



THE BOOK OF BOUNDARIES

BY MELISSA URBAN

Boundaries allow those who care about us to support us in the way we want to be supported. They provide a clear line between the helpful and the harmful, so people don't have to try to read our minds. They let us engage in relationships fully and openly, knowing we've clearly expressed our limits and made it easier for others to respect our needs. In fact, the best way to preserve a relationship often includes setting boundaries within it.

You're not being mean when you set boundaries, you're being kind—to yourself and your relationships. But that doesn't mean they're not uncomfortable. Any conflict can be uncomfortable—I won't try to pretend otherwise — I feel it, too. It's not always easy for me to say no to an esteemed work colleague, to ask my husband for alone time, or to tell my parents, "I won't discuss this with you further." But what's

both uncomfortable *and* damaging is reaffirming the story that someone else's feelings are more important or worthy than your own — which is what you do every time you swallow your healthy boundary in an effort to keep the peace.

But there is a better way — one that leads to more fulfilling relationships, improved self-confidence, better health, and more time and energy for the things that are important to you. It may be uncomfortable, but I guarantee it will be worth it. Boundaries are how we care, stay supportive, and give to those we love without sacrificing our own health and happiness in the process.

In *The Book of Boundaries*, I offer scripts organized into three categories: Green, Yellow, and Red. The three-part color-coded system represents the level of threat that stems from the boundary crossing you're facing. If someone continues this behavior, is your mental health going to suffer? Are your health commitments at risk? Is it putting you in the way of physical or emotional harm?

If that threat is minimal at this point — their behavior is not okay, but it's the first time it's happened, or it's not hugely harmful — you're still in Green territory, and the language you use to establish or reinforce the boundary should acknowledge that. But if the threat to your relationship is imminent — as in, "If you mention my weight one more time, I'm walking out the door" — you're in the Red, and your boundary language and the consequences should reflect that, too.

GREEN: Low risk, and the gentlest language. Assumes the other person wasn't aware they were overstepping and wants to respect your limits. Your boundary language is clear, generous, and very kind. Leaves any potential consequences unsaid in the spirit of good faith.

YELLOW: Elevated risk, and firmer language. Used as a follow-up if your Green boundary isn't respected, or if historical interactions with this person indicate the threat is higher. Yellow may also include an intended consequence, if appropriate.

RED: Severe risk, and your most direct language. At this point, your health, safety, and/or the relationship are in jeopardy, and your language must reflect the severity of the situation. It's still kind, but this is their last reminder, and makes it clear that you are prepared to hold your limits. State the consequence plainly here and be ready to enforce it.

Setting Boundaries With a Family Member

Issue: “Some of my family members and I don’t agree on political or social justice issues. When we spend time with them, they’re not shy about expressing their perspectives. They’re entitled to their opinions, I suppose, but this kind of commentary is unacceptable to me. Can I even set a boundary here?”

GREEN: (before the visit) “I know we don’t see eye to eye on political or social justice issues, so let’s please agree to not bring up, discuss, or provide viewpoints on those topics during our visit. It’s the only way we’ll enjoy our time together, and I really want to.”

YELLOW: (in the moment) “Stop, Jeff. We all agreed to not bring up immigration, so please change the subject.” Change the subject.

RED: “If you won’t stop talking about your views on immigration [or sexuality, gender identity, reproductive rights, etc.], we’re going to leave.”

Yes, you can set a boundary here. If it’s important to you to maintain the relationship and/or it’s inevitable that you’ll see these family members at gatherings and you’d rather not have it turn into an episode of The Jerry Springer Show, setting and holding a healthy boundary is the only way you’ll accomplish that.

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