

The Guide to Strong Boundaries

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A lot of people ask me about boundaries in relationships—what they are, what they look like, how to build them and maintain them, do they help *that* much, are they *that* important, do they stop your girlfriend from farting too much in her sleep, where are my keys? Have you seen my keys? Where are my damn keys?

PSA: Setting strong personal boundaries are not a cure-all for your relationship woes (or your lost keys). In fact, they're more of a side effect of having a healthy self-esteem and a general low level of neediness with people around you.

Boundaries in relationships work both ways: they create emotional health and are created by people with emotional health. They are something you can start working on today with the people close to you and you'll begin to notice a difference in your self-esteem, confidence, emotional stability, and so on.

And yes, believe it or not, boundaries are also hot.

ISSUES WITH BOUNDARIES IN RELATIONSHIPS

First, let's do the obligatory bullet point list every blog must do for these types of posts. Let's do the "You Might Have A Boundary Issue If..." list so you know where you stand:

- Do you ever feel like people take advantage of you or use your emotions for their own gain?
- Do you ever feel like you're constantly having to "save" people close to you and fix their problems all the time?
- Do you find yourself sucked into pointless fighting or debating regularly?
- Do you find yourself faaaaar more invested or attracted to a person than you should be for how long you've known them?
- In your relationships, does it feel like things are always either amazing or horrible with no in-between? Or perhaps you even go through the break-up/reunion pattern every few months?
- Do you tell people how much you hate drama but seem to always be stuck in the middle of it?
- Do you spend a lot of time defending yourself for things you believe aren't your fault?

If you answered "yes" to even a few of the above, then you probably set and maintain poor boundaries in your relationships. If you answered a resounding "yes" to most or all of the items above, you not only have a major boundary problem in your relationships, but you also probably have some other personal problems going on in your life.

WHAT ARE PERSONAL BOUNDARIES?

I'll start with the practical and work my way to the theoretical. Instead of defining what boundaries actually are (because I don't want you to fall asleep on me just yet), let's talk about what they look like first.

Healthy Personal Boundaries = Taking responsibility for your own actions and emotions, while NOT taking responsibility for the actions or emotions of others

People with poor boundaries typically come in two flavors: those who take too much responsibility for the emotions/actions of others, and those who expect others to take too much responsibility for their own emotions/actions.

Interestingly, these two types of people often end up in relationships together.

Some examples of poor boundaries:

- *"You can't go out with your friends without me. You know how jealous I get. You have to stay home with me."*
- *"Sorry guys, I can't go out with you tonight, my girlfriend gets really angry when I go out without her."*
- *"My co-workers are idiots and I'm always late to meetings because I have to tell them how to do their jobs."*
- *"I'd love to take that job in Milwaukee, but my mother would never forgive me for moving so far away."*
- *"I can date you, but can you not tell my friend Cindy? She gets really jealous when I have a boyfriend and she doesn't."*

In each scenario, the person is either taking responsibility for actions/emotions that are not theirs or they are demanding that someone else take responsibility for their actions/emotions.

For those of you who have read it, you'll notice that taking responsibility for your own actions and not blaming others are two of the pillars in Nathaniel Branden's *Six Pillars of Self Esteem*. People with high self-esteem have strong personal boundaries. And practicing strong personal boundaries is one way to build self-esteem.

Another way to think about it is when you have these murky areas of responsibility for your emotions and actions — areas where it's unclear who is responsible for what, whose fault is what, why you're doing what you're doing — you never develop a solid identity for yourself.

For instance, if you're really into Judo, but you're always blaming your teacher for your lack of progress and feel guilty about going to classes because your wife gets lonely when you're not around, then you're not owning that aspect of your identity. Judo is now something you do and not something you are. It becomes inauthentic, another tool in the game of getting social approval, rather than to satisfy your own desire to express yourself. This is neediness. And the dependence on external approval will drive your self-esteem lower and make your behavior less attractive.

POOR BOUNDARIES AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

I actually believe boundary issues are the most difficult to deal with at the family level. You can always dump that ass-hat of a boyfriend/girlfriend, a divorce is always but a phone call or twelve away, but you can never dump your parents.

If you have boundary issues in your family, then it's very likely you have them in your romantic relationships as well. And your relationships are the best place to begin fixing them.

Chances are at some point you've been in a relationship that felt like a roller coaster: when things were good, they were great; when things were bad, they were a disaster; and there was an almost-predictable oscillation between the two — two weeks of bliss, followed by one week of hell, followed by a month of bliss, followed by a horrible breakup and then a dramatic reunion. It's a hallmark of a codependent relationship and usually represents two people incapable of strong personal boundaries.

My first serious relationship was like this. At the time, it felt very passionate and like it was us against the world. In hindsight, it was incredibly unhealthy and I'm much happier not being in it.

People lack boundaries because they have a high level of neediness (or in psych terms, codependence). People who are needy or codependent have a desperate need for love and affection from others. To receive this love and affection, they sacrifice their identity and remove their boundaries.

(Ironically, it's the lack of identity and boundaries that makes them unattractive to most people.)

People who blame others for their own emotions and actions do so because they believe that if they put the responsibility on those around them, they'll receive the love they've always wanted and needed. If they constantly paint themselves as a victim, eventually someone will come save them.

People who take the blame for other people's emotions and actions are always looking to save someone. They believe that if they can "fix" their partner, then they will receive the love and appreciation they've always wanted.

Predictably, these two types of people are drawn strongly to one another. Their pathologies match one another perfectly. And often, they've grown up with parents who each exhibit one of these traits. So their model for a "happy" relationship is one based on neediness and poor boundaries.

Ironically, they both fail completely in meeting the other's needs. In fact, they both only serve to perpetuate the neediness and low self-esteem that is keeping them from getting their emotional needs met. The victim creates more and more problems to solve and the saver solves and solves, but the love and appreciation they've always needed is never actually transmitted to one another.

In *Models*, when I talk about authenticity, I explain how in relationships, whenever something is given with an ulterior motive, with the expectation of something in return, when something is not given as a "gift", then it loses its value. If it's self-serving then it's empty and worthless.

This is what happens in these codependent relationships. The victim creates problems not because there are real problems, but because they believe it will cause them to feel loved. The saver doesn't save the victim because they actually care about the problem, but because they believe if they fix the problem they will feel loved. In both cases, the intentions are needy and therefore unattractive and self-sabotaging.

If the saver really wanted to save the victim, the saver would say, "Look, you're blaming others for your own problems, deal with it yourself." That would be actually loving the victim.

The victim, if they really loved the saver, would say, "Look, this is my problem, you don't have to fix it for me." That would be actually loving the saver.

But that's not exactly what usually happens...

A LACK OF BOUNDARIES LEADS TO A VICIOUS CYCLE

Victims and savers both get kind of an emotional high off one another. It's like an addiction they fulfill in one another, and when presented with emotionally healthy people to date, they usually feel bored or a lack of "chemistry." They'll pass on healthy, secure individuals because the secure partner's solid boundaries will not excite the loose emotional boundaries of the needy person.

From an Attachment Theory perspective, victims tend to be anxious-attachment types, and savers tend to be avoidant-attachment types. Or as I like to call them: crazy people and assholes. Both often push away secure-attachment types.

For the victim, the hardest thing to do in the world is to hold themselves accountable for their feelings and their life rather than others. They've spent their whole existence believing they must blame others in order to feel any intimacy or love, so letting that go is terrifying.

For the saver, the hardest thing to do in the world is to stop fixing other people's problems and trying to force them to be happy and satisfied. For them, they've spent their whole lives only feeling valued and loved when they were fixing a problem or providing a use to someone, so letting go of this need is terrifying to them as well.

Both start the process of building self-esteem. Both begin to eliminate needy behavior and make one more attractive.

(Side note: I state in my book that needy behavior makes you unattractive to most people by limiting you to people of a similar level of neediness; i.e., the adage that you are everyone you end up dating. If you end up only attracting low self-esteem slobs, then you are likely a low self-esteem slob yourself. If you only attract high maintenance drama queens, then you are likely a high maintenance drama queen yourself. Oh, you queen, you.)

EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

Since this is a topic that many, many people are always asking, "Yeah, that's nice, but what does it look like?" I'll ride this out with a few examples. Personal boundaries, while particularly crucial in intimate relationships, also highly influence our friendships, family relationships and even professional relationships. So I'll include a variety of examples below.

"Jon, we've been working together for five years. I can't believe you'd fuck me over like that in front of our boss."

"But you got the data sheet incorrect. It was important that the correct numbers were submitted."

"Yeah, but you're supposed to back me up. You made me look like an asshole. You don't have to disagree with me in front of everybody like that."

"Look, I like you. You're my friend. But I'm not going to do your job for you. And that's that. End of discussion."

"I am doing my job!"

"Good, then it shouldn't matter what I say then."

Some friends are maybe a little bit too close. This situation comes up in various forms in everybody's life: long-time friend screws up, but instead of taking personal responsibility, expects you to shoulder some of the responsibility with them because "that's what friends do."

Accepting this leads to codependent and unhealthy friendships. Yes, even friendships can be needy and unattractive. Ever meet two friends who are constantly complaining about one another or saying things behind each other's backs, but when they're together everything seems great? Chances are they have some serious boundary issues like the one above. Friendships like this are never-ending drama factories. Steer clear.

"I get so sad when you and your sister don't come see me. I get very lonely, you know."

"Why don't you go out more, mom? Make some friends."

"Oh, I've tried. Nobody likes an old lady like me. You two are my children. You're supposed to take care of me."

"We do."

"No, you don't. I spend so much time alone. You have no idea how hard it can be sometimes."

"Mom, I love you and will always be here when you need me. But you are still responsible for your own loneliness. Jennifer and I are not the only solution to all of your problems."

The old family guilt situation. I used to be fond of saying "Guilt is a useless emotion." I actually don't believe that anymore. Guilt is important when it's legitimate and self-imposed.

Where guilt is useless and harmful is when it is used as a tool to manipulate those close to you. Guilt can be incredibly painful when used this way, not only because it demands responsibility from you for emotions which are not yours, but it also implies that you're faulty or a bad person in some way for not doing it.

(All of my Jewish readers are nodding their heads right now.)

Nothing sets me off these days like a person trying to guilt trip me. I immediately call them out on it and if I don't know them well, will sometimes end the relationship right then and there.

Last example. This one is a couple in a relationship:

"Hey, I was thinking about that new job you're looking for. I redid your resume and I've started sending it out to some people in my HR department."

"Um, thanks, but you didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to do it. I want you to be successful. I was also thinking again about us moving in together, I went and looked at apartments toda—"

"I told you, I'm not ready for that yet."

"I know! But it only makes sense. And we're not getting younger. I think we should just try it."

"Last month you replaced half my wardrobe with clothes you want me to wear. Then you wanted me to live with you. Now you want me to work with you too?"

"But I love you, I want to take care of you."

"I love you too, but you have to let me do things my own way. This is not healthy. You take control of my life decisions without consulting me first."

"I can't believe how selfish you are! I do EVERYTHING for you and now you're blaming me for it!"

"If you really care about me, then you need to stop trying to control my life and let me live it on my own."

This is an example of a codependent relationship from the other side — the side of a partner who gets smothered and pampered too much. It may seem really nice on the surface. You may even think, "Damn, I wish my boyfriend/girlfriend did that for me." But the truth is that it's just as unhealthy and it will eventually lead to just as many problems.

A FINAL NOTE ON SACRIFICE AND BOUNDARIES

Before we go (I realize this is getting long, and I still haven't found my keys), I want to make a final note about relationships and sacrifice.

The biggest counter-argument — or rationalization, depending on your perspective — is that sometimes you have to make sacrifices for the people you love.

This is true. If your girlfriend/boyfriend has an unreasonable need for you to call them every day, even if it's just to talk for three minutes, then it may be reasonable to make a small sacrifice to make them happy.

The catch is that if you make a sacrifice for someone you care about, it needs to be **because you want to, not because you feel obligated or because you fear the consequences of not doing it**. It comes back to the point that acts of affection and interest are only valid if they're performed *without expectations*. So if you call your girlfriend/boyfriend every day but hate it and feel like she's impeding on your independence and you resent her and you're terrified of how angry she'll be if you don't, then you have a boundary problem. If you do it because you love her and don't mind, then do it.

It can be difficult for people to recognize whether they're doing something out of perceived obligation or out of voluntary sacrifice. Here's the litmus test: ask yourself, "If I stopped doing this, how would the relationship change?" If you're really afraid of the changes, that's a bad sign. If the consequences are unpleasant but you feel like you could stop performing the action without feeling much different yourself, then that's a good sign.

The reason is that if there's a boundary issue then you will fear the loss of that cross-responsibility for one another. If there's not a boundary issue, i.e., you're doing it as a gift without expectations, then you're OK with the repercussions of not doing it. A person with strong boundaries is not afraid of a temper tantrum, an argument or getting hurt. A person with weak boundaries is terrified of it.

A person with strong boundaries understands that it's unreasonable to expect two people to accommodate each other 100% and fulfill every need the other has. A person with strong boundaries understands that they may hurt someone's feelings sometimes, but ultimately they can't determine how other people feel. A person with strong boundaries understands that a

healthy relationship is not controlling one another's emotions, but rather each partner supporting each other in their growth and path to self-actualization.

Update (Dec 2013): I found my keys.