

10 LAWS OF BOUNDARIES

These laws are based on the concept of the importance of considering our behaviour in order to lead a more mindful, compassionate life for ourselves and for others. When we broaden our understanding of the concept of boundaries, it helps us understand ourselves (and others) better. When we understand, it is easier to change how we do things.

The 10 Laws of Boundaries -*Excerpted from "Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No, To Take Control of Your Life"* Dr. Henry Cloud, Dr. John Townsend.



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The Law Of Sowing and Reaping

Actions have consequences. If someone in your life is sowing anger, selfishness, and abuse, are you setting boundaries against it? Or are they getting away with not reaping (or paying the consequences for) what he/she sowed?

1. Sowing and Reaping:

The Law of Cause and Effect. When we behave in a particular way there are consequences: our behaviour has an impact on ourselves and also on others.

If we make decisions based on 'worldly desires' for example, I want to eat that second piece of cake, drink that third glass of wine, we need to understand the consequences of that. For example, I might carry too much weight, increase my chance of diabetes, have a troubled sleep, on so on. If we do not manage our finances, it will cause problems for us later on.

However, if we consider the value of our actions for ourselves and others, our life will be easier. No overeating means a healthier lifestyle and better long term options. Better management of our finances means we can care for ourselves into retirement better.

If we are physically and financially healthy, we can better support others. Also, others are more drawn towards us because we can be more loving and responsible and show our care for others.

Now we can see others who apparently 'get away with doing whatever they want' without concern for the consequences. It may not be apparent immediately, but the chickens do come home to roost. Celebrities might seem to live glamorous self-centred lives. Later on they may not look so happy though. Also, we must not confuse their self-promotion with reality – it may be just whatever product they are promoting.

Some people don't reap what they sow, because someone else steps in and reaps the consequences for them. This might sound familiar. Your parents may send you money to protect you from your creditors and thus bear the consequences for your spendthrift ways. You may walk on eggshells around your moody husband, try everything to make him happy, and enable him to have his tantrums as he likes while you bear the entire burden of his moodiness.

Thus people may interrupt the effect of the law, just as one catches a glass that is falling off the table. Yet the law of gravity is not changed by that. And in the same way the Law of Sowing and Reaping is not repealed if somebody interrupts its effect. The only thing that has changed is that somebody else bore the consequences.



Now there are situations where this has to be the case. Parents may step in to prevent children from a true disaster. Spouses rescue each other out of difficult situations because they love each other.

However, if you truly love your spouse, your sons and daughters and so on, you allow them to experience the effects of their irresponsibility. It is unlikely to happen immediately, but eventually the lesson will be learnt. When you no longer enable, you are able to support.

If our 'boundary' is functional, e.g. doing the washing, cleaning the room, paying a bill, that is relatively easy to identify.

It is when we consider the relational sowing and reaping that it becomes more difficult. Do you carry the moods of the person you love? One example is where wives tend to carry the emotional burden for their husbands, without even realising it. The consequences of this can be resentment unconsciously directed to the husband, he may feel a sense of guilt for what he doesn't know, he might feel a constraint to his freedom as a result. When we sow, so shall we reap. But in either aspect the problem is the same: The person who created the problem doesn't have to face its effects and thus sees no reason to change it. The spouse who takes responsibility for dealing with the problem does not realize that this problem is not his problem and thus does not say or do anything about it. The solution to this is in the setting of boundaries that can break the cycle.

The Law of Responsibility

We are responsible TO each other, not FOR each other. This law means that each person refuses to rescue or enable another's immature behaviour.

2. Responsibility:

In a family we have the responsibility to love and care for each other. We care about the effect we have on each other. Our responsibility to our spouse is higher than all others. Then we have a responsibility to our parents, children and so on. We also have a responsibility towards work colleagues, and all people we have contact with and then beyond. Those who are more vulnerable often demand a greater responsibility from us and challenge these priorities. Our religions teach us to love one another and when we do, we fulfil our sense of responsibility – this means being compassionate.

Our challenge is not confusing our sense of responsibility and taking on the emotional burden of others. We cannot feel the feelings of those we love. We can't think their thoughts. We can't behave for them. We are responsible for ourselves . . . and others are responsible for themselves. In a family this means that we have to distinguish between our responsibility to each other and their responsibilities for themselves. This means we have to support each other in carrying the heavy burdens of life. On the other hand we cannot take over the responsibility for our family members' feelings, attitudes, values, and their handling of life's daily little difficulties. We may help each other, but each person must take care of his and her daily loads.

Many people have a tendency to fall into one of the two following extremes. On the one hand, a family member may neglect his/her responsibility to love each other and become selfish and inconsiderate. This is irresponsible. On the other hand, the family member can try to do everything to make the others happy. But this is an impossible task. While one should be sympathetic towards the other, no one can make another happy as long as they do not take on the responsibility for their feelings.

Finally, the Law of Responsibility also means that we have to refuse to rescue or enable immature or inappropriate behaviour.

The Law of Power

We have power over some things, we don't have power over others (including changing people). It is human nature to try to change and fix others so that we can be more comfortable. We can't change or fix anyone - but we do have the power to change our own life.

3. Power:

When we ask, 'how do I get my daughter to...?' (insert husband, wife, son, sister, neighbour etc.), we show we misunderstand what we can and can't do, or the extent we have the power to change a relationship. Many of us focus on trying to change the behaviour of others, not ourselves. And we suffer from this. It might seem logical to want to change the behaviour of others so that we can feel better... but this does not work.

We do not have the power to make other people change. We have no power over their attitudes and actions. We can't make them grow up, we can't stop them from exhibiting a difficult behaviour, and we can't force them to stop yelling at us or even to initiate a deep conversation with us.

We are not responsible for the actions, feelings, attitudes, values, or behaviour of others, and the Law of Power says that we don't have power over these things anyway.

You might want to say: 'but he made me do it' or something like that. It is a common argument of people who need an excuse for something that they either knew to be wrong or did not really like to do, but this is an excuse. No one has the power to make us do things against our will. Others can limit our choices and give us compelling reasons to do what they expect from us, but nevertheless we are the ones who choose what we do – and no one else.

These are our powers:

1. We have the power to agree with the truth about our problems. We can identify our own hurtful ways.
2. We have the power to admit our inability to change these ways without accepting our vulnerability and reaching out for support if necessary.
3. We have the power to repent, that is to become willing to turn from unhelpful ways and accept the change that is possible.
4. We have the power to seek reconciliation with those whom we have injured.



One thing is sure, just as we want others to change their ways, others will want us to change our ways. We are powerless outside our boundaries, others are powerless inside our boundaries.

Despite our inability to make others change, we do have the power to influence them. But there is a trick to this. It requires a change in us to motivate others to take a step in our direction. If we change our way in dealing with our family, they may see their way to change as well – both because of a renewed closeness and because some of the old destructive ways simply don't work anymore.

The Law of Respect

If we wish for others to respect our boundaries, we need to respect theirs. If someone in your life is easily angered, you should not dictate to him/her all the reasons that they can't be angry. A person should have the freedom to protest the things they don't like. But at the same time, we can honour our own boundary by telling them, "Your anger towards me is not acceptable to me. If you continue this way, I will have to remove myself from you."

4. Respect:

One of the difficult problems that people experience is that their boundaries are not always welcome. Others seem to get angry if we begin to set limits and we get the feeling that they do not accept us when we say no to them. If we actually experience that, there is often a simple reason. Our boundaries are not respected if we don't show respect for the boundaries of others. We get all excited about finally being able to say no, but we are not at all excited about hearing no. We demand freedom, but don't want others to be free to disappoint us. If this is how we feel, we may be in good company. But we have not yet made it beyond the level of children. Children only think about their own rights. Mature adults, however, desire others to be free in the same way they desire freedom for themselves.

If we wish our boundaries to be respected, we need to respect the boundaries of others. We can't expect others to do for us, what we don't like to do for them.

Some people use two different measures: a generous one for themselves and a very strict one for others. They can be quite judgmental when it comes to the life of other people but do not live up to these standards themselves. A judgemental approach is doomed to failure. Others have their own mind, values, and feelings. If you respect that, you will see love grow in your relationship. If you try to make the other the same as you, your relationship will grow cold.

Of course, this is easier said than done. If we learn to love and respect people who tell us no, they will begin to love and accept our no as well. If we trust ourselves, we will give people around us the freedom to make their own choices, we can begin to trust them.

Our concern with others should not be "are they doing exactly what I want them to do?" but "do they really have a free choice?". Of course, we should voice our opinion to help them make a wise choice, but we must let them make their own decision.



No one likes to be hit over the head with a new set of “rules”. If you want your family member to accept your new boundaries, make sure that they feel that their boundaries are accepted as well. Sometimes this means that you have to ask a few questions that can be quite uncomfortable for you, like:

- Do you feel I respect your right to say no to me?
- Do I give you guilt messages, withdraw, become angry, or attack you when you set a limit?
- Will you let me know the next time when I don’t respect your freedom?

It is not easy to ask these questions, because they are humbling. But they show your sincere concern and love for the other. And they can bind your relationship. However, if your relationship is burdened by problems and you can’t really trust the other anymore, you may feel that you are putting yourself in the hands of someone who could use your respect against you. There is a certain risk that this may actually happen. However, even untrustworthy people need to have their legitimate needs and boundaries respected. Of course, you can’t allow yourself to be harmed by anyone. But you can respect their needs and still set limits on their untrustworthiness.

For example if your loved one is angry, you can’t dictate to them not to be angry. They have the right to protest what they do not like. However, you might tell them that their way of expressing their anger is not acceptable for you and that – for your own protection – you have to distance yourself from them – for instance by leaving the room – if they cannot find other ways to express their anger. It may not be advisable to say this while they are enraged, but you need to find a situation when to express this to. Respecting and valuing other’s boundaries is the key to a close and loving relationship. When you extend love to give freedom to your loved one, you will reap freedom in return.

The 5 out of 10 rule:

If a person is frequently and easily enraged, it is helpful to set some mutual boundaries around this. When others are easily enraged, we are also easily upset and distressed and angered, this is why the 5 out of 10 rule is important.

To understand this rule, we need to appreciate that if a person is angry to a level of 5 out of 10, then it is not easy for them to come back down to a calmer state of mind. In this case, it is not realistic to expect to resolve any concern, in the moment, because emotions are running high and flooding the mind and body. To settle down to a level where it might be possible to resolve a situation requires time out, the parties need to take time out for themselves to calm down. They may also need to place distance between each other.

It is advisable to jointly make a 5 out of 10 rule before it is likely to be used, when everyone is calm. The people concerned would need to agree that if they felt angry 5 out of 10, or if they felt the other person was angry 5 out of 10, then they could call time out. If this happened, then they would need to agree when and perhaps where they could meet again to resolve the concern that created such an angry response.

The Law of Motivation

We must be free to say "no" before we can wholeheartedly say "yes". One cannot actually love another if he feels he doesn't have a choice not to. Pay attention to your motives.

5. Motivation:

We have all experienced a situation where we did something that we were not excited about at all, but we felt it was the loving thing to do. This can cause a problem though. When we act out of 'sacrifice' it is not motivated by love anymore. Actually, we will begin to feel resentment and continue to do so more and more reluctantly. And when the loved one feels our displeasure, we will be disappointed to find out that they don't appreciate our sacrifice at all – because our inward grudging makes the outward act totally worthless.

We can do everything in the world for our family members. If what we do is not motivated by genuine love, or if we complain about all the things "we have to do" then our motives are wrong. A gift must be given out of free choice. We must feel free to say no before we can wholeheartedly say yes. This is the Law of Motivation.

Giving true love, compassion, requires that we make our choices based on our values and not out of fear. When we say yes, we must make sure that our motives are right, or we may resent it later. If, however, we believe that we have to and can't say no, we are clearly afraid of the following:

1. We may fear losing the love of loved one or even being abandoned.
2. We may fear to lose the approval of others and do everything to please them.
3. We may fear the other's anger and can't just live with anyone to be mad at us.
4. We may fear loneliness and give in to earn "love".
5. We may fear to be a bad person and believe that to love always means to say yes.
6. We may be afraid of guilty feelings and try to compensate these by "good deeds".
7. We may fear to hurt the feelings of others who have done good to us. We feel that we owe them.
8. We may overidentify with the other's disappointment and interpret it as hurt, and we can't stand to hurt somebody.

Fear always works against love. The "have to" drives out the "want to". If we let ourselves become slaves to our fears, our giving will not lead to joy. If this is the case we need to examine our motives and work on overcoming the specific fear behind it. When we have a tendency to comply, we should keep in mind that fear drives out love.



The Law of Motivation says that freedom must come before service. Freedom is the key to a balanced lifestyle that fosters growth and love. While the Law of Respect says that we need to let others have their freedom, the Law of Motivation tells us to pay attention to our motives and to make sure that they are based on our freedom.

Of course, this does not mean that we only say yes when we feel like it. This would be plain selfishness. Sometimes our choices will lead us to sacrifice for others and that can actually be uncomfortable and painful for us. But these choices are based on love and responsibility, not on fear.

The Law of Evaluation

We need to evaluate the pain our boundaries cause others. Do our boundaries cause pain that leads to injury? Or do they cause pain that leads to growth?

6. Evaluation:

Sometimes setting boundaries can be very difficult because we may actually hurt somebody else.

A simple example may illustrate this. If we have to go to a dentist because of a cavity, he will certainly hurt us when he drills our tooth. However, he will not harm us but make us better. On the other hand, the sugar that gave us the cavity did not hurt us – but it certainly did harm to our teeth.

Hurt and harm are not the same, although many people confuse these two ideas. It is true: physical pain often indicates a physical injury. But this is not always true otherwise. Just because someone feels pain does not necessarily mean that something bad is happening. Actually, something good may be going on, such as a loved one learning to grow up.

And this is the essence of the Law of Evaluation: we need to evaluate the effects our boundaries cause others. Do they cause pain that may lead to growth – or do they cause pain and lead to injury?

Correction can be painful for the one who receives it. It helps to remind ourselves that correction prevents harm instead of causing it. But setting limits that harm is unloving. They do not aim at growth but more at revenge.

Finding the right balance is not easy. We actually have to think through the consequences of setting or not setting boundaries and then choose wisely. These are hard decisions to make, as it is easier not to think through the consequences. Yet, when we decide to set boundaries that may cause pain to someone we love, we need to see how this hurt is helpful and sometimes the best thing we can do for our relationship. This enables us to empathize with our loved one's feelings without changing our mind.

The Law of Pro-activity

We take action to solve problems based on our values, wants, and needs. Proactive people keep their freedom and they disagree and confront issues but are able to do so without getting caught up in an emotional storm. This law has to do with taking action based on deliberate, thought-out values versus emotional reactions.

7. Proactivity:

When people, who have been compliant for years, begin to set boundaries for the first time, we often see very intense reactions to boundary violations. Sometimes they explode in anger about a behaviour they have tolerated for years. While this reactive phase of boundary creation is helpful to get out of a state of powerless compliance, it is not sufficient for establishing long-lasting boundaries that lead to growth.

Reactive boundaries are not bad. In some cases they are necessary, for instance to help a victim of abuse initiate a change. But they are only a first step that helps you find your own boundaries. Once you have found them, you need to go further and establish connections to others that clearly define who you are and what you stand for; what you love, want, and your purpose. These proactive boundaries are very different from the reactive ones, which only tell others what you hate, don't like, stand against, or will not do.

The Law of Proactivity is to solve problems on the basis of your values, wants, and needs. Proactive people don't need to demand their rights anymore. They can solve their problems without having to blow up. They live their boundaries actively and don't have to "do" them, that is to react to violations. They are able to love genuinely and thus do not have to "return evil for evil". They can turn the other cheek without fear.

The Law of Proactivity has three facets.

1. Reactive boundaries are a necessary part of relationships. We have to go through this phase, without acting out the negative feelings associated with it. Instead we must learn to express that our boundaries were violated in order to practice and gain assertiveness. And in some cases this may mean distancing ourselves from an abusive person to fence ourselves off from further invasion.

2. But, reactive boundaries are not sufficient for growth. Compassion means higher goals than just "finding yourself", a stage in which many self-assertion courses get stuck. This is just a stage, not an identity. A lot of damage can be done if we don't grow out of this victim role of constant protest.



3. Proactive boundaries, on the other hand, maintain love, freedom, and reality in relationships. They help us keep our freedom, to disagree, and to confront issues in a relationship while holding on to the love we have for the other. The latter is hardly possible if we stay in the reactive stage.

This law applies differently to people at different points of their growth. You may have your reactive boundaries still ahead of you and need to get started. Be prepared that your reactions will not always be as nice as you want them to and find some caring people who can help you navigate through this difficult phase.

But once you reached that stage, go on. Don't continue to define only what you hate. Find out what is truly important to you and what you love and value. Begin integrating these positive values into your protests and then start living according to these values.

The Law of Envy

We will never get what we want if we focus our boundaries onto what others have. Envy is miserable because we're dissatisfied with our state yet powerless to change it. The envious person doesn't set limits because he is not looking at himself long enough to figure out what choices he has.

8. Envy:

One of the most common negative feelings of humans in their relation to others is envy. Envy defines as good what we don't have but see in others and does not appreciate what has been given to us. How often have we heard someone subtly put down the accomplishments of others, just because he wasn't the one who accomplished this. We all have envious parts in our personality. But what is so destructive about envy is that it almost guarantees that we will not get what we want and keeps us perpetually insatiable and dissatisfied.

This is the Law of Envy. Envy never leads to good results. It actually keeps us from getting what we want, because it focuses outside our boundaries. It is not wrong to desire things we do not have. But it is wrong to focus on what others have or have accomplished, because it makes us devalue what we do have. If we begin comparing ourselves to the rich and famous (without noticing the high price they sometimes have to pay for that), we will never be satisfied. If instead we look at what we have achieved without making comparisons, we will lead a satisfied life – maybe a bit simpler, but certainly happier.

Envious people feel empty and unfulfilled. They feel envious about the other's sense of fullness but do not take responsibility for their own lack. And consequently they spend time and energy to keep up with the Jones' instead of addressing their true problem. And envy doesn't stop at possessions and accomplishments. We may envy a person's character, personality, and abilities instead of developing our own gifts and bringing these specific gifts into service. Envy keeps us from doing something about the real problem, namely the negative feelings in us that block our growth.

Envy may cause a feeling of rivalry or prevent us from setting proper boundaries. For instance, a wife may envy the aggressiveness of her husband when it comes to pursuing a goal and chose to comply with whatever he says, "because he is stronger". Or a husband may envy his wife's ability to express emotions and as a result avoid expressing his emotional needs, "because he can't talk about these things as easily". We can't establish proper boundaries in our relationships unless we see our envy as part of the problem and begin to work through it.

The Law of Activity

We need to take the initiative to solve our problems rather than being passive. In a dysfunctional relationship, sometimes one person is active and the other is passive. When this occurs, the active person will dominate the passive one. The passive person may be too intimidated by the active one to say no. This law has to do with taking initiative rather than being passive and waiting for someone else to make the first move.

9. Activity:

When it comes to dealing with problems, many people have a natural tendency to wait until the problem solves itself. In some cases this actually works, either because the problem wasn't really a problem in the first place and not worth being dealt with, or because others became active and solved the problem for them. However, all other things being equal, active people are much more successful in addressing and solving problems than passive ones. Because they take initiative, they have a greater chance to learn from mistakes. They confront problems, try solutions, obviously make mistakes, and – if they are wise – grow from them. They even have a better understanding of forgiveness, because they need it more often.

In contrast to that, passive people are afraid of taking risks and making mistakes. They want to be sure that they do things perfectly well before they start. As a result, they hardly learn and lack practice in many things. For the same reasons, they also have a harder time taking responsibility for their lives and establishing good boundaries. Passivity is unhelpful, it's better to participate in life, not wait on the sidelines: it helps to have trust in ourselves.

Those who do not try are bound to fail. If you try and fail, you will be asked to learn from your mistakes and do better next time. But what can you tell someone who didn't even try in the first place? What has s/he learned from doing nothing? The sad thing is that passive people are not inherently bad or evil. They often are just afraid of making mistakes and losing the love of others. Or they don't see their lives as their problem. Or they are simply a bit lazy. Whatever the reason, their passivity will always result in the same: the problems are going to get worse. Passivity is actually the best ally of unhappiness, it thrives on passivity; if we want happiness we have to work for it. Problems do not go away by themselves – you have to take action against them.

Even in a “good” relationship, passivity will hinder growth and development. If, as often happens, one person is active and the other one passive, several problems may occur.



1. The active one may dominate the passive one or feel abandoned by him or her.
2. The passive one may become too dependent on the active one, resent his/her power, and may be too intimidated to say no.

When, however, both people in a relationship are active; when they both speak the truth openly, set goals, and take initiative to solve problems, they both will grow. They will have security that problems will be addressed, even if for some reason they will not be able to do this. If we always assume that the first move towards solving a problem is ours and don't wait for the other to do that, the relationship has a chance to improve.

People may ask, how the Law of Activity differs from the Law of Proactivity. The former says that we are to take action instead of remaining passive, while the latter tells us to base our actions on positive values and not only on the things we hate.

The Law of Exposure

We need to communicate our boundaries. A boundary that is not communicated is a boundary that is not working. We need to make clear what we do or do not want, and what we will or will not tolerate. We need to also make clear that every boundary violation has a consequence. A boundary without a consequence is nagging.

10. Exposure:

Boundaries, as we have discussed at the very beginning, are like property lines. They define where we begin and where we end. In a relationship, boundaries are particularly important because they allow two separate individuals to grow together into one strong unity instead of having one person dissolve and become just a part of the other.

Some people believe that they do not have any boundaries and that they don't need them. But actually, that is not true. We all have our own feelings, opinions, and views. But we may not communicate them to our loved ones and then it appears as if they would not exist. If we don't communicate our own thoughts and emotions, our loved ones will not have the slightest idea who we really are.

The Law of Exposure says that our boundaries must be made visible to others. We need to be truthful to our loved ones and communicate clearly what we do or don't want, think, or feel. Unless we expose our own boundaries, we cannot connect and our relationship shrinks. For example, one party to the relationship is self-centred and the other is hurt by this. The hurt one may withdraw more and more until the connection between the two is deeply distressed. The hurt one might think that there is no point saying anything because the other will respond angrily, and the cycle repeats. Ultimately, there is a point where the connection between the two is broken. What is the consequence? One loses the connection and doesn't know why and is cheated out of an opportunity to hear the boundary and start maturing in their character.

What is said here about anger holds for resentment, hurt feelings, and frustration in the same way. We should not let the sun go down on it but expose it in order to work the problem out. If we hide all this, because we fear that speaking about it will only make things worse, we create fertile ground for unhappiness. If we bring it to the light, others will have access to it and we can resolve problems together. Exposure is the only way for healing and growth to take place.



In conclusion:

Setting boundaries is a tool we can use to improve our relationships with others. It is about accepting the challenge to change what we can change, and gives us the strength to accept that we can't change others. To identify when we need to consider our boundaries, look at the relationships where we are unhappy. If we are unhappy in a relationship, we need to work on our boundaries.