Grace Counseling

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Setting Boundaries

What are boundaries?

Boundaries are lines that determine where it is ok for someone to be or not to be. They can be physical, like a fence around a yard distinguishing my property from my neighbors. Or they can be relational, like asking someone to not bring up a certain topic in conversation. Relational boundaries often vary from person to person based on their cultural norms and personal experiences.

Why is it hard to set relational boundaries?

One of the biggest obstacles to setting and holding boundaries with others is fear of losing relationships. We were designed to be connected to others; we need people in order to survive. Those that struggle to set and hold boundaries are often afraid that if they do, the other person will be upset with them or leave, resulting in disconnection or abandonment.

Traumatic experiences in childhood can impact a person's ability to set healthy boundaries and respect others' boundaries. Unhealthy practices can teach a child that if he sets a boundary with mom or dad, they will withhold good things like affection, care, support, and encouragement. Setting boundaries might also mean that parents might retaliate with verbal or physical abuse. The child then learns to push past their boundary and meet the parent's need in hope that the parent will provide for their emotional and physical needs in return.

Why is it hard to respect boundaries?

Respecting a boundary that someone has set involves tolerating discomfort. A person that struggles to respect a boundary might not have adequate skills to tolerate discomfort; they are looking for you to make them feel ok again, which is why they push past the boundary. They may also have had little exposure to boundaries being in place, so this concept feels foreign to them.

What does having healthy boundaries look like?

The first part of having healthy boundaries is setting aside time to decide where these boundaries need to be drawn. It is much easier to hold a boundary for someone else when you have personally clarified what is important and why. Once you have explored this decision, clearly and firmly communicate it to others.

While we are hopeful that a person will respect our boundaries, we are not dependent on them to change in order for things to work. Setting a boundary does not necessarily mean they will do something different, but rather that we will.

In the example mentioned above – setting a boundary that someone should not bring up a certain topic with you – a boundary might look like saying, "I do not want to talk about this right now. If it is too hard for you to not bring it up, I will leave, and we can discuss getting together another time when it is easier for you to respect my request."

What if someone has set a boundary with me that I find difficult to respect?

If respecting someone else's boundary is difficult, pause and ask yourself why this is hard for you. Reflect internally on your own experience and why you want to push past the boundary, paying attention to the discomfort inside of you. Explore ways to decrease the discomfort that do not involve disrespecting the bound-ary that's been put in place.

RESOURCES

Boundaries, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
Set Boundaries, Find Peace by Nedra Tawwab
Set Boundaries Workbook, by Nedra Tawwab