

Ask Your Therapist

By Krishnabai, MSW, LICSW, the Ashby Center for Counseling

Boundaries

The first time I became aware of my boundaries I was visiting a Cajun family in the Louisiana bayou and I noticed how close they stood to me. I kept backing up to get a comfortable space between them and me and I backed into the back side of a sofa and almost tumbled into it! It's funny now but at the time I didn't have words to describe my discomfort. I felt encroached upon and I didn't know why.

A boundary is the space (air) immediately around us which we claim as our personal "air space". It can also be emotional space such as how private we are about our personal information or emotions. Some people have wide boundaries and we feel them as deep walls or defensiveness. Some people have thin or insufficient boundaries and they reveal too much about themselves too quickly which can feel like they are violating our boundaries by overloading us with too much information that we don't want to know about them.

Boundaries don't come in sizes. No one has just one boundary of all occasions or persons. We have thinner boundaries for those people we trust and thicker boundaries for those we don't trust or know well. It is important to be able to adjust your boundaries to each new situation or person. We use our judgment to help us discriminate which boundaries to have with whom.

For example, when most people ask you "How are you?", they are not really asking you that specific question as much as just acknowledging your presence. When you say "Fine" you aren't really assessing how you feel and reporting that to them, you are just replying that you are also acknowledging their presence.

However, when your best friend knows that you are sick, heart-broken, ecstatic, scared, super-charged, etc and they ask you how you are, it is expected that you will actually tell them how you are feeling. You are discriminating between people with your boundaries.

People who can't say no (or yes) have trouble with boundaries. People who live by rigid formulas (This is how I/we have always done this) also find boundaries challenging.

There are many good books available to help people with boundaries, such as "When I say no, I feel guilty". If you can't find that one, look up any books with "Boundaries" in the title.

To read all the prior Ask Your Therapist columns go to www.krishnabai.com where you can also send Krishnabai a general question for her column.

Krishnabai, MSW is a therapist in Ashby and Wellesley Hills where she sees adults, older teens and couples. The core of her work is the discovery and expression of the Authentic Self. She focuses on the identification, expression, and resolution of emotions, commitment to honesty and the use of remedial education and information. The Ashby Center for Counseling 978-386-5657