



Say Yes to Your Boundaries

“Name the action, criticize it, and tell them what to do with it.” The self-defense instructor makes this three-step model sound easy. “Your hand is on my shoulder. I don’t like it. Take it off.” Her voice is calm, matter-of-fact. One by one we practice around the circle, receiving our neighbor’s hand on our shoulder and calmly telling her to take it off.

Build skills. Before we can apply the three-step model in real situations, we need to build new skills:

- Trust our perceptions enough to name people’s actions out loud.
- Connect with our boundaries so we know when an action violates them.
- Confidently claim our space.

Frequently noticing our sensations, emotions, and preferences builds all three skills.

We often think of boundaries as fences we must set up and patrol. We try to figure out the best place to put the fence based on how other people might react. If someone crosses the fence, or if surprise and fear keep us from immediately pushing them back, we perceive it as a boundary failure. Any hesitation in defending even the most obvious boundary allows the offender to blame the victim for being unclear.

Flexible container. Boundaries are already part of us, a flexible container for sensations, emotions, and preferences, separating “me” from “not-me”. Instead of trying to create

boundaries with our thoughts, we can discover and nourish the boundaries we already have.

Just as our skin marks the edges of our physical body, our boundaries mark the edges of our selves. Just as our skin heals from injuries, our boundaries heal from injuries caused by trauma and emotional abuse.

Define “too close.” Next time you are in a crowd, observe your reaction when someone gets too close. You may notice: tight belly, clenched jaw, braced shoulders, a sinking feeling, anger, an impulse to move away, or sudden spaciness or distraction. What are your personal signs that someone is too close to you?

Also observe your reaction when someone is a comfortable distance from you. You may notice: relaxed breathing, open chest, warmth, ease. What are your personal signs that you have the space you prefer?

Note that “too close” is defined by your internal reactions in the moment, not by anyone’s thoughts or opinions.

Listen for your answers. To nourish your boundaries, bring your attention to your sensations, emotions, and preferences. At least once a day, pause and ask yourself:

- What you notice
- How you feel
- What you want

Listen for your answers with room to be impractical, implausible, and unreasonable.

In the past, you may have been punished for expressing your feelings and wants. You may have found it too painful to articulate your wants even to yourself if you could not achieve them. You may worry about what other people think. You may have learned to dissociate to protect

yourself. Gently acknowledge your reasons for pushing your perceptions and preferences away.

Can you become curious about your feelings and wants the way you are curious about a new friend? Your answers mark the edges of your being.

Choose what pleases you. As you learn about your preferences, keep an eye out for easy ways to move toward them. When there are no obstacles, you will naturally choose what pleases you. Notice how your body responds to those choices.

With more practice, you will be able to speak up for your preferences even in the face of obstacles. It can be scary to speak up. Other people may have their own agendas, and resist yours. At the same time, relief, delight, and even euphoria reward you when you say yes to your boundaries.

Rehearse for confrontations. Even after you become familiar with your boundaries and stand up for your preferences with other people, you may still need a short, clear way of telling someone they have crossed your line. Practice calmly applying the three step model in your imagination, or with your cat. “You nipped me. It hurts. Don’t do that.”

Even if you rarely use the three-step model out loud, it helps you clarify your boundaries for yourself.

Say yes to yourself. Every time you listen for what you notice, how you feel, and what you want, you are strengthening your connection with your boundaries and helping them heal. You’re worth it!