# Understand And Dissolve Obstacles To Setting Life-Serving Boundaries

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If you are having difficulty setting life-serving boundaries, then you might recognize this parent's story:

> *I came to Mindful Compassionate Dialogue through parenting, and wanting to learn how to raise children from a loving energy rather than a punitive one. After some time of practicing, I realized that when I would get angry and shout at my young daughter (something I feel lots of regret about), it was often because I had been making myself tolerate a behavior I didn't enjoy (making noise, loud tone of voice, jumping on the bed…) for longer than I could actually handle with the resources I had access to in the moment. The key, then, was for me to set a life-serving boundary and reach an agreement that worked for both of us from the start, rather than pressuring myself to put up with something I had intense resistance or discomfort about.*

These sorts of stories are common and point to a longing for a skillful way to set boundaries. Life-serving boundaries are key to creating and sustaining fulfilling relationships. This may seem difficult to understand at first, because the compassionate expression of life-serving boundaries has not often been modeled for us. More often, setting boundaries is associated with rigid rule making that hampers connection.

If you are reading this, no doubt you have become aware that some of the recurrent challenges or discomfort you experience in your relationships could be resolved by setting boundaries, thus meeting needs like self-care, respect, or choice. And, at the same time, you're finding that taking that next step of actually setting a boundary is difficult, if not impossible.

If you have difficulty setting boundaries, there's a good chance that you grew up in a family in which your attempts to set a life-serving boundary (asking for something outside the family norms, saying "no," or attempting to make a decision for yourself) were punished, shamed, or simply ignored. As a kid, your first imperative is to belong to your parents and family. This is a deeply wired-in response that is meant to ensure your survival. Thus, as a child, you might have walled off parts of yourself in order to maintain a sense of safety and belonging.

Attempts to change these once adaptive behaviors may trigger the same sense of threat experienced in the original traumatic situation. This sense of threat implores you to stop what you are doing and back away at any cost. As such, the mere thought of setting a boundary might set your heart pounding, your palms sweating, and adrenaline rushing through you. At the very least, you might notice resistance and attempt to brush off the unwanted behavior or convince yourself to tolerate it. For example, you might have thoughts like, "It's really not that bad," "He didn't mean that," "I'm probably exaggerating," etc. You might even feel guilty for wanting to set a boundary.

These reactions try to keep you safe at the cost of other needs like agency, honesty, collaboration, authenticity, freedom, and self-care, to name just a few, and may leave you feeling angry, ashamed, disconnected or even depressed.

Thus, learning to notice all the unconscious ways you sacrifice who you are in order to avoid setting boundaries and meeting that reactivity with compassion are key to helping you dissolve those obstacles.

This means engaging all the tools you have for staying grounded, along with giving yourself the mental reminder that the fear of setting a boundary or the impulse to avoid is an outdated habit of heart, body, and mind and that now it is okay for you to set boundaries.

Begin your practice by making a list of signs that tell you a life-serving boundary is needed, but you are denying this fact. Your list might include some of the following:

- a feeling of being small or shrinking
- accusing others of taking advantage of you, using you, or ignoring you
- feeling disconnected
- a sense of inauthenticity as you attempt to give empathy or achieve harmony when a part of you is being repressed
- regret or pain about not getting what you really want
- complaints about how others get what they want but you don't
- making someone else wrong (such as calling them “selfish”) for engaging in self-care, saying “no” to what they don't want or asking for what they do want.

Again, when you notice these signs, remember that you unconsciously learned to avoid setting boundaries as a way to protect yourself from real dangers. Ideally, remembering this, evokes self-compassion. You can also request support from an empathic other to accompany you on this journey. Realizing that you've consistently abandoned particular needs can be painful and may require time to process and mourn before you can begin to set life-serving boundaries consistently. With practice, your body, heart, and mind will recognize life-serving boundaries as a way to care for yourself and others.

# Practice

Take some time now to review an agreement that you made with someone recently. Mindfully feel and reflect on each part of the agreement and notice if there are any symptoms from the list of bullet points above. If so, imagine yourself changing the agreement, mindfully feeling your body and grounding through any physiological escalation. Find even the smallest action to move you towards setting a life-serving boundary in this situation.

You might also practice setting boundaries with a trusted friend. This boundary-setting practice might look like saying “no” to simple things that you would otherwise adapt around, or asking for what you want when it's uncomfortable and would be easier to let it go.