

Speaking Up for Yourself, Part 1: Lighten your depression when you set a boundary and keep it.

When I mention healthy boundaries to people, they often hear "creating conflict" or "saying no." The idea of boundaries feels like I may be asking them to put up a wall, to keep others away or just be alone without anyone near them. If you are depressed the idea of creating boundaries that separate you would make you feel much worse. In fact, having healthy boundaries means knowing what you want and what you will say 'yes' to in relationship to others. Healthy boundaries create relationships in which you can feel safe and good - the opposite of depression.

If you believe setting boundaries (or limits) will cause others to be angry or leave you, you will anticipate a bad outcome - a cause of depressed ruminating. As a result you may not to speak about what is right for you in fear of losing a friendship, a job or losing love. Fear of loss raises anxiety to extreme heights, making depression more complex.

But anxiety also rises in the face of ambiguity. *Unclear boundaries* cause people to feel in a constant state of anxiety because they never know what to expect in relationships with people who ignore their wishes, their needs and their situations. When you are depressed, you may lack energy to set boundaries or even think about them, but if you can muster the energy for the first steps, the respect you will feel for yourself will lighten your depression.

Creating boundaries starts when you simply notice that you are not being treated with respect. This is an easy first step. Pay attention. In what ways does your partner, or colleague or boss cross the line? Disrespect may show up in actions or in words. Ask yourself these questions as they apply to romantic partners, friends, colleagues or bosses.

1. "Do I typically speak up about what I want to do, or am I more likely to just go along with what others want?"
2. "How often do I give in and do something that I do not think is right for me?"
3. "Have I ever gone along with a behavior that I thought was harmful or even illegal, because I was afraid I would lose the relationship?"

These questions will reflect different levels of not keeping boundaries. You can feel you are moving in the right direction by honest appraisal of the situation.

The Next step is just to figure out what you are afraid of in specific situations. *Knowing what you fear can help you decide how important it is to confront it or just let it go.* This means looking at how you feel in reaction to how others treat you.

1. For example, participating in a sexual activity that you do not particularly enjoy but does not harm you is an example of not speaking up about what you want, but is not a gross violation of boundaries. Yet, if it happens every time you have sex with your partner, you are allowing your boundaries to be disrespected. On the other hand, if you let your partner hurt you in pursuit of sexual pleasure, that is much more serious. Being ill-treated can make you feel worthless: a major symptom of depression all by itself. You are in serious need of examining why you would allow that boundary of physical harm

to be breached. To start deciding what to do, first you must learn what is so frightening to you that you allow injury rather than say no. If you are afraid for violence from your partner, you should seek professional help immediately. But if the situation is about losing love, then for now, just acknowledge that is your fear.

2. Perhaps the boundary issue is how others speak to you:
 - Allowing your partner to speak to you with vulgar or insulting language.
 - Perhaps your boss is derisive and uses offensive language but you are afraid of being fired if you say you do not like it.
 - What about the friend who circumvents doing what you ask by mocking what you want or teasing you about your desires. The defensive "I am just joking," may then feel like a boundary violation. You may hesitate to protest that it does not feel funny for fear of blowing it out of proportion or seeming weak. Or you may want to avoid an argument.
 - You may have a friend who puts you down in front of others as a way to build himself up, and you may be afraid of being judged by others or losing the friendship if you protest.

Notice what you fear, and you may want to just jot down a sentence about it such as this:

For now, I acknowledge this boundary violation _____ that makes me feel _____, while I consider whether I will make changes. I can change when I am ready.

Just knowing that information is enough for now. It will help you decide how important it is to confront the situation or just leave it alone. In my next blog I will discuss how to set boundaries once you know a little more about your feelings.