

Why Healthy Relationships Always Have Boundaries & How to Set Boundaries in Yours

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In romantic relationships we often think of boundaries as a bad thing or simply unnecessary. Isn't our partner supposed to anticipate our wants and needs? Isn't that part of being in love? Aren't boundaries callous? Don't they interfere with the romance and spontaneity of a relationship?

Many of Ryan Howes's clients assume that having boundaries means not having loving feelings toward their partner. But it's actually the opposite.

All healthy relationships have boundaries. Howes, Ph.D, a clinical psychologist in Pasadena, Calif, defines a boundary as "the line where I end and someone else begins." He likens boundaries in relationships to the boundaries around states.

"Without any line the distinction becomes confusing: Who owns and maintains this ambiguous space? Which rules apply?"

When the boundary is clearly defined and respected, you don't need walls or electric fences, he said. "People can even cross the boundary occasionally when there's a mutual understanding." However, when the boundary is violated in order to do harm or take advantage, then you'll likely need walls, gates and guards, he said.

In healthy relationships partners "ask permission, take one another's feelings into account, show gratitude and respect differences in opinion, perspective and feelings."

In less healthy relationships, partners assume their partner feels the same way they do (e.g., "I like this, so you must, too"), [Howes](#) said. They ignore the effects of violating their partner's boundary (e.g., "They'll get over it").

Boundaries in romantic relationships are especially critical, because as opposed to other relationships, partners inhabit each other's most intimate spaces, including physical, emotional and sexual, he said.

This is why communicating your boundaries clearly is key. But what does — and *doesn't* — this look like?

Below, you'll find insights on boundaries that don't work and tips for setting boundaries that do.

Boundaries that Don't Work

"Boundaries that often fail are those that include the words 'always,' 'never' or any absolute language," said Bridget Levy, LCPC, a therapist who works with couples and directs business development at [Urban Balance](#). Such boundaries are usually unrealistic and don't last, she said. She shared these examples: "You can never" or "You must always."

Other poor boundaries alienate you from your partner, have a double standard or try to manipulate an outcome, she said. She shared these examples: “If you aren’t home by 7 p.m. every night, I will not have sex with you,” “If you don’t do X, I will hurt myself” or “You are not allowed to do X, but I can do it when I please.”

Vague boundaries also don’t work. These include, she said: “Don’t spend a lot of money this month” or “Pick up the kids from school a few times a week.”

Many partners don’t even talk about their boundaries. They expect their partner to just know them. This is unfair, Howes said. For instance, you want your partner to recognize your accomplishments. Instead of expressing this need, you hint at it, play a game of “I’ll lavishly affirm you if you’ll return the favor” or mope around when it doesn’t happen, he said.

Not only is this ineffective, but it creates confusion and can hurt your relationship.

Setting Healthy Boundaries

According to psychologist [Leslie Becker-Phelps](#), Ph.D, healthy boundaries include everything from speaking up when you think you’re being disrespected to advocating for yourself to have time for your own interests.

Be self-aware. The first step in setting any boundary is self-knowledge, said Howes, who pens the blog “[In Therapy](#).” “You need to know what you like and dislike, what you’re comfortable with versus what scares you, and how you want to be treated in given situations.”

Be clear about your needs. After you know what your needs are, tell your partner. Howes has found that many boundary violations stem from misunderstandings. One partner has a problem with certain behaviors, but they never let their partner know. Often this is because they worry it’ll trigger an argument, he said.

However, “it’s OK to have preferences, and it’s OK to let your lover know.” For instance, if you want to be treated as an equal with financial issues, tell your partner, he said.

Be specific and direct. According to Levy, the more specific you are with communicating your boundary, the better. She shared these examples:

- “I want to hear about your day. I’ll be available to give you my full attention in 10 minutes.”
- “If you put your dirty clothes in the hamper by 10 a.m. on Saturday morning, I’ll be happy to wash them for you.”
- “I love you but am not willing to call in sick for you when you’ve been drinking.”
- “Do not read my journal. I feel violated when my privacy is disrespected.”

Be clear about your love, while being clear about your boundaries. Communicate to your partner how much you care about them, said Becker-Phelps, author of the book [Insecure in Love: How Anxious Attachment Can Make You Feel Jealous, Needy, and Worried and What You Can Do About It](#). If they’ve overstepped a boundary, mention this. “Say that you want them to respect the boundary, and explain the importance of this to you.”

She shared this example: “I need you to know that I love you and have every intention of us working through whatever issues come up. But I am not OK with you being verbally abusive when you get angry. If you want to talk about how it upset you that I ran into my old girlfriend, we can do that, but only if you don’t attack me.”

Becker-Phelps also suggested remaining open to hearing how the boundary affects your partner. Talk through the issue so both of you feel respected, heard and cared about, she said.

Use “I” statements. According to Levy, “I” statements “help you own your own feelings and allow your partner to feel more at ease and less defensive.” Rather than saying, “You need to do this,” or “You should always,” use such phrases as: “I feel,” or “I would appreciate,” or “I would like it if…”

Try the sandwich approach. This consists of a compliment, criticism, compliment. Starting with a compliment prevents your partner from getting defensive, Howes said. “This primes them for a little criticism, they feel connected and comfortable enough to take it, and then it closes with a compliment.”

Howes shared this example: “I love having sex with you, it’s an incredible part of our relationship. I find that I’m usually in the mood in the morning before work, and at night I just want to [sleep](#). Can we keep having the best sex ever in the mornings?”

While there’s no guarantee this will always work, people tend to be more receptive to criticism when they first feel heard and understood, he said.

Ultimately, healthy relationships require clear-cut parameters. For instance, most couples agree that cheating is a boundary violation, Howes said. But what does cheating mean? Is it physical contact, going to lunch, sharing secrets with a colleague, fantasizing about someone or watching porn?

“When couples are clear about the boundaries for their own relationship, what the rules, goals, and expectations are, the relationship can be stable,” he said.