

WELLNESS TIPS

HEALTHY INTERPERSONAL BOUNDARIES

Maintaining healthy boundaries is important for good self-care and establishing mutually meaningful relationships. They create limits or space between you and others and communicate what are acceptable or unacceptable behaviors. Jacob Priest states boundaries are "... about relationships where you feel respected and connected." While we often think about the ability to say "no" as a reflection of boundaries, healthy boundaries are broader than this and also include saying "yes" to become more connected.

Boundaries exist on a continuum, with different levels of flexibility. Rigid boundaries are more inflexible, like erecting a barbed wire fence. People with rigid boundaries tend to keep people at a distance, are more reluctant to ask for help, and may tend to avoid intimacy. Rigid boundaries may be an attempt to avoid getting hurt or feeling rejected and can result in feeling more detached or cut off from others.

Loose or poor boundaries are too flexible, like the fence is down or there is not one. People with loose boundaries may overshare or prematurely share personal information (TMI), have difficulty saying no, allow others to be disrespectful towards them, or value others' opinions more than their own. These relationships tend to be enmeshed, with less ability for individual differences to manifest within a relationship.

Healthy boundaries fall between being too rigid or too loose and are flexible in responding to circumstances, which may be temporary or permanent. One acts to protect oneself by tightening boundaries, making them more rigid when indicated and facilitate desired growth and closeness in a relationship by loosening boundaries. People with healthy boundaries can negotiate when needs or differences in expectations arise.

Some examples of different types of boundaries:

- Psychological – include opinions, thoughts, beliefs, information about yourself

- Emotional – willingness to express emotions and how much others affect your emotions

- Physical – physical contact or activity regarding your body (may or may not be sexual)

- Physical Space - Comfort with physical distance from someone. Comfort sharing your environment

- Material - comfort sharing or others using your belongings

- Time – comfort with others' demands on how you use your time.

A person's boundaries are influenced by personality, cultural background, and past experiences, to name just a few. Boundaries differ, given the type of relationship. Boundaries with different family members, friends, classmates, and patients differ. Someone with healthy boundaries

shares personal information appropriately, communicates their desires and needs, and accepts when someone says “no”.

Often boundaries are not directly discussed, having been established when one person acts and the other responds. People with similar personalities, backgrounds, shared experiences, or approaches to life may not need to directly discuss some boundaries. But not discussing and clarifying boundaries can lead to uncertainty, confusion, and misunderstandings, even in close relationships. Directly negotiating boundaries is important when you identify differences, are feeling uncomfortable, or uncertain about what is acceptable. If you are dating or in a romantic relationship, how much time will you spend together? If you are going on a spring break trip with family, how much time do you need to devote to studying? How will you negotiate expectations while you are at your parents’ home studying for Step 1?

We all experience times of minor violations of our boundaries in which we become uncomfortable or stressed. And sometimes we contribute to our own discomfort because we ourselves are uncertain about what we want the boundary to be or have not directly communicated our expectations.

Setting boundaries to meet your own needs allows you to be present in your relationships without distractions of discomfort or resentment. Remember, people are not mind readers. Let them know what you need or expect.

Self-awareness is important. What are you feeling (emotionally close, frustrated, resentful)? Have you let your boundaries slip, so you are feeling taken advantage of? Have you previously been available to provide emotional support to a friend and are there expectations (yours or others) that you will continue when other demands on your time have changed? Are you expecting someone to go along with your expectations when they are not comfortable in doing so?

Begin practicing setting new boundaries by making small changes. Perhaps focus on becoming more skilled in saying “no” in specific circumstances. Or perhaps it means taking a risk to loosen a boundary or say “yes” when it is in your best interest and is consistent with your goals. Or clarifying what you would like to happen in a certain setting.

Some boundary violations are extreme and damaging, such as emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. If you have experienced serious boundary violations, there are resources for support and assistance. Contact the MSCC to talk with one of our counselors.

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Ury, William. The Power of a Positive No: Save the Deal Save the Relationship and Still Say No. Bantam, 2007.

Check the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips, including "Self-Care through Saying No"
<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Stay Well and Stay Healthy

Feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment for questions and concerns.

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