



RELATIONSHIPS:

Boundaries vs. Expectations

Many times in personal conversations, on various media platforms and certainly in my professional work, the term "boundaries" is often discussed. Despite the general agreement that boundaries are beneficial, I seldom hear from people that they believe that they are setting, communicating and following through on them effectively!

Even when we feel confident in our understanding of what a boundary is, we may find ourselves struggling with what to do when it comes time to follow through. This can leave us tolerating situations that leave us feeling stuck, to only become more upset and frustrated over time.

Through my own reflection, it has become clear, that the idea of identifying and setting personal boundaries is not universally understood, and is not really applied in a clear and predictable way. I have also come to understand that a lot of what we think about setting and upholding boundaries, are really expectations that we have of others - and are not really boundaries!

Within the context of a relationship, regardless of the nature, we benefit from understanding where our limits are, and where the limits are for others. We can also expect a certain level of treatment from those we surround ourselves with. For example, we can expect that others will not mistreat us physically and emotionally. Maybe we expect that one partner will help with domestic tasks and financial responsibilities. We can expect that we get paid for the work that we do at our job, and that there will be clearly defined expectations around what our role consists of and that policies exist to keep us safe in the workplace. Depending on context, expectations will be different. In short, expectations are what we require other people to do in order to reasonably keep engaging in the relationship - whether that be as an employee, a partner, family member or friend.

A boundary, is a limit that we set for ourselves, coupled with an action that we take to ensure our own safety and wellbeing. If something happens that is outside of this limit, we know what we can do to ensure our wellbeing, regardless of what someone else chooses to do or not do. A boundary does not require someone or something else to necessarily change or be different (because we cannot control that)! Setting a boundary, does not include an ultimatum or threat because someone else has done something that we do not like or are not comfortable with. A boundary gives us space to take care of ourselves, so that we can come back to the relationship in a more clear and engaged way.

An example of setting a boundary might sound like saying "when a conversation gets escalated and loud, I will need to walk away until I can calm down and come back to the conversation ready to talk further". It would not sound like - "if you do not stop yelling, I am getting out of here and not talking to you anymore." In this case the expectation might be that you taking some space is respected by the other person. The other side of this, may include the other person having an expectation that a timeframe is given for when you will come back to the conversation. When expectations are not met, there will always be some kind of consequence, which again is unique to each individual, and situation, however it is important to understand that this is not the same as a boundary.

Another example might sounds like "when I work long days and take care of so many things, I will need to take a break by doing x, y, z, so that I can show up more energized and engaged in this relationship, because I know that when I overwork, I can get irritable and impatient. Setting this boundary would not sound like " I need you to stop asking me to do things and/or assuming that I should just do everything"! Again, the expectation might be, that taking breaks and taking care of yourself, is respected.

Identifying boundaries, requires knowing yourself and where your personal limits are. Setting boundaries, requires communication and personal follow through on the action that supports your wellbeing. The benefit of taking these actions, is to increases your capacity to stay present in the relationship in a way that you can feel good about!

If any of this feels hard, or maybe even impossible, it can be a sign that you learned that keeping the peace and maintainging a sense of stability in relationship, meant giving up personal needs and boundaries. Expressing what you needed may have caused someone to become upset and/or threaten the relationship itself. Maybe having needs caused problems and got in the way of feeling accepted and loved in relationship, so ignoring them, was really important.

When these strategies are no longer working and are now compromising your wellbeing - exploring and supporting these parts of yourself can be an effective way to show up with more confidence and authenticity in relationship.



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