

Ask Your Therapist

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Boundaries Revisited - Now how do they work????

In last month's article I defined and described boundaries as personal "air space" either physical, mental or emotional which we think of as belonging to us. So now you ask "How do they work?"

To set a boundary is to set a limit. For example, you get a phone message from your (demanding person) asking, demanding or commanding you to meet their needs in some way without asking you if you can. "Hi, Dear. Aunt Petunia is arriving this Friday afternoon at Manchester Airport and you'll have to go get her because you know how I hate going to the airport. I'll call you later with her flight data." Your reaction is to fume with resentment and to yell at the phone machine "NO WAY! Get off your couch and get her yourself! I work Friday afternoons!!"

If you have thin, wimpy boundaries you will call back and say something such as "Well, I'm supposed to work but if you really need me to go I can ask my boss....."

If you have thick boundaries you might say "No, I can't! I'm working on Friday afternoon! What were you thinking?"

The middle ground might be to get her on the phone and say "I understand that Aunt Petunia has to be picked up. I have to work and am not available. Let's see what we can come up with. Would you be comfortable driving to the airport if you took a friend to keep you company and who could be your co-pilot? Or is there someone in town who might be willing to make the trip for you for \$20?" This way of speaking assumes you are both equals who are problem solving but it keeps you out of the way of being the solution and it lets you speak without defensiveness.

Now suppose you have a friend who has been promising you all summer that he will come over and fix the leak in your roof. Every time you see him he says "I haven't forgotten your roof! I'll be there this weekend!" And he never shows up and has a million excuses. At this point your angry and resentful feelings are affecting you more than your concern about the roof. So what do you do?

You say to him (in person if possible, or on the phone but not in a phone message) "Winter is coming and you have promised me all summer you would fix the roof. I believed you the first X number of times you told me you would come but now your credibility with me is pretty poor. I'm really questioning your integrity and your word. I would like you to give me one more date and actually come and do it. If you fail to show up one more time I will get it fixed by someone else but my regard for you will be gone. You choose which one you want to happen."

I know that sounds bold but you deserve to have people treat you with respect and to do what they say they are going to do. I have a reputation for being very direct but not blunt because I do not pack an emotional punch with my words. If you ask me a question I will give you my honest answer. “Does this dress make me look fat?” “Yes. Horizontal stripes are not for you.” Or I might tell a parent of a teenager that kids have a right to privacy, too, and that they had no business reading their child’s journal.

Boundaries give definition to who we are which is very helpful to other people. People with good boundaries are very easy and comfortable for others to be with because they know where they stand with that person. Why don’t you practice setting some boundaries and see what happens?

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.