



Assertive Communication: Boundary Setting

What is Boundary Setting?

Boundary setting is when we use our assertive communication skills to:

- set a limit with someone who is being disrespectful
- enforce emotional or physical boundaries
- stop someone trying to manipulate or control us

Boundary setting can be used with people we know—including friends and family—as well as strangers. Setting boundaries is about letting the people in our lives (whether they're in our lives for a moment or many years) know how we want to be treated. Setting and communicating your boundaries clearly helps you to stay safe, and it can make you a better friend, family member, and partner: your loved ones will always know where they stand with you, and won't have to guess about whether they've inadvertently hurt you. It's a key component of assertive communication. Communicating clear boundaries is also a great way to learn early on in a relationship or encounter how someone will respond to your boundary-setting, which is crucial information to have (people who respond poorly to having boundaries set for them are not safe people to be around). Boundary-setting is useful in both everyday and emergency situations.

Examples of setting a boundary:

- Letting a new partner know that you're not ready for more physical intimacy
- Speaking out against harassment
- Setting a limit with someone who is emotionally abusive
- Speaking up for your rights when you are not being heard
- Yelling loudly to protect yourself

The Thousand Waves Approach:

- **Believe you are worth defending** and commit to speaking up even when it's hard.
- **Know that most forms of violence start small**, so interrupting violence in its early stages will help you stay safe.
- **Use across the spectrum of violence.** Boundary setting can be effective in situations that run the gamut from irritating to dangerous to life threatening. Use it with family, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Use it to stay safe emotionally and physically.
- **Commit to being assertive.** Saying nothing or being passive may erode your self-esteem; using aggressive or hostile language may escalate the situation. Be assertive.
- **Say what you need** and back up your words with confident body language.
- **Remember that silence implies complicity.** Use your voice to stand up for what you need and what you believe in.
- **Match the intensity** of the situation with the intensity of your response. Adjust your volume and tone as needed to support your message.
- **Know you can change strategies** if it isn't working. Options include getting others involved, leaving, fighting back, seeking help.
- **Practice!** Start small. Note the everyday situations where you can speak up to prevent/stop violence. Exercise your boundary setting "muscles" so they will be ready when you need them.



Boundary Setting Strategies

Internal

- **Trust your instincts** about what is going on. If it feels wrong, it probably is, whether or not you can put your finger on why.
- **Remain (or get) calm.** Prepare your mind and body by taking a deep breath or a few seconds to ground yourself. Temporarily let go of feelings (such as fear or rage) that may not serve the situation.
- **Keep breathing.** Breathe deeply and slowly to help you persist when things get challenging.
- **Stay focused on what you need.** Avoid getting pulled into drama, or responding to pleas or threats.
- **Decide when it's over.** It may be time to stop the discussion and get to a place of safety. Or it may be time to end the friendship, quit the job, or leave the relationship.

External

- **Use assertive body language.** Stand tall, avoid fidgeting, keep your hands available.
- **Make eye contact:** This communicates your strength and gives you valuable information about the other person's reaction.
- **Maintain a serious facial expression** that says "don't mess with me."
- **Make sure your tone matches your intent.** Without sounding unnatural, use a low rather than high-pitched voice. Nervous laughter may make the person you're talking to think you're not serious.
- **Protect yourself.** Keep a safe distance away from the other person. Know where your access to escape is. Don't block the other person's line of escape.

Verbal

- **Say what you need.** "I need more space; please back up." "I need you to trust me if we are going to be in a relationship."
- **Name the behavior.** "We're colleagues, not close friends, and that language is harassment."
- **Avoid excuses.** Excuses may seem like a way of getting what you want without having to set a boundary, but they provide a 'hook' that the person can latch onto.
- **Don't answer prying questions.** Answering questions is a natural response, but remember that you're not obligated to tell someone something just because they ask. "I'm not comfortable sharing my private life with friends/colleagues." "That information is personal."
- **Speak up against harassment and hate-based speech.** "Those words are offensive. I don't allow them in my home."
- **Say how you feel** if you think it will be useful. This is most relevant with friends and loved ones. "Please don't touch my leg. It makes me feel uncomfortable and I don't like it." "When you're consistently late, I feel disrespected."
- **Repeat** if they persist. Use the 'broken-record' technique to make it clear that you won't negotiate. "I'm not going to tell you that. I'm not going to tell you that. I'm not going to tell you that."
- **Intensify as needed.** "I said, NO!" "Back off NOW!"

Emotional Manipulation

To some extent, most of us use some manipulation tactics with our friends and loved ones. These include

- **Bargaining** "If you go with me, I'll go with you next time,"
- **Appeals to self-image** "I thought you were a good person!"
- **Appeals to the relationship** "If you loved me you would."

Notice these tactics in your relationships, and consider minimizing them. We think it will improve the relationships!