

## Gray Matters on Setting Boundaries

*She drew a hard line in the sand. I have to keep him at arm's length. She really crossed a line this time.*

Boundaries: a necessary and yet ever elusive process of maintaining space and autonomy while simultaneously preserving some degree of closeness in relationships. We are, after all, social creatures by nature as a means of not only surviving but also thriving. We must take great care of those relationships to preserve them. And so, *we walk the line*, so to speak, of holding boundaries in such a manner that affords us the benefits of those relationships without being swallowed up by the demands that might accompany them.

Boundaries can be loosely flexible or unbendingly rigid. They can be barely noticeable or blaringly obvious. We set them with our body language such as folding our arms in front of us or by offering a warm, open hug. We set them with our tone, our language, our facial expressions. We set them by simply ending a phone call, denying someone a request for money, accepting an invitation to dinner, or by letting someone interrupt us in conversation. Ultimately, we are saying 'yes' or 'no' to some degree or another. Kindly forgive the oversimplification.

The age-old adage 'it doesn't hurt to ask' may be all well and fine for the 'asker'; however, being asked to do some thing for someone who struggles to set and hold boundaries may set in motion a truly torturous emotional experience. They may become riddled with guilt or a sense of obligation; fear of rejection, abandonment, or accusations of selfishness; fear of being invalidated if they do say no leaving them feeling as though it is pointless to try... all a very high price to pay for simply daring to say no. And so, they do not. Rather, they say yes, often begrudgingly, which may relieve the tension momentarily but will quickly transform to resentment toward the 'asker' for asking and/or to themselves for saying yes. This may in turn set a different but equally painful emotional process in motion plagued with resentment, anger, frustration, self-loathing, disgust, regret, and so on.

"If only they hadn't asked me to do that, I wouldn't be in this predicament." Ah, yes: avoidance. If only others could read our minds and know that we are uncomfortable with this or that and would just take it upon themselves to set our boundaries for us *by not asking*. I do not recommend holding one's breath for this to occur as it will likely leave you feeling equally as helpless and powerless to the asker. And of course, while the inner turmoil wreaks its havoc on the requestee, the asker may be completely oblivious to the pain they have unintentionally afflicted upon the other. On the other hand, the asker may be well aware that they can ask, and ask, and ask again. Why? Because the requestee has yet to say no.

And therein lies the problem.

Now, this is not to suggest this is your fault. On the contrary. At some time in your life, you may have been harshly guilt-tripped for saying no or accused of being selfish or stingy; or you may be a helper by nature-- a quality highly susceptible to exploitation by others causing it to run rampant and out of control. (The latter suggests a need to set a boundary on that part of your *Self*, your 'helper part'. An interesting and provocative suggestion. Do take the time to let it sink fully in.) However, saying yes when you really want (or need) to say no may be perpetuating the likelihood that you will be asked again and again as a consequence of the intense discomfort you feel about saying no.

And the cycle continues.

The solution? Honesty with your Self first, then with others; self-confidence; reasonable assertiveness; insight; self-awareness. If you tend to knee-jerk respond to requests with a yes, buy yourself some time to think it over. Avoid the trap of explaining, defending, assuming, or taking it personally. Consider the reasonableness of the request in proportionality with what you are truly able to provide. Consider the relationship itself and the appropriateness of what is being asked of you and by whom. Ask yourself: What is the worst thing that might happen if you say no? And alternately, if you say yes? Go inside of yourself and find that place within you that is sounding alarms at the onset of being asked to do something. Find out what its true fears and/or desires are, then see if there is room to negotiate with it to help settle its fears and unsound the alarms. Maybe what it is telling you is that saying no will take you out of character and possibly cause you to be rejected but that saying yes will cost you time, energy, and resources you don't have. And once again, you are stuck between a rock and a hard place and so you choose what you believe will be the lesser of two evils but will inevitably suffer some degree of consequence either way.

At the risk of compounding the issue, it should be no surprise to hear that those who struggle to set boundaries often also struggle to ask for help. A discussion for another article on another day, perhaps.

Finding balance with boundaries does not have to be painful. But know that the pain you feel in doing so *is not trying to hurt you*. It is trying to communicate something important to you... from the inside out. So listen, and have patience with your Self. Explore ways to honor both the need to set boundaries as well as the desire to be helpful *because both are true and deserve to be acknowledged*. This can be accomplished with honesty by saying, "I would really love to help you and it pains me to have to say no but right now I need to stay focused on (such and such)..." Or through compromise, "Although I can't do what you're asking, what I can do is (such and such)." Or bartering, "I'm so glad you called because it just so happens that I need something, too. I'm so grateful to have each other to rely on at times," thereby sending a clear message that this is a two-way street. (This one will quickly nip requests from those who do not practice reciprocity: a win/win scenario for you.)

In the end, be it a loosely marked fence such as a property pin, a living fence of shrubbery, or a 6' tall stockade fence firmly cemented into the earth, in the words of Robert Frost, "Good fences make good neighbors."

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