

LIMIT-SETTING

Setting Appropriate Boundaries

Being a good person *does not* mean that you must put up with unreasonable behavior as part of your interpersonal relationships. Even if you have a friend or family member who is struggling with depression, anxiety, or other psychological issues, certain behaviors should *never* be tolerated:

- Emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse
- Stealing or other illegal activities (such as drug abuse)
- Destruction of property—e.g., your roommate throws or smashes things in your room
- Severely disruptive or tyrannical behaviors—e.g., a housemate constantly pressures you to borrow your car, a friend expect to talk to you for hours after every fight with her boyfriend, your mother insists that you must call several times every day to check in with her, etc.

Some additional examples of unhealthy boundaries are as follows:

Your behaviors:

- Going against personal values to please others.
- Letting others direct or define you.
- Being overwhelmed/preoccupied by another.
- Not caring when someone else violates your boundaries.
- Allowing someone to take as much as they can get *or* giving as much as you can give for the sake of giving.

The other person's behaviors:

- Talking at an intimate level on the first meeting.
- Touching a person without asking.
- Falling apart so someone will take care of them.
- Believing others can anticipate their needs *or* expecting others to fill their needs automatically.
- Taking as much as they can get for the sake of getting.

What can you expect when you use limit setting?

- The other person will probably get angry and will test your limit-setting skills.
- The other person may attempt to engage in “emotional blackmail.” For some specific responses to this type of behavior, visit this web page: <http://www.angelfire.com/biz/BPD/blackmail.html>.
- You may have your own emotional reactions like sadness or anger at having to set boundaries; it can feel like being a parent to your parent or being a disciplinarian to a friend.
- You *cannot* expect that you have the power to control the other person's behavior. This unrealistic expectation will only serve to leave you feeling defeated, angry, and frustrated.
- You have the right to take care of yourself and to *put your own needs first*.

How to set limits:

1. Pick ONE problem behavior at a time. Be as specific as possible about the problem behavior. For example, instead of saying, “You're inconsiderate,” say “You borrowed my clothes without asking.”
2. Inform the other person of what you will and will not tolerate, being as specific as possible. In the example above, you might say “You can borrow my jeans, but I don't want you to borrow my shoes.”
3. Describe the consequences for the intolerable behavior to the other person, preferably at a time when you are both emotionally calm.
4. Emphasize to the other person that you know you cannot control his/her behavior but that you have to take steps to protect your own needs.
5. Answer any questions which the other person may have, but do not defend or argue your position.
6. Be consistent! Consistently and successfully carrying out your plan will make the other person more likely to be respectful and responsive the next time you set limits.

Limit-Setting with Disruptive and/or Dangerous Behaviors

When disruptive and dangerous behaviors are involved, you will need to set stronger limits. Get to know and recognize cues that the other person is disruptive and dangerous; your own uneasiness or fear is usually a good cue. The first step to setting strong limits is to talk to the other person at a time when you are both calm. Explain to the other person what kinds of behaviors you will not tolerate and describe in detail the exact consequences on which you (and other roommates, friends, or family members, if applicable) have decided and agreed upon for specific disruptive or dangerous behaviors. Here are some specific examples of limits:

- “If you mention not wanting to live anymore, I am going to go to the RD.”
- “If you miss more than two of your classes this week, I’m going to call your parents.”
- “If you cut yourself, we are going to contact University Police immediately.”
- “If you won’t see a family counselor, then I’m not coming home for fall break.”

If the behavior occurs, don’t hesitate to tell the other person that his/her behavior is scaring or upsetting you. This feedback may help to defuse the situation, but it is still important to impose any limits which you have set. If you and others have made a plan for dealing with a particular behavior, now is the time to carry out the consequences. Use your judgment and past experience to decide whether to inform the person that you are setting limits or to go ahead with the plan without saying anything to the other person first.

What to do if you suspect another person might be suicidal:

Ask the person directly "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" You *will not* be putting ideas in their head by asking this question; in fact, most people who have thought about suicide are not only willing but also eager to share their feelings with someone. Show interest, understanding, and concern. Avoid any attempts to convince the other person that things are not as bad as they think, as this will likely make them feel even more guilty, worthless, and misunderstood. If, after talking with the other person, you have *any concerns whatsoever* about his/her safety, be sure to **SEEK HELP IMMEDIATELY**, *even if* they have sworn you to secrecy and/or have promised to get help on their own. Take it upon yourself to immediately contact your RA, RD, your friend’s parents, another family member, Counseling Services (245-5716), the Nurse Advice Line (245-5736), Life Line (1-800-310-1160), University Police (245-5222), or 911. Yes, it is possible that the other person might be angry at you for taking action, but at this point, the other person’s safety is your number one concern. And remember, whatever you do, you don’t have to do it alone; help is always available.

Positive Ways to Help Another Person

It is important to know your limitations in relationships. There are times when you might not have the time or energy to help, especially if you are unable to listen without being judgmental, you have a conflict in values, you are too close to the situation yourself, or you are overwhelmed with your own problems. However, if you do want to offer your assistance, here are some positive ways you can help:

- Offer to listen. Encouraging the other person to talk by listening without interruption. Ask open-ended questions to help increase your understanding of the issues. Resist the urge to share your own feelings, advice, or judgments with your friend; your goal as a listener should simply be to *really listen*.
- Focus on emotions. Rather than calling attention to any disruptive behaviors, concentrate on the emotions which the other person is experiencing. When talking to your the other person, mirror back the feelings that you hear, saying things like “So you felt hurt?” or “It sounds like you were angry.” Let the other person know that his/her feelings are normal, valid, and understandable reactions.
- Suggest other resources. Although advice-giving is usually not helpful, making the other person aware of available resources can be. For example, let your friend know that Counseling Services can help with a personal problem, reminding a family member that their doctor can provide referrals, etc.
- Finally, get help for yourself! Don’t feel as if you have to deal with this alone. Involve your friends, seek support from your family, notify college officials, or talk to a counselor about the situation. Don’t take responsibility for fixing or solving the other person’s problem; take care of *your own* needs.

Recommended Readings

- 📖 Katherine, Anne (1998). *Boundaries: Where You and I Begin*. MJF Books.
- 📖 Smith, Manuel (1975). *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*. New York: Bantam Books.

*Some of the above information was adapted from the following web site:
http://www.bcsc.org/support_centre/information_for_families/friends_handbook.html*