

How to Set Boundaries Early and Often

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It can be difficult at the beginning of a relationship to be direct and clear about what works for you and what doesn't. Often the longing to have partnership, love and affection overrides your wise discernment and ability to say no to what doesn't work.

For an example, let's look at a new dating relationship. You really like your new dating partner. You've been going out for 3 months now and you are starting to hope this could really work. Then on your next date they are two hours late. They arrive and explain how band practice went late and they lost track of time. You feel disoriented. You're not sure what's happening, but you know you don't want to threaten the sweet connection you have enjoyed so far. So you decide to just be understanding and say it's okay, and that you understand how that happens sometimes.

Shockingly, the same thing happens on your next date, but this time there is a different explanation and an apology. You are not hiding your disappointment so much this time and maybe you even say a word or two about what it was like for you to wait two hours. You receive more apology and within the hour you are happily receiving the love and affection for which you had been waiting.

If this pattern continues, it escalates in a predictable way. You complain more when your partner is late and this complaint then escalates into anger and criticism. You find yourself taking potshots at your partner about it at random times. Your partner at first escalates in the apology, possibly even crying. But later, the apology gets equal time with justification and at the worst moments there are attempts to belittle your feelings and needs. If the belittling goes on too long, you begin to doubt yourself. You might wonder if you even have a right to ask your partner to be on time for your dates.

This is a very painful way to learn about the results of not setting a clear boundary. Let's go back to the first time this dating partner is late two hours for your date and see how boundary setting might look. There you are standing in front of your attractive, but very late date. You are a swirl of confusion, hurt, disappointment, fear, and desire. Your date is explaining the lateness and trying to reassure you that it doesn't mean anything. You are in an emotional pressure cooker, you need time to find a sense of groundedness before responding. So the first thing you do is buy yourself some time. For example, you might say, "I don't know what to say right now. Let's get something to eat and talk about it after."

Once, your emotions and body have settled and you have done something grounding with your date like eating or walking, you will be able to sort things out a bit. From a grounded place you realize that a number of things can be true at the same time and you can express it freely. In this particular example, you can name at least three things that are true:

- You felt disappointed and hurt this evening because being two hours late doesn't give you the sense of respect and caring you're looking for.
- You know that you really like them and have enjoyed your time together thus far. You would like the relationship to continue.
- Trust and reliability are important for you in relationship and that kind of lateness doesn't contribute to either.

As you express your experience, perhaps one of the most important things is that you value the truth of them. If you express these three things with an apologetic tone, your dating partner will feel that and likely interpret that you don't really mean what you say or it's not important.

The second key element is to follow up with a request and really hear the answer. A clear request might sound something like this, "Would you be willing to make being on time for our dates a priority

and be there within ten minutes of the time we set?" Your partner might respond like this, "Oh yea, I will. You are important to me. It's just that I get caught up in things and I lose track of time. You know I really value being in the flow and once I get creative and I want to follow that creative energy. Art isn't created on a schedule you know."

It's important to hear the real answer. In the example above, your dating partner starts with yes, but then really implies a no. If you let this roll by without further negotiation, you will drop into the reactive pattern described above. It's hard to stay with it, because moments like these can be deal breakers. When the immediate pain of a potential break up is looming, it's hard to keep track of the long term satisfaction that comes from clearly expressing what's right for you and sticking to it.

In summary, here are key elements that can support you in setting boundaries early in a relationship.

1. When someone does something that crosses a boundary, delay talking about it until you can get grounded. This might be a few second, a few minutes, or a few days.
2. From a grounded place name all the things that are true in that situation. For example, in a dating relationship, this might include: your feelings and needs at the time of the boundary crossing, your love and care for your the other person, the desire for the relationship to continue, and a clear articulation of your boundary along with a specific do-able request.
3. Don't settle for a "maybe" or "I'll try" from the other person. Continue negotiation until you either come up with a new request that works for both of you or you hear a clear yes or a clear no to your initial request.

Practice

If you are currently in a relationship in which your boundaries are respected, take a moment now to celebrate and articulate for yourself all that enabled you to set and follow through with clear boundaries. If you are struggling to set clear boundaries in a relationship, reflect on and work through the steps above in your journal or with a friend as a first step.