

Setting Boundaries

Honoring Your Truth in Romantic Relationship

BY CLAUDIA SIX

Boundaries are sometimes known as where one person stops and another begins. *Webster's* defines boundaries as “unofficial rules about what should not be done, limits that define acceptable behavior.” Setting boundaries entails letting others know where the line in the sand is. Setting boundaries requires the ability to balance togetherness and separateness with others.

Boundaries can be physical (“I’m not comfortable kissing in public, but holding hands is nice”), emotional (“Doing *xyz* reminds me of a difficult time in my life, so I’d rather do this other thing instead”), energetic (“I feel crowded when you stand close; would you mind creating a little space between us so that I can stay grounded”), sensory (“I get overstimulated by loud noise, so could we please keep the music low; that would help me to be more present”), sexual (“I love giving oral sex, but I’m not a swallower”). Notice that in these examples, I’m not just saying what doesn’t work. I’m completing the boundary by saying what would work.

I have found in my clinical sexology and relationship coaching practice that women especially have difficulty setting boundaries. Boundaries are relevant to men and women, but I will focus on women. And though boundaries come up for us all day long, my lens is focused on dating, relationships, and sex.

I have an interesting perspective on this, as I was born and raised in France, where there is not such an emphasis on being nice and avoiding conflict. In the US, girls seem to get the message that it’s more important to be pleasing than to be authentic—it’s more important to be liked than to be true to yourself. This leads to tricky situations when girls start dating and don’t have a voice to say what they want, what they are comfortable with, what they need, what’s not okay. And it’s not just girls; it’s also

women who find themselves dating again after long, monogamous relationships and have to develop a whole set of social skills (if they haven’t already) to navigate the vagaries of the bedroom.

Being able to set boundaries allows us to remain close to our lover even when we have differences. We can allow ourselves to be influenced by the other without losing ourselves. We retain a solid core of self that enables us to adapt to situations or to the wishes of others without self abandoning. We can accept others as separate from us. We can respect what they want, we can value their interests, we can see merit in their preferences without losing ourselves. It’s not about being selfish by prioritizing ourselves; it’s about knowing and being clear about who we are as separate yet connected to those we court, date, have sex with, marry—thus creating more room for true, intimate connection.

Some people feel that setting boundaries is creating conflict. Not so. When you say, “This doesn’t work for me,” there is nothing for anybody to argue with. The other person may have a hard time or be upset, but that is not your responsibility. You’re responsible for your actions; you’re not responsible for other people’s feelings. What they do with your boundary is their business. They need to respect it. Hopefully, there is a sense of trust and mutuality whereby your partner appreciates your telling them what you need and sees value in accommodating that, as in, “You need some space, honey. That’s fine. Take your time. I’ll go do something else, and you come find me when you’re ready.”

When women set wishy-washy boundaries, without much conviction behind them, people know that they can push those boundaries. Perpetrators or violators know a victim when they see one. And those women who set weak boundaries, if at all, tend to attract partners who push or even violate those boundaries.

The payoff of not setting boundaries is that you don’t have to face the discomfort of doing something new and unfamiliar, even if you’re terribly uncomfortable doing what is familiar. You don’t have to be responsible or self-accountable. You can just hand yourself over to someone, or hide what is true for you, and then blame them when you’re unhappy. That’s

passive-aggressive and a setup.

Here are a few ways to successfully set boundaries:

The positive sandwich. Start with a positive, set a boundary, and end on another positive. For example: “I like how you’re thinking, and although I’m not ready for that, I do like spending time with you.”

Firm energy. When your energy is firm, your boundaries are unequivocal. This applies in unpleasant situations and ones where you just need to be clear. Sit, stand, or lie down straight so that you can breathe into your belly. Use all of your voice, even if you’re not feeling confident—it doesn’t have to be loud, just firm—and back it up with sustained eye contact.



Set up your lover to win. This doesn’t mean your lover wins and you lose. It means everybody wins. Since your lover can’t read your mind and does want to be with you, if something doesn’t work for you, tell them what would.

In a long-term relationship, if you don’t set boundaries, you’re not totally present or authentic, and something is missing, for both you and your lover. Eventually, sex gets boring, loses its appeal, and fizzles out for no clear reason. In dating or in a new relationship, when you don’t set boundaries, you set a precedent for what your date can only assume is how you like things in the long term.

When you set boundaries, you do everybody a favor because they know where they stand. Nobody has to guess or read your mind, you get what you need, and everybody wins. ♣

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