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Health

Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



Setting Healthy Holiday Boundaries for Stress-Free Celebrations

This year, in the spirit of practicing kindness and finding joy, we invite you to think about how understanding the importance of setting and maintaining healthy boundaries is a gift of self-compassion that may be long overdue.

This article explores how embracing the concept of creating boundaries to address social commitments and family dynamics can help you better manage people-pleasing pressure. You can reclaim your peace and maintain routines over the holidays. Realizing this can be incredibly liberating. You're not alone: we'll guide you on how to identify, communicate, and protect your personal limits. With clear boundaries, you can have more meaningful and enjoyable holiday celebrations.

Boundaries are important

Relationships can be complicated, and during stressful times, like holidays, when extra pressures and expectations arise, we can start to feel like we are losing control and balance in our lives. That's where setting boundaries can help. When we establish and maintain clear boundaries for ourselves, we are taking steps to "define what is appropriate behavior in our relationships" that can

help us protect our well-being so we feel safe.¹ Healthy boundaries can reduce stress by limiting what make us feel overwhelmed. These can take the form of something as simple as maintaining regular routines. This can help us prioritize self-care, positively affecting our mental health because it helps us focus on finding joy instead of feeling frustrated or overwhelmed.

Identifying your boundaries

Different events, relationships, and individuals can trigger underlying emotional and psychological responses for some of us. Recognizing and understanding how these are associated with stressful experiences can help us see the root causes of some of our struggles. We can begin to heal when we welcome the opportunity to take a different approach and confidently express ideas that are good for us.

When you identify a trigger, try focusing on being conscious and aware of the sensations and movement you feel in your body as you respond to the stress of a tense interaction. Pay attention to how that stress expresses itself in your body. Once you can understand this mind-body connection, your awareness puts you

in the position of being able to let it go. Start by exploring your thoughts and pinpointing where you started to feel uneasiness or discomfort in your body. What did you instinctively want to do in that moment? Reflect on these sensations so you can understand your comfort zones and limits.

Next, consider what could be different in that same experience that would not have upset you. Try to be specific. Were there words that caused your reaction? What actions or activities happened? Don't rush the process: take the time you need to understand. Then, consider what parts of life you find draining rather than uplifting. Finally, think about what makes you "feel safe, supported and valued?"²

Tips for setting boundaries that you can keep

If you've never operated with boundaries before, taking steps to set clear ones can make you feel a bit uncomfortable initially. Pay attention to how you feel in different situations. You also may find it difficult to say no to people. One approach that could be helpful is to use what is referred to as "I" statements to clearly "express yourself without blaming, threatening or misleading others."³

Here's what an "I" statement looks like:

I feel **(you describe the feeling)** when **(this happens)** because **(the reason)**.

You can even express what you need from the person or situation.

I need **(you describe what you need to feel safe)**, or I would rather if **(suggest the preferred behaviour)**.

Setting boundaries using "I" statements helps to:

1. Express your needs clearly without causing someone to feel defensive.
2. Be assertive.
3. Use language that is empathetic and avoids blaming or accusations.
4. Keep things short and specific.
5. Offer alternatives or compromises that can build goodwill.

This takes careful practice but is quite effective in modelling a healthy dialogue that is not based on making assumptions and doesn't degrade into an argument or become competitive.

Here are some examples of "I" statements you could make to set boundaries for some of these common challenges:

Time

It stresses me out when you ask me to arrive at your house early in the morning because waking the kids and getting them ready is difficult. I need you to understand that we also need some time at home to do our things and celebrate in our own way. I'd rather if we could discuss what time works best for everyone.

Taking on tasks

I feel upset when you ask me to prepare a dish you would like me to bring to dinner a certain way, as I have modified the recipe to make it healthier. I need you to be open to tasting and enjoying how I make it without offering comments or comparing it to your recipe.

Emotions or happiness

I feel frightened when you leave the room angrily and comment that no one appreciates what you do for the family or offers to help you because I don't believe this is true. I need you to realize that we are gathered to enjoy each other's company. We can be involved in catching up with people we haven't seen in a while. I would rather if you were to ask for help and accept it from anyone who offers. It doesn't always need to be me.

How to deal with adverse reactions to your new boundaries

Anticipating others' responses helps you manage your expectations and maintain boundaries. It takes time to recognize that we can express anger/disappointment to other adults without feeling that we need to curate their reactions.

Managing your emotional response to other people's behaviour is a way to help you stay firm about your boundaries respectfully. You should be clear and reassert them if people ignore your boundaries. It's okay to indicate the actions you must take if your boundaries continue to be violated. Adults understand that there are consequences for their actions. Suppose you have reminded others of your boundaries, and they continue to ignore them. In that case, you might need to re-evaluate the relationship or your desire to participate in an event with that person. It would help to recognize the negative consequences of compromising boundaries yourself. You're undermining the self-care and self-compassion you've demonstrated in creating them, leaving you open to receiving the damage associated with the stressors you were trying to avoid.

Practicing self-compassion

Self-compassion involves treating yourself with kindness, understanding and forgiveness, especially in difficult circumstances. It consists of the ability to see yourself as you would a good friend rather than being judgemental or critical of your actions.

When you are in the process of establishing healthy boundaries, you may start to feel guilty. That's okay. It shows that you think with deep purpose. You can also feel anxious about upholding your boundaries, which may lead you towards negative self-talk, which can, in turn make you resigned that this is the way things are and alternatives are impossible. Going there is dangerous. Self-compassion should be equivalent to a life-saving measure you wouldn't question.

Taking care of yourself means that you are:

- Being authentic.
- Expressing ideas that are good and protective for you with confidence.

When you decide to sacrifice your boundaries to merely keep the peace, you undermine the work you've done for self-awareness and self-compassion.

Suppose you are trying to preserve your sense of self-compassion. In that case, affirming your beliefs through a mantra or meditation that you can recite can be helpful. Here are two that can help reinforce your strength and keep you pointed in the right direction:⁴

1. "My life is for me, not for others. I deserve to make decisions that make me happy."
2. "I'm allowed to say 'no' to protect my energy and time."

How can counselling play a role in helping you set boundaries?

Counselling can help you prepare for challenging interactions and dynamics that have the potential to create stress responses. You can often find greater success and confidence by talking through triggers and anticipated reactions and even exploring role play. This can be a powerful way to explore your feelings and address apprehensions. It lets you become more attuned to what's being said, the emotions you could feel in the moment, and, simultaneously, become aware of non-verbal elements that could affect you. Walking through a potential situation with a counsellor can help you learn about and practice positive coping strategies, rather than feeling vulnerable and reacting impulsively.

Ideally, you want to recognize that seeking support can be an effective way to help you build emotional resilience, create healthier relationships, and avoid retreating into resignation.

With healthy boundaries, the freedom that comes with encouraging, prioritizing, and practicing self-care and assertiveness offers you the potential to experience more happiness during the holiday season and year-round.

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