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Article: Looking After Ourselves - Improving your Boundary-setting

(Inspired by the book: [Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life](#) by Jan Black & Greg Enns, New Harbinger Publications, 1997).

Boundaries are barriers we set up in interpersonal situations in order to protect ourselves and others. They help to determine the ways in which we will interact with people.

There are three types of personal boundaries:

- Boundaries set to look after self
- Boundaries set so others do not harm us
- Boundaries set in how we communicate with one another

Boundaries to look after self

These are the boundaries we set to ensure that we have a good quality of life and that we do not over-extend ourselves. We do things to “recharge our batteries” and for the simple reason that we enjoy them.

Examples:

- good nutrition
- enough sleep
- regular massage therapy
- spend quality time with friends, family we care about
- set dedicated time for self: watch a tv program, have a bath, go to the movies, have a coffee, read a magazine



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Boundaries so others do not harm us

These are the boundaries we set with others so they do not take advantage of us or do not hurt us in some way.

Examples:

- do not lend money to someone we do not know well
- have a first date in a public place
- stop spending time with a friend who is rude, judgmental, abusive
- spend less time with a friend or family member when the relationship feels one-sided, ie. the other person gets most of the benefit from the relationship (you do all the listening, you do favours for the other person but the person is unavailable when you need help, etc.)

Boundaries set in how we communicate with one another

These are boundaries which are set (or understood) in relationships. We negotiate what are appropriate and inappropriate ways to respond to one another.

Examples:

- We speak respectfully to one another.
- We do not call each other names.
- We apologize if we have hurt feelings or have done something hurtful in some way.
- We try to listen to each other and validate feelings.



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Principles of Boundary-Setting

- You have a right to set personal boundaries.
- You have a right to make choices about what is best for your own life.
- Setting boundaries does not equal "being selfish".
- Setting boundaries does not mean that you will not take personal risks.
- Saying no to someone does not mean you will hurt that person's feelings (although the person may feel disappointed)

Risks of Not Setting Boundaries

By not setting boundaries there is a possibility that:

- We will experience personal or emotional vulnerability.
- Someone could take advantage of us.
- We could possibly experience some sort of victimization
- We experience a lack of self-care leading to frustration, fatigue, burn-out, and/or irritability

Myths about Boundaries

- Boundaries are selfish.
- Setting boundaries makes relationships more difficult.
- Setting boundaries leads to more conflict.
- Kind, giving and loving people just don't set boundaries.



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Truths about Boundaries

- Setting boundaries can increase others' respect for you.
- Boundaries help to improve clarity in life.
- Boundaries help you to feel more in control of your life.
- Other people who set healthy boundaries will be drawn to you.
- Most people respect boundaries when you set them.

Your counsellor can help you to explore your relationship with boundaries. How good are you at setting them with others? How good are you at setting them so you look after yourself? What is getting in the way of allowing you to set clearer boundaries?

If you are having difficulty setting boundaries with others, your counsellor can help by asking questions to look at what is influencing you and what barriers might be present. Sometimes patterns emerge in relationships — for example, someone may become dependent on you for support, company, or finances. If you decide to set boundaries with that person, you are likely to encounter resistance. The other person has been getting his (or her) needs met by you and may feel frustrated or disappointed that those needs will not be met in the same way. Sometimes those patterns emerge as an expectation. A parent may expect an adult child to behave in a particular way; the child may decide to become more independent. The parent may respond with guilt or shaming behaviour to try to get the child to change back to the old behaviour.

Very often people will come to me for counselling, feeling stressed and overwhelmed. As we explore what is happening in the person's life I hear stories about demanding jobs, demanding families, demanding responsibilities at home and very little time for the person to decompress. Often I will hear, "Well, stress management strategies are wonderful suggestions, but my life is just too busy to try to fit something else (like exercise, massage, time with friends) in." My argument is that those people have to re-prioritize so that the stress management activities appear higher on their "to do" lists! The only way to manage long hours at work, a household, and the expectations of a partner, and family, and friends, is to ensure that time is available which is just about looking after self. This means learning to



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say "no" when people ask for assistance if it will compromise how we look after ourselves or how we protect ourselves from harm. It means setting time aside which is just about fun. For some people it means figuring out what activities would be fun to do in the first place.

To avoid burnout, set boundaries to ensure self-care. Although challenging, setting boundaries with others will result in creating a sense of peace and harmony in your own life.

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