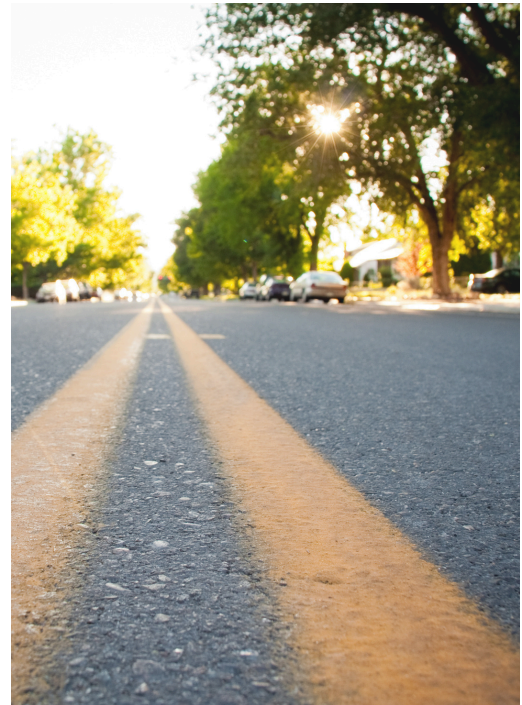


Boundaries for Well-Being

By Stephanie Mastroantonio

We successfully navigate physical boundaries every day: we stay in our lane while driving, we wait our turn in line, and we don't cross through a barbed wire fence. We generally respect physical boundaries, even if we disagree with them or find them inconvenient, because we understand their purpose. Physical boundaries are concrete, with the obvious intent of helping us navigate situations in a safe and respectful way. Personal boundaries, on the other hand, are less tangible, and so we sometimes have more trouble navigating them. But they are equally important in creating a safe and respectful society.



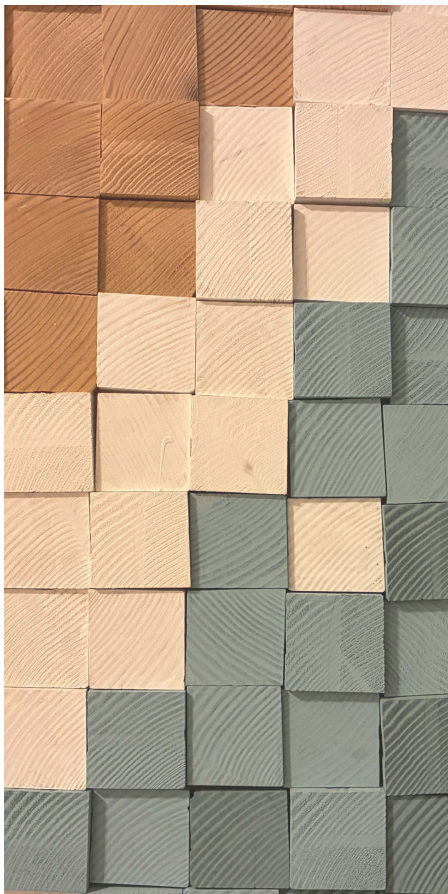
The American Psychological Association defines boundaries as “a psychological demarcation that protects the integrity of an individual or group or that helps the person or group set realistic limits on participation in a relationship or activity.”[1] Boundaries set expectations that balance connection and protection while preserving well-being. Boundaries also play a role in our ability to differentiate our thoughts, motives, and emotions from those in our environment. Establishing boundaries takes time and thought, but the returns on that investment include increased relationship satisfaction and improved conflict resolution skills.[2] Learning how to establish boundaries also improves our relationships with ourselves, boosting our self-confidence and insight into self-improvement.[3]

Given the demands of balancing personal and professional responsibilities, it can be helpful to have a framework for understanding how boundaries can vary.

Types of Boundaries

A common framework for boundaries suggests conceptualizing them as porous, rigid, or healthy. If we think of boundaries on a continuum, porous and rigid are on opposite ends. Porous boundaries tend to be more permissible, prioritizing connection over self-protection and allowing a greater draw from our energy. Porous boundaries may also leave us too vulnerable by making it easy for others to take advantage of us. Rigid boundaries, on the other hand, tend to be too constrictive by prioritizing protection over connection and limiting what we allow in or out. Rigid boundaries can inhibit us from sharing anything that may feel too vulnerable, leaving us feeling disconnected from others. Healthy boundaries, which fall in the middle of the continuum, balance connection and protection. This balance allows for an ebb and flow in our relationships, which creates a sense of equity and emotional safety.

Let's consider how rigid, porous, and healthy boundaries appear in relationships with ourselves and others.



Porous Boundaries

When we have not clearly defined our boundaries with others, they are likely to be porous. When our boundaries are porous, we are more likely to engage in maladaptive coping strategies, such as people-pleasing and avoiding conflict. These strategies may seem to serve us in the short term because they feel easier than saying no and help us avoid rejection. Over time, however, porous interpersonal boundaries can lead us to feel resentment in our relationships. Porous boundaries may also harm our relationship with ourselves by undermining our ability to assert and protect our needs. When we prioritize people-pleasing or conflict avoidance over self-protection, we can damage our sense of self and lose insight into our needs and how to meet them.[4]

When our boundaries with ourselves are porous, we lack clarity about our own needs, desires, and goals. We may look for someone else, such as a romantic partner, or something else, such as our career, to define and fulfill those things for us. This can make it challenging to differentiate our sense of self and identity from that of others, leaving us vulnerable to experiencing enmeshment in our personal and professional relationships. An overlap between the needs of self and others can negatively affect our self-esteem by making it challenging to separate our needs, beliefs, and emotions from others.[5]

Rigid Boundaries

When our boundaries with others are too rigid, we may feel distant or cut off from the people around us. While rigid boundaries may be necessary in certain situations, over time they may negatively impact our well-being. If we apply rigid boundaries broadly in our relationships, the people who we interact with may hesitate in trying to connect and build relationships with us. Research has consistently found that social connection has a strong correlation to our well-being and contributes to lower levels of anxiety and depression and improves our resilience in the face of stress.[6]



Rigid boundaries with ourselves are often a coping mechanism to manage our fear of failure. They can give us a sense of control but lead to high self-criticism and expectations of perfection. When we inevitably struggle to meet rigid and unrealistic expectations, we lose that sense of control and may feel like we failed. When this happens, we tend to overlook our own boundaries and place the blame on a perceived character flaw instead. We overcompensate and become more rigid, thus beginning a continuous cycle of seeking control through unrealistic expectations for ourselves. This cycle adds to our distress and makes it challenging to focus on implementing practices to support our well-being.

Healthy Boundaries

When our boundaries with others are healthy, we are more likely to have balance in our relationships and social interactions. Healthy boundaries help us balance work versus play, priority versus passion, productivity versus rest, and must-do versus want-to-do. This means we don't expect less or more of ourselves than others, and we don't view our needs as less or more important than the needs of others. Healthy boundaries allow us to have hobbies, downtime, and fun as a regular part of maintaining our well-being.

Healthy boundaries also promote awareness of our needs and emotions, allowing better self-regulation, improved impulse control, and increased trust in our decision-making abilities.[7] Research has identified a statistically significant correlation between boundaries and self-esteem.[8] Of course, setting boundaries can be easier said than done. Healthy boundaries require assertive communication and transparency in relationships, which can be momentarily uncomfortable. But learning how to establish healthy boundaries is critical to protecting our needs and limits over time.



Establishing Healthy Boundaries

The first step in establishing healthy boundaries is considering what is most important to our well-being within personal and professional areas of our lives. Next, we can assess if our current boundaries are porous, rigid, or healthy. For example, you may value working from home but find yourself struggling with porous boundaries between family and work demands. For boundaries that we deem porous or rigid, we can reflect on how to shift them toward healthy boundaries. We can take these steps even if it initially feels uncomfortable to do so.

Like any stress management tool, establishing healthy personal boundaries takes practice and is an ever-evolving work in progress. To start, identify a few boundary areas that are most important to you and then build upon or shift what you have already established. Acknowledge what is going well, and let that inform how you can make adjustments in needed areas. It's easier to attempt new skills when we're not starting from square one, and to make lasting behavioral changes when we're free from feelings of shame and guilt stemming from harsh self-criticism.



Maintaining healthy boundaries requires introspection and communication. Assertive communication skills can help us share our boundaries clearly, respectfully, and concisely. While it can be tempting to overexplain our intentions, it often comes at the cost of clarity. Personal accountability is necessary, which we can accomplish by using "I" statements. When we begin statements with "you need to" or "you should," we are attempting to dictate the other person's behavior and expecting them to be responsible for our limits. Not taking ownership of our boundaries can easily lead to frustration or defensiveness for the other party.

When using assertive communication, consider your tone and volume, and be careful not to conflate assertive and aggressive communication styles. Once set, we must consistently uphold our boundaries by communicating them and following through on changes that may need to occur with individuals who violate our boundaries.

Striking the Right Balance

To support boundary maintenance, it can be helpful to discuss our boundaries with a trusted confidant or professional. Upon review, we should consider how well our needs are being met and protected while balancing our need for connection.

If we feel an imbalance between our need to set limits and our need for connection, this is likely a sign that boundaries need to be reevaluated. Experiencing frustration or exhaustion from personal or professional requests or avoiding communication with people who may make a request of us can be a sign that you may benefit from establishing more firm boundaries. On the other hand, if you feel disconnected, lonely, or misunderstood, there may be a need to add more flexibility in your boundaries with others.

Establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries is a practice that takes ongoing assessment, adjustment, and communication. While setting boundaries can be an uncomfortable practice at times, it is an essential tool for maintaining well-being.

Stephanie Mastroantonio is a clinical coordinator for the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). She is a Colorado-licensed clinical social worker and therapeutic foster care provider. She has specialized experience and training in working with professionals, primary and secondary trauma, community outreach, parenting, and both forensic and medical social work, including extensive work supporting attorneys and populations navigating the court system.

For more well-being related strategies visit the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) website at www.coloradolap.org or contact us at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a confidential, free well-being consultation.



[1]. "Boundary," APA Dictionary of Psychology (updated Apr. 19, 2018), <https://dictionary.apa.org/boundary>.

[2]. Chernata, "Personal Boundaries: Definition, Role, and Impact on Mental Health, 3(1) Personality and Env't Issues 24 (Mar. 2024).

[3]. Id.

[4]. Najavits, *Seeking Safety: A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Abuse* (Guilford Press 2022).

[5]. Mathe and Kelly, "Mental Boundaries Relationship With Self Esteem and Social Support: New Findings for Mental Boundaries Research," 43(1) *Imagination Cognition and Personality* 29 (2023).

[6]. Seppala et al., "Social Connection and Compassion: Important Predictors of Health and Well-Being," 80(2) *Soc. Rsch.: An Int'l Q.* 411 (Summer 2013).

[7]. Chernata, "The Role of Emotional Intelligence in the Personal Boundaries Formation," 3(3) *Personality and Env't Issues* 59 (2024).

[8]. Mathe and Kelly, *supra* note 5.