Cleveland Clinic
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How to Set Boundaries with Family and Friends

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We've all done it. We've all found ourselves involved in situations with family, friends, business partners, or any other relationship that we have with others, where we aren't quite sure how we got into the situation in the first place. And how to get ***out*** of it is an even bigger problem!

It all starts with someone needing our assistance. Not everyone necessarily asks for it. Sometimes, we see people struggle and feel bad for them. We want to show kindness, so we make the offer someone cannot refuse.

At other times, we respond to cries for help and don a super-hero cape to save the day. We go into "fix-it" mode and take on the challenges head-on so that we can present the solutions. All the other has to do is follow through on what we have done for them. Of course, that rarely happens.

There are other instances where we are bamboozled by the histrionic machinations from those who seem to make a career out of lamenting about the unfairness of life, and how it or someone has, once again, done them wrong.

Consider the friend who has just walked out of her marriage with her three kids. Do you convert your upstairs office into a bedroom? Do you give her money for rent? Become her personal counselor and give her advice? Offer to watch the kids free-of-charge?

Or what about your brother who never has enough money to fill-up his gas tank to get to work or pay for groceries at the end of the month? You notice that throughout the month he *always* seems to have money for cigarettes, or justifies spending $200 "relaxing" at the casino because he "deserves" it? Of course, every month you give him gas and food money.

When is what you do for another not enough? When is it too much? When or where do we draw the line? How do we know if what we are doing is helping or hindering others on the road to self-sufficiency? How do we preserve our own sense of self-respect, as we help others?

Regardless of how we end up trying to pull others out of their predicaments, our intentions are well-meant. We want to do the "right" thing. We don't want to see others suffer. We want to be seen as kind. We don't want to be thought of as heartless. We want to show love and get love in return.

But then we get to a point where we simply cannot tolerate it anymore. We begin to feel resentful and angry. What we want or need seems to be unimportant to the other. We start to recognize when we are being manipulated. This is the point where we know that we've had enough and when it's time to draw the line.

If it has come to this point, then it has gone on too long.

Learning how and when to say "no" can be a difficult lesson to conquer. Dr. Manuel J. Smith, author of "***When I Say No, I Feel Guilty,"*** suggested in his book on assertiveness training that the difficulty comes from our childhood training when we learn how to manipulate situations to get what we want. Learning to be assertive and set limits or boundaries with others is in conflict to this training.

Dr. Smith states, "...when you try to do what you want, you also allow other people to make you feel ignorant, anxious, or guilty; the three fearful emotional states you may have been trained as a child to feel when you don't do what someone else wants you to do. The problem in resolving this conflict is that the trained manipulated part of us accepts without question that someone else "should" be able to control us psychologically by making us feel these ways...we respond by counter-manipulation to the frustration of being manipulated. Manipulative coping, however, is an unproductive cycle...if you manipulate adults through their emotions and beliefs, they can counter-manipulate you in the same way."

This coping response can become a vicious cycle. The best solution is to learn how to set clear, healthy boundaries in your relationships to others. It is a process which needs to be followed without guilt.

Make the decision to set a boundary. If you continue to tolerate behavior that is unacceptable to you, you are making a conscious decision to do so. You must make the *choice* to set boundaries.

Come to terms with and feel your feelings. Self-reflection may be necessary to understand the genesis of your feelings of anger or resentment. Try to take some time to feel. Then step back and view the reasons why you feel what you do. Accept where you are at the moment with what you discover.

Decide what the boundaries will be. Look at the big picture, and be objective about what you can or cannot do or give. This can include money, things, your time, or even your emotional well-being. It is important to try to remain on the sidelines emotionally and do what you want to do without trying to accept the burden for the entire problem. You have offered to assist someone. You are not offering a way to avoid the problems at-hand.

Clearly define and communicate the boundaries. In the case of your brother, you might say, "I will loan you $100.00 to help you pay for your groceries this month. I expect that you will pay it back to me when you receive your paycheck next week and before you can borrow more money."

To your displaced friend with the three children, say, "You and your children can stay here for one month. You must pay half the utilities, and help by cooking dinner three times per week. I expect that you will find your own apartment before the month is over."

Follow through with the boundaries you have set. As difficult as it may be, remember that you are only responsible to yourself for the boundaries you are setting. You are also responsible for following through with what you do. **You may not be taken seriously the first few times you attempt it. You will likely be met with resistance from the other person.** Keep in mind, however, that you are not responsible for whether or not the other person abides by the boundaries you have set. Nor are you responsible for their reaction to you should they try to push back at your limits.

If your brother pays you half of the $100.00 you have loaned him and asks for more money for groceries, you say "no." He starts to raise his voice and says, "But I'm your brother. We're family

and family takes care of one another." Don't react to the manipulative words. You follow through because you care enough to want your brother to be independent of others. Family status does not mean someone has the right to lay a guilt trip on you when you lay out boundaries.

Look to a healthier future. When you begin to be more assertive and set boundaries with others who are unaccustomed to you doing so, you will likely feel guilty. **Others will certainly overreact to this new behavior from you.** They may get angry, reject you, and refuse to communicate with you. They may hold the relationship hostage by not allowing you to see other family members. It can come with weeks, months, or even years of non-communication.

But by setting boundaries, you are learning how to love yourself and your friends and family members differently than you may have in the past. Remember that you are beginning to learn to separate yourself from unhealthy patterns of behavior. You are taking responsibility for your own decisions and choices. It will take some time to get over the feelings of guilt, anxiety, and the stress of doing things differently. Take care to not allow yourself to buy into the manipulation volley of the past.

Boundary setting is hard work. But once we begin to build healthier relationships with the people in our lives, we will get better with practice and have a healthier respect for ourselves and others.

Coral Levang is a trainer, coach, speaker and writer whose mission in life is to inspire others to see beyond the challenges they face in their lives, both personally and professionally.

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