

# The Challenge of Setting Boundaries

by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

Few of us are especially adept at setting boundaries with anyone, and for good reason. Let's back up a bit.

When you were growing up, were you told that other people's needs were more important than yours? Were you rewarded for self-sacrificing and people-pleasing? Were you taught to obey and then shamed, hurt, or punished if you didn't? Were you chided for questioning authority? Were you taught to avoid conflict at any cost? Were you often told that you were responsible for someone else's feelings or behaviors? If you answer yes to most of these questions, the price was your sense of self, which is the foundation for boundary setting.

Was your privacy respected? Was it OK to have your own feelings and opinions? Were you encouraged to solve your own problems, and supported through the process, or was someone always there to tell you what to do? Or did you spend just a little too much time fending for yourself, perhaps taking care of other family members with very little support? These experiences, too, influenced your sense of where you end and where others begin.

How do you typically respond to conflict? If your pattern is either one of rebellion or one of compliance, you probably haven't had much practice setting boundaries.

As a child, did you experience verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse? It's hard to develop boundaries when any part of your self, including your dignity and sense of worth, is violated.

Clearly, Boundary Setting 101 is not typically a part of a child's education. If anything, most of us have been conditioned to not set boundaries as a way to avoid the negative reactions of others. The ability to set boundaries to take care of yourself begins with the belief that your "self" is worth caring for. If we've learned that taking care of ourselves results in conflict, rejection, or abandonment, it's likely that we'll shut down when we need set a boundary, rather than take that risk.

In addition, there has been, for most of us, a severe shortage of healthy role models. Most of the adults in our lives tend to fall into one of two categories: Bulldozers or Doormats.

"Bulldozers" may appear to take care of themselves, but their version of self-care does not take other people's needs into consideration. Bulldozers need to win, to have their needs taken care of, and feel entitled to do so at the expense of the other person.

This is not boundary-setting. Boundary-setting considers the needs of the other person, although it does not always accommodate them. In other words, "*My way or the highway*" is bulldozing, not boundary-setting.

"Doormats" function as though they had no boundaries. They are agreeable, nice, FINE. (At least until their resentment builds up to one nasty tolerance break, after which they can make the meanest Bulldozer look pretty tame.) Doormats are terribly accommodating, but do so at the expense of their own needs. They tend to be on the losing end of most conflicts. However, by not sticking up for themselves, they can not only avoid many conflicts, but they also get to "look good," be self-righteous, and validate a self-perception of helplessness and victimization. So when you think about it, there's a great payoff for being a Doormat, but there's also a high price to pay in the loss of one's self.

Clearly, these patterns have nothing to do with boundary-setting, although Doormats often function in the hope that being "nice" enough will inspire the people around them to figure out and accommodate their needs. Boundary-setting always takes one's own needs into account and relies on honest and direct communication, (rather than manipulation and clairvoyance).

Growing up with either or both of these models, we receive a number of messages that present obstacles when we attempt to take care of ourselves in relationships with others, messages that connect our worth and loveable-ness to our ability to please others. If most of the people in our lives operated on some form of win-lose method of conflict resolution, either by violating and disempowering (as a Bulldozer) or by self-abandoning (as a Doormat), it can be hard to imagine win-win solutions that consider the needs of all parties involved.

In the process of establishing healthy belief systems and behaviors, our progress can be seriously set back by the reactions of others, especially if we have a history of people-pleasing. If most of our friends and family members are used to seeing us as care-takers, people with no clear sense of boundaries, people who consistently place higher priorities on other people's needs than our own, they will certainly respond in whatever way seems necessary to maintain status quo. One woman lamented, "I've tried setting boundaries, but my parents get hurt, my husband gets mad, and my kids feel abandoned. What's the use?"

What's the use, indeed? People do what works and our loved ones can become fairly aggressive when old tactics fail them. By the same token, we can take drastic measures when our self-protection becomes important enough. A psychologist friend with grown children got so tired of her children showing up on her doorstep with all of their kids and possessions that she finally sold her house and bought a one-bedroom place to make it crystal clear that "moving home" was simply no longer an option.

Perhaps you'll find success with less extreme options, but I believe that the greatest contributions any of us can make to a relationship is a healthy sense of self. And that takes whatever it takes.