



Thousand Waves
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Assertive Communication: Boundary Setting

What is Boundary Setting?

Boundary setting is when we use our assertive communication skills to:

- set a limit with someone who is being disrespectful
- enforce emotional or physical boundaries
- stop someone trying to manipulate or control us

Boundary setting can be used with people we know—including friends and family—as well as strangers. It is a good strategy to use at the first signs of conflict or violence. It can also be used in very intense situations.

Examples of setting a boundary:

- Telling someone not to touch you
- Speaking out against harassment
- Setting a limit with someone who is emotionally abusive
- Speaking up for your rights when you are not being heard
- Yelling loudly to protect yourself

The Thousand Waves Approach:

- **Believe you are worth defending** and commit to speaking up even when it's hard.
- **Know that most forms of violence start small**, so interrupt violence in its early stages.
- **Use across the spectrum of violence.** Boundary setting can be effective in situations that run the gamut from irritating to dangerous to life threatening. Use it with family, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Use it to stay safe emotionally and physically.
- **Commit to being assertive.** Saying nothing or being passive may erode your self-esteem; using aggressive or hostile language may escalate the situation. Be assertive.
- **Say what you need** and back up your words with confident body language.
- **Remember that silence implies complicity.** Use your voice to stand up for what you need and what you believe in.
- **Match the intensity** of the situation with the intensity of your response. Adjust your volume and tone as needed to support your message.
- **Know you can change strategies** if it isn't working. Options include getting others involved, leaving, fighting back, seeking help.
- **Practice your skills!** Start small. Note the everyday situations where you can speak up to prevent/stop violence. Exercise your boundary setting “muscles” so they will be ready when you need them.



Boundary Setting Strategies

Setting a boundary uses emotional, mental, physical and verbal tools.

Internal

- **Trust your instincts** about what is going on. If it feels wrong, say something.
- **TAKE TEN:** prepare your mind and body by taking a deep breath or a few seconds to ground yourself
- **Assess your emotions and gather your courage.** Temporarily let go of feelings—such as fear or rage—that may not serve the situation. Know you can vent later.
- **Stay focused on what you need.** Avoid getting pulled into their drama, or responding to pleas or threats.
- **Decide when it is over.** It may be time to stop the discussion and get to a place of safety. Or it may be time to end the friendship, quit the job, or leave the relationship.

External

- **Project strength and calm.** If you don't feel this way, be an actor!
- **Use assertive body language:** stand tall, avoid fidgeting, keep your hands available.
- **Maintain a serious facial expression** that says “don't mess with me.”
- **Protect yourself.** Keep a safe distance away from the other person. Know where your access to escape is. Don't block the other person's line of escape.

Verbal

- **Say what you need.** “I need more space; please back up.” “I need you to trust me if we are going to be in a relationship.”
- **Be direct; call it what it is.** “We're colleagues, not close friends; if you use that language it is harassment.”
- **Speak clearly and be firm,** avoid using sarcasm and rude words. “Calling me ‘baby’ isn't appropriate. A simple ‘hello’ will do.”
- **Set a boundary with someone trying to gain your trust.** “I appreciate your offer, but I can change my own tire.” “I'm not going to give you my number.”
- **Don't answer prying questions** “I'm not comfortable sharing my private life with friends/colleagues.” “That information is personal.”
- **Speak up against harassment and hate-based speech.** “Don't call me that name—I don't like it.” “Those words are offensive. I don't allow them in my home.”
- **Say how you feel** if you think it will be useful. With a friend at a party: “Please don't touch my leg. It makes me feel uncomfortable and I don't like it.” To a friend: “When you're consistently late, I feel disrespected.”
- **Repeat** if they don't respond as you want. “I already said that I am unable to loan you money. Please stop asking!” “This is the third time I've told you. I'm calling security.”
- **Intensify as needed.** “I said, NO!” “Back off now!”