the person for her choices, you're not telling him he has to have the same desires or needs as you. Not that it does the least good to say these things, 'cause people are individuals and have their own needs and desires.

Boundaries improve relationships because they take the pressure off. You acknowledge that you're completely responsible for meeting your own needs, and you get rid of any emotional investment in the other person doing so.

For your boundaries to work for you, you have to have a few tools, though.

1. You must know what you want – This can be a subtle thing, and often you need to focus on "meta wants". When you're fuming that someone is late out the door, what you want isn't necessarily for the person to stop primping at the mirror, but that you want to be on time! Make sure you are very grounded in the "meta want". It makes step two easier.
2. You must detach your wants from the other person's behavior. This can be a rough one, because it often looks like your wants are dependant on what other people do. Thing is, as long as you attach your wants to another person's behavior, you're just asking to be frustrated. You have no control over how someone else acts! It is supremely important to separate your needs from others' behavior.
3. You must choose to ask for what you want — I once heard someone comment, "If you do not ask for what you want, you deny the other person the opportunity to say 'yes'."
4. You must know what you want to do if the person says "no". While the other person has the opportunity to say "yes", they also have the right to say "no". What do you do then? Well that seriously depends. Boundaries are not hard, fast and rigid at all times, nor should they be. Let's say you want the dishes washed, have asked for it, and the

other person says “no”. (For this example, we’re going to presume that this is an adult relationship, and you’re not enforcing parental boundaries here...) You could say, “It is one of my personal boundaries that I will only be in relationships with people who will do the dishes when I ask it of them.” After all, boundaries are individual, and that’s your right to choose. You could say, “What I want is a clean kitchen. Therefore, I shall do the dishes.” Keep very much in mind what it is that you want. Was the “meta want” a clean kitchen, or a relationship with someone who does housework on command? That will help you choose how to act.

For all of this to work, you must understand your own locus of control. You own your own life, and you own your own time. No-one else does. However, you do not own another’s life or time, and if you make claims on it, you’re impinging on someone else’s boundaries. That’s not a healthy way to have a relationship.

Like so many of these articles, they’re more relationship specific than poly specific. Notice, you could apply this to any non-romantic relationship quite as well as you could to romantic ones.

In fact, I believe you might like the results if you did try it!