

Setting Healthy Personal Boundaries with Family Members

Objective

To identify how to set healthy boundaries when you have previously had a difficult time doing so with family members.

What to Know

Personal boundaries are the limits, guidelines, and rules you set for yourself. You draw a line around what is appropriate – and what is not – within relationships. Setting and sustaining healthy boundaries is a skill, and they are necessary for self-care because without them, you can end up feeling depleted, taken advantage of, taken for granted, or intruded upon. Poor boundaries can eventually lead to resentment, hurt, low self-esteem, anger, or burnout.

Clear personal boundaries support healthy connections with others, and communicating your boundaries strengthens relationships. Sometimes the most difficult people to set and maintain boundaries with are family members. Trauma, illness, addiction, divorce, or other challenging events can lead to unhealthy boundaries in families. Perhaps you have a difficult time setting boundaries with family members because they frequently cross your boundaries or exhibit other toxic behaviors.

You might find family members react negatively to your boundaries. Despite their reactions, setting clear boundaries shows you care and communicates that you respect yourself and others.

You might struggle with boundaries, or you find yourself in situations where others frequently “cross the line” with you. Unhealthy family boundaries can lead to problems at work or school, within other relationships, and so on. This worksheet will help you identify how to set healthy boundaries when you have previously had a difficult time doing so with family members.

What to Do

How do you know if your family had (and perhaps still has) unhealthy boundaries? Some of these situations might have occurred when you were a child. Check off any that apply.

- invading your privacy
- giving unsolicited advice
- being overly judgmental
- making unnecessary or hurtful comments
- engaging in overly controlling behaviors
- overreliance or dependence

- ___ exhibiting jealousy
- ___ pressuring you to “give in”
- ___ making comments like, “If you really cared...” or “I would do it for you!”
- ___ trying to define who you should be
- ___ trying to change you
- ___ holding you back
- ___ trying to make you feel guilty about doing things that interest you
- ___ disregarding your personal space / inappropriate touch
- ___ making excuses or blaming you for others’ problems
- ___ disrespecting your values, beliefs, or opinions
- ___ refusing to accept “no” for an answer
- ___ expecting you to take responsibility for others’ feelings

If you checked off more than three statements, you probably have a family with unhealthy boundaries.

Can you think of other examples from your family that indicate unhealthy boundaries? If yes, describe.

Here are some examples of healthy boundaries. Family members:

- ask permission.
- take one another’s feelings into consideration.
- are honest and direct.
- clearly communicate their wants, needs, and feelings.
- give each other space.
- avoid codependent behaviors.
- show respect for differing perspectives, opinions, and feelings.

You can learn to set healthy boundaries with your family, depending on the situation and the people involved. Here are steps of what to do when setting boundaries with family.

1. Identify how you want to interact and what is OK (and not OK). Identify what *you* need. Your needs are just as important as your loved ones’ needs.

2. Directly and clearly communicate your boundary. Be specific. Effective boundary-setting involves confirming the person received the message. They should be able to accurately summarize what you tell them. Repeat it until what you are saying and what they reflect to you match.

3. Determine effective and respectful ways to respond when your boundaries are crossed. Attach a consequence if your boundary is violated. What happens if others cross the line?

4. Remind and redirect. Your family might not believe you will set and stick to boundaries – and they will probably test them. When this happens, respectfully remind them, and redirect by suggesting an alternative.

5. Offer a warning. Boundary violations are not always intentional or malicious. You might say, “Hey, remember when I told you that if you _____ I will leave? Well, the next time this happens that’s what I’m going to do.” You do not have to warn others, but if your relationships are valuable enough to you, you might want to give them a second chance. With more than one warning you run the risk of setting yourself up for repeated violations.

6. Follow through. It is important you follow through on your boundaries and the associated consequences or you run the risk of damaging your relationships.

7. Remember you can only control your choices and behavior. Learn and practice coping strategies to manage when others cross your boundaries.

You probably want to avoid conflict and drama, and unfortunately, when you set boundaries, you might find yourself in awkward or unpleasant situations. Your emotions might get the best of you in these situations. Here are some phrases that might help:

“I appreciate your concern, but this is my decision.”

“I respect your opinion, but I don’t share it.”

“I will no longer be in the middle of family conflict.”

“Please stop asking/saying/doing _____.”

“I understand your frustration, but I am choosing _____.”

“That crosses the line. If you’re going to continue, I’m going to leave.”

What else can you say? _____

Write down your needs when it comes to setting boundaries with family. Be very explicit about what is okay and what is not okay.

Seek out people who value you, and if necessary, find people outside your family that can help you set boundaries. Who can help you?

Be realistic with yourself about how much you can tolerate. Be specific.

You have the option to leave a situation when someone crosses your boundaries. You might want to defend yourself, but sometimes the best thing to do is remove yourself from the situation. You do not have to explain yourself, and you do not have to apologize. What are some situations when it might be best to leave?

Self-care can help you understand the importance of your own boundaries. Take the time to care for yourself when someone has crossed the line. What can you do when you are upset that a loved one has crossed a boundary?

Some difficult people get away with crossing boundaries because no one stands up to them. Sometimes, being assertive and telling people what you want, and need is enough. What are some ways you can stand up for yourself?

Perhaps you have tried to set boundaries, and you have followed all the above suggestions. No matter what you say or do, family members refuse to respect your boundaries. In this case, you have the right to walk away. You can simply re-state your boundary and tell them you are removing yourself from the conversation.

Did this exercise help you set healthy boundaries with your family? Why or why not?

What else can you do to ensure your boundaries are not crossed?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
