

Help! My Family is Driving Me Crazy!

■ by Lynne B. Scherschel, MS, LMFT



Setting Boundaries May Be the Solution

A boundary is the limit a person sets regarding what behavior will be tolerated from others and helps define your identity and your integrity. When someone crosses your boundary, something inside of you will react. The reaction may be subtle or unmistakable, but either way you know something isn't right. This may be especially true of physical boundaries, such as infringing on your personal space or by inappropriate touch.

Examples of Boundary Crossing

- A married man/woman talking about intimate details regarding their spouse.
- A parent doing the same with a child.
- Grandparents who insist on breaking the parents' rules.
- Anyone who won't respect your "no" answer but proceeds to pressure, manipulate, or "guilt trip" you into giving in.
- Relatives who ask personal questions about how much you earn, spent on a purchase, or have in savings.
- Parents or adult children who drop in, when they've been asked to call first.
- Someone who rearranges your furniture while they are babysitting.
- Aunt Susie who insists on asking her single nephew if he is ever going to get married or asks a young married couple when they will have children.
- Uncle Jim, who invariably gives you a sustained hug even though it makes you uncomfortable to the point of wanting to avoid him.
- Grandparents who are very vocal about how their grandchildren should be reared.

And the list goes on!

Never Too Late to Set Boundaries

Setting boundaries – and maintaining them – is often difficult for many people, and it can be especially difficult with parents and other family members. If you didn't learn this art growing up it is highly likely that other relatives didn't either. They may be pushy, manipulative, and controlling people, but it is also possible that they are nice people who interfere because they love you, are concerned about you, and have never learned appropriate boundaries themselves. That doesn't mean, however, that you should allow it to continue.

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It's Healthy for Christians to Set Boundaries

Jesus said, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his **heart**, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his **heart**. For the mouth speaks what the **heart** is full of." (Luke 6:4). In 1 John 4:20 we read, "If a man says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" Scripture is very clear that God is primarily concerned about what is in our hearts because that is what prompts our words and our actions.

Smiling and speaking kindly to someone, while inwardly seething with resentment, definitely does not please God, and the risk is that your resentment may erupt in angry words and damage the relationship. So let's be clear that it is healthy for Christians to set boundaries. It is critical for our spiritual as well as our emotional and relational health to maintain clear boundaries with others.

Steps to Setting Healthy Boundaries

1. Decide what behavior you would like from others.
2. Formulate a very clear statement of your expectations.
Example: Instead of "Don't just drop in," say, "Please call first to arrange a time to visit."
3. It is often helpful to write the statement on a piece of paper.
4. Practice saying it in front of a mirror to be sure your facial expression matches your message.
5. If you call to deliver your message, have the paper in front of you.
6. If you are with the person, use only the statement you've written.
7. Continue to restate the message if the other person objects, argues, or tries to put a guilt trip on you.
8. If they persist after a few exchanges, politely excuse yourself and exit the conversation.
9. Don't be surprised if the people in your life don't like your new boundaries.
10. Be prepared to lovingly and firmly maintain them.
11. Occasional push back is quite typical, so be alert!

Additional Resources

There is much more to learn than can be said in a short article. Taking the time to learn new skills and practice them will benefit you greatly, and your relationships will tend to be much more rewarding. Please refer to the resources listed below for greater depth and detail:

Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life, Henry Cloud & John Townsend

Fool-Proofing Your Life: How to Deal Effectively with the Impossible People in Your Life, Jan Silvious

No More Christian Nice Girl: When Just Being Nice – Instead of Good – Hurts You, Your Family, and Your

Friends, Paul Coughlin and Jennifer D. Degler, Ph.D.

No More Christian Nice Guy: When Being Nice – Instead of Good – Hurts Men, Women, and Children, Paul Coughlin and Laura Schlessinger

Breakthrough: When to Give in, How to Push Back, Tim Clinton and Pat Springle

Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No: Making Life Right When It Feels All Wrong, Herbert Fensterheim and Jean Baer



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