

Motivational Moves

Setting Boundaries

By Joanne Flom, LCSW

Relationships are an integral part of our lives. We are all in relationships; with our family, friends, spouse, children, co-workers, and even with ourselves. Relationships can be wonderful and they can also be very stressful. One of the most common struggles of relationships is setting and maintaining boundaries.

Setting boundaries basically means that in well-functioning relationships, we need to set limits and that those limits need to be respected. It allows one person to express what they are willing and able to do and it provides an opportunity for the other person to accept or negotiate those limits. It provides a relationship with a higher level of functioning so that the needs of both people can be met in a realistic way. When we don't set boundaries, unhealthy patterns can develop. Inappropriate limit setting can create a dysfunctional relationship.

Three of the most common ways people create and maintain inappropriate boundaries in relationships are: 1. One person is unable to set limits. 2. One person doesn't have their limits respected. 3. Neither person can set limits.

Unable to Set Limits

Those who are unable to set limits allow people to walk all over them. They feel taken advantage of and often times can feel like a victim. They are the ones who can never say "no" to a request that is made upon them even when the request is unreasonable. They tend to take responsibility for things even when it's not appropriate for them to take responsibility.

In a work place environment, the person who everyone goes to for last minute requests or for tasks that no one else wants to do, who is always there to pick up the slack or take on someone else's job may be unable to set limits. If this is done once in a while, then this person can be seen as a team player, but if this is done consistently, it may feel like you are being taken advantage of and not being respected. In this case, it would be wise to clarify what your role is and when it's ok for you to say 'no' to an assignment that is not your responsibility.

For personal relationships, the person who is always putting more effort into the relationship, whether it's emotional or otherwise may be the one who can't set limits. This person may be compensating for the other person's lack of involvement and for some reason feels that if they don't do more then they might be abandoned. Its important here to understand what you feel like you might lose or gain if you were to set limits.

There is a reason why someone choses not to set limits with others even though they want to. Typically, one who refuses to set limits may have some issues of low self-esteem or fear of abandonment and before you begin to set limits, those issues may need to be addressed first.

Limits Not Respected

Those whose limits are not respected, on the other hand, are the people who try to set limits but finds themselves around someone who refuses to respect those boundaries. If you are setting reasonable limits and the other person gets upset with you, this is not necessarily your problem to fix. The problem is not you, but the fact that the other person cannot respect your boundary. For instance, you may have a friend who calls you in the middle of the night whenever she has a personal crisis. If this is something that bothers you and you are clear about communicating that to her and she continues to do it then there is a lack of respect towards you.

When faced with someone who is not respecting your boundaries, it is less about you (unless you continue to allow them to disrespect you) and speaks volumes about them. You may want to address the conflict head on and confront her/him, or if it continues, you may want to consider that this is not a relationship you want to be in.

No Limits

A relationship where people are unable to set any limits with each other is often referred to as an "enmeshed relationship" where it's difficult to know where one person ends and the other begins. This occurs when people don't have clear limits and can't distinguish the difference between another's needs, opinions, and feelings and theirs. In a healthy relationship, two people are independent but have a strong emotional attachment to one another. An enmeshed relationship is co-dependent and they 'can't live without the other'.

An example of an enmeshed relationship would be a couple (or entire family system) that are 'joined by the hip' and don't have any sense of independence or individualism. Often times this can be attributed to both individuals whose child-

hoods lacked nurturance and now they are trying to get their needs met by recreating the bond of an infant and parent, where there is a strong attachment and sense of dependence that the child has on the parent. Those wounds have not healed and they are being played out in a co-dependent relationship. A good place to start here is individual counseling to gain a sense of self and to begin to differentiate you from your partner.

Setting Boundaries

The idea that "we teach people how to treat us" means that if we accept that someone is not respecting our boundaries, we are sending out the message that it's ok to be treated that way. When we establish boundaries, we are setting a limit to what we will tolerate. And while you want those limits to be reasonable and somewhat flexible (depending on the situation) you also want to be firm and consistent in maintaining those limits. For instance, if you begin setting limits with your children, being firm and consistent, allows them to know what is expected of them, as well as, what the consequences are for not respecting those limits.

Keep in mind that when you begin to set limits, others are going to resist, especially if they are used to you not setting limits. They are going to know what buttons they need to press to get what they want. Expect negative reactions from others' while they adjust to the new rules you are setting. They need time to understand that you have changed what works for you. You also need to stay strong so that when they regress to old patterns, you can maintain your limits. The goal is to teach them that your buttons can no longer be pressed no matter how hard or how many times they press them. Also, know that as you begin to experiment with limit setting, you will have some failures which is to be expected. Try not to get discouraged. Learning to set reasonable boundaries can help enhance your relationships with others and with yourself.

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Next issue

Alex Brooks is devoted to educating dog owners on how to communicate with their dogs in a dog's natural language, ultimately fulfilling the canine's first and most pressing need, leadership. "Dogs are not leaders," says Brooks, "they're followers. There is only one 'alpha', and it doesn't have anything to with being macho."

Often referred to as a "dog whisperer", Brooks' amazing ability to communicate with dogs is second only to his love for them, a passion which has made him and the Midwest Canine Center, the business he and his wife Marcy began building twenty years ago, formidable names in the dog training industry.

State of the art boarding, training and doggie day care were the core services at Midwest until recently, when plans for implementing a "wellness center" were developed to provide alternative pet health care, one of the hottest and fastest growing trends today. We'll share Alex's animal expertise and explore this new trend in our next issue.