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**Boundaries: When to Say Yes,  
How to Say No to Take Control  
of Your Life**

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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

## **What's in it for me? Love yourself and others by setting boundaries.**

What does a day without boundaries look like?

Maybe this: You wake up before your alarm to make your children's breakfast. You have a big presentation at work that morning and really need time to prepare, but you still don't ask your spouse to help with the cooking. At work, the presentation isn't set up. It's not your job, but you get all the equipment ready anyway. Then, before you can even begin, your boss has asked you to coordinate the upcoming Christmas party. He would do it himself, he says, but he's just too busy. Of course, you agree. All this, and it's not even lunchtime!

Sound familiar? If so, you know how draining a day without boundaries, let alone life without them, can be. That's

why setting boundaries is both a necessary act of self-care and an act of kindness to others. In the blinks that follow, you'll learn exactly how setting boundaries can work and, through hypothetical case studies, learn how to put them into practice.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how letting people take advantage of you also hurts *them*;
- how to troubleshoot common boundary violations; and
- why setting boundaries might be the most selfless thing you can do.



## **Setting boundaries is an act of kindness.**

Walls, fences, No Trespassing signs: when you think about it, your physical environment is delimited by all kinds of concrete boundaries. What's more, those boundaries exist for good reason. That barbed wire fence around a nuclear power plant? It's there for your own protection – it prevents you from inadvertently wandering into a hazardous zone.

Boundaries are just as necessary for your emotional and spiritual protection. Unlike physical boundaries, however, emotional and spiritual boundaries aren't laid out in a way that's clear to everyone. That can make it difficult to establish your own boundaries and to discern those of others. Worse, enforcing your boundaries can make you feel mean. But it shouldn't.

**The key message here is: Setting boundaries is an act of kindness.**

When you set a boundary, you take ownership of your needs, wants, and feelings. Yet when we do this and prioritize ourselves, we often feel like we're neglecting those of others.

Let's be clear: setting healthy boundaries doesn't mean you have no stake in other people's problems or spiritual concerns. It simply means that you're not solely responsible for them. As the Bible's book of Galatians teaches, you are responsible *to* others but *for* yourself.

Still confused by this distinction? We can unpack it with the example of a hypothetical family. Let's call them the O'Rileys.

The O'Riley's are a loving family, but their son James has lost his way. He's been expelled from school and developed a drug problem.

The O'Riley's can take responsibility *for* their son's issues by enrolling him in another school and paying the fines when he's busted for drug possession. But will James solve his problem? Unlikely. Functionally, he doesn't even have a problem – his parents have shouldered it for him.

Alternatively, the O'Riley's could own their responsibility *to* their son without taking responsibility *for* his problems. They can listen to him, support him, and take steps to facilitate his sobriety – all without stepping in to solve his problems for him. The O'Riley's are taking care of themselves by setting those boundaries. But they're also taking care of James. Setting boundaries is not just an act of kindness toward yourself. It's an act of love toward everyone around you.



**Boundary issues can manifest themselves in many ways.**

Maybe you're thinking, "I'm assertive. I have no problem saying no. Therefore, I don't have a boundary problem." Well, boundary problems come in every shape and size.

**The key message is: Boundary issues can manifest themselves in many ways.**

When most people hear "boundary problems," they imagine a *compliant* – that is, a person who just can't say no. A compliant is a doormat. Everyone takes advantage of them.

But though your boundary problems may not manifest as compliance, that doesn't mean they're not there. You could be an *avoidant*, for example. A boundary is like a fence, remember? It keeps things that could cause you emotional and spiritual damage out. But

fences also have gates. Avoidants are so focused on building a fence to protect themselves from the bad that they don't let the good in through the gate. When your boundaries are too strict, you have difficulty letting others in and sharing your feelings. You say no to help even when you need it.

Then again, you could be a *controller*. Let's say people never overstep your boundaries. Is it possible you're trampling on theirs? If you're the boss that emails all weekend or the friend that won't take no for an answer, you might be a controller. You might think being a controller is win-win – people respect your boundaries and you get what you want out of them! But that's a pretty cynical approach to other people. Controllers' relationships are built on the fear and guilt they inspire in others, not mutual respect or love. As a result, deep down, controllers rarely feel loved.

Finally, you might be a *nonresponsive*. Nonresponsives don't just avoid taking responsibility *for* others – they also shirk their responsibilities *to* them. When others come to you with a problem, do you dismiss them with an unsympathetic statement like “Tough luck”? Then you might be a nonresponsive – and other people might find it impossible to get close to you.

Clearly, there are a lot of ways that boundary issues can manifest themselves! So while you may not be a compliant, don't be so sure that you're in the clear when it comes to boundaries – you could still very well have issues.



## **Don't buy into common myths about healthy boundaries.**

What's holding you back from setting healthy boundaries that allow you and the others in your life to thrive? Maybe you feel that setting boundaries is selfish, or hard to reconcile with your faith.

Christians, for example, might think of how the Bible quotes John as saying that how well they love others is a hallmark of Christ's followers.

However, to love others well, we must first love ourselves. And setting boundaries is a profound act of self-love – the idea that healthy boundaries are selfish is just a myth.

**The key message is: Don't buy into common myths about healthy boundaries.**

When you begin setting boundaries, you'll encounter some myths and

misconceptions that might hold you back. For example, you might hesitate to set boundaries because you believe that setting boundaries hurts others. Actually, when a request for healthy boundaries in a relationship causes hurt, it's the relationship that's to blame, not the boundaries.

Here's an example. Let's say you take ownership of your time by declining to babysit for your friend every week. He gets upset and stops talking to you. Have you hurt him? No. He's being unreasonable. If this unreasonable behavior is a pattern, then your relationship is predicated on total compliance. If the relationship can't survive with boundaries, then it's not worth keeping it alive.

There's a common misconception that people who set boundaries do so out of anger. And yes, you might experience anger when you begin to set boundaries

for yourself. But what makes you angry is the hurt feelings that stem from *injured boundaries*.

Injured boundaries occur when others don't respect your boundaries or don't allow you to set them in the first place. Many of us repress the feelings of hurt and anger that occur when our boundaries are violated. It's perfectly normal for that repressed anger to come to the surface when you begin to set your limits. Boundaries will give you the space to work through that anger.

Often, we're reluctant to set boundaries because we think they're irrevocable. A boundary is only permanent if you make it so, though. Telling your mother to lay off on the parenting advice doesn't mean you'll never see her again. As you work on your relationship, you might even reach a point where the two of you are again ready to discuss previously-fraught topics like screen time and toilet training.



**The journey toward a life with boundaries is long but rewarding.**

Before you're comfortable asserting boundaries, you might placidly accept boundary violations. You might think, "Carole always asks me to babysit last-minute, but that's just her way." Or "Lin always puts me down in front of his friends. He's just joking, though."

Over time, you'll probably experience resentment. This can be unpleasant but useful – the feeling shows you that you've stopped being complacent when your boundaries are violated. So pay attention to it! That's your heart telling you an important boundary has been overstepped one too many times. Heeding it is the first step toward a life of healthy boundaries.

**The key message is: The journey toward a life with boundaries is long but rewarding.**

Ever tried to set boundaries with a controller or a manipulator? When they want to use you, they won't take no for an answer. Their insistence on using you can be addictive – it can make you feel needed and important. People who respect your boundaries, on the other hand, like those friends who don't make a fuss when you decline their invitation to Sunday lunch, won't give you this high. But when you start your journey toward healthy boundaries, you'll find that you seek them out anyway. Doing so is a clear sign you're recovering from your boundary issues.

Next, you'll learn to value and love yourself – and as the authors see it, this also means loving God. When we're treated badly, our boundaries are violated over and over again and we learn to treat ourselves as those who violate our boundaries have. We don't steward the talents, gifts, feelings, thoughts, and body that Christians

believe God gave us in the manner we should. If we can't love those things in ourselves, we can't love them in others. So we fail God on that count, too. Finding and celebrating value in yourself is a key step on your journey.

After that, the next step is becoming comfortable setting small-stakes boundaries and relaxing personal boundaries that don't serve you. You'll tell your spouse not to always leave you with the dirty dishes. You'll accept a friend's offer to bring dessert to your dinner party. Through recalibrating these smaller boundaries, you'll learn to set and recalibrate big boundaries.

Ultimately, you'll find that you love your healthy boundaries, and the space and respect they've created in your life.



## **We first learn boundaries from our families.**

Are you a confident, high-functioning person who feels inexplicably depressed and insecure after spending time with family? Do you love your partner but throw them under the bus to please your parents? Are you an adult who relies on your parents to resolve problems big and small – from paying off credit card bills to helping with laundry?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you come from a family with boundary issues. What's more, those issues are shaping the boundaries you set in your own life.

## **The key message is: We first learn boundaries from our families.**

Whether you're constantly counseling your parents or you run to mom and dad whenever life throws a curveball, you're

likely reenacting the boundary problems you learned as a child. If you grew up in an environment where limits weren't set or were too strictly enforced, that shaped your own attitude toward limits. If you come from a family where problems weren't directly confronted or unacceptable behaviors weren't met with consequences, you carry that dynamic into your adult life.

How do you break out of unhealthy patterns learned in childhood? Begin by identifying the issue – where have you lost control of your needs? Where have you taken ownership of needs that aren't yours, or pushed responsibility for your needs onto others?

Next, try and identify the unmet needs that underpin your boundary issues. Why do you put your mother's needs above your own – are you craving her approval? Why do you expect your father to solve your problems for you –

are you craving his attention? Being aware of *why* you act can help you change *how* you act.

Finally, the next time your boundaries are violated, try to respond rather than react. When you react, you act instinctively and unthinkingly – and unless your boundaries are well-established, you're likely to forget them when you're in the throes of an emotional reaction. When you respond to a situation, on the other hand, you stay calm enough to assess and analyze the situation before you act.

What if you're dealing with a family member who tramples your boundaries repeatedly and hurtfully? Well, they don't necessarily need to stay in your life, but don't withhold forgiveness from them. If you haven't forgiven someone, that means you still want something from them. Forgiving these violations will give you freedom.



**Boundaries are the key to a fulfilling romantic relationship.**

Okay, you've got the message. Boundaries are good! Creating and maintaining boundaries isn't just a form of self-care – it also gives you the space to better care for others. In fact, healthy and long-lasting relationships depend on boundaries being enforced and respected.

But what about when it comes to marriage? After all, you and your spouse are in love and you share everything with each other. You don't even need boundaries – do you?

Actually you do. They might not be diamond rings or long-stemmed roses, but healthy boundaries are a loving gift to your partner and yourself.

**The key message is: Boundaries are the key to a fulfilling romantic relationship.**

When boundaries aren't established or respected, problems follow. Here are some couples who are struggling to set or defend boundaries:

Rosario thinks her husband Jim is a problem drinker. She can't get through to him when she asks him to stop. She says, "When you drink, I feel like you don't care about me and the children."

See the problem here? Rosario is overstepping a boundary by inferring what Jim feels. She's not owning her feelings. Rosario should try saying, "When you drink, I feel scared and alone." This is a healthier way for Rosario to address Jim's problem.

It's important to own your desires, too. Andrea has a demanding job and often brings work home. This frustrates her partner Caroline, who wants to spend time with her. As a result, Caroline becomes withdrawn and angry in the evenings. But Andrea's not the villain

here – the two simply have conflicting desires. Caroline wants to spend time with Andrea, and Andrea wants to catch up on work. If Caroline could take ownership of her desire and ask Andrea to set aside a few work-free evenings every week, they'd both be happier.

Finally, it's important to own your limits. Rafael is proud of his home, and he's always coming up with DIY projects and roping Julie in to help on weekends. This frustrates Julie, who can't devote time to her hobby, oil painting, because she's too busy with Rafael's projects. Actually, Julie *can* spend time oil painting, but she *won't* – because she's refused to own her limitations. There are limits to what we can give our partner without compromising ourselves. When we don't recognize and respect those limits, we create resentment.

Each of these couples have their own problems, but the solution is always the

same: They need to establish, maintain,  
and respect boundaries.



## **Boundaries also benefit friendships.**

Here's a tendency that might sound familiar: You can assert your needs to your spouse, no problem. If your family tramples your boundaries, you tell them to back off in no uncertain terms. But when it comes to your friendships, you just can't seem to establish healthy boundaries.

That's a real problem. Outside of your partner and your family, some of the most meaningful relationships you have are with your friends. It can be all too easy to fall into problematic patterns in these relationships if you don't establish healthy boundaries.

**The key message is: Boundaries also benefit friendships.**

So what do friendships without healthy boundaries look like? Well, compliant friends try to please each other, each

acquiescing to the other's desires. It's easy to be compliant in a friendship – after all, you like each other. You want to please each other. But this approach can backfire.

Let's look at Tom and Andy, two compliants who go out of their way to make each other happy. One weekend, the pair is faced with a choice: they can go on a hike or go to a concert. Tom, wanting to please Andy, suggests the hike. Andy, wanting to please Tom, agrees. The problem? They both would have preferred the concert. Clearly, Tom and Andy need to be honest with themselves, and with each other, about how they want to spend their time together.

A compliant who is friends with a controller, on the other hand, might find that her friend tends to walk all over her, leaving both of them unhappy.

Let's say a compliant called Becky is friends with a controller named Soon-Yi. Soon-Yi controls Becky directly, by asking her to cancel weekend plans so they can spend time together. She's also manipulative, saying things like "I wouldn't ask if I didn't need you, but I can't go to the festival without you." Soon-Yi's demands make Becky feel used and put-upon.

At first glance, it seems like Soon-Yi is at fault. However, Becky has never given Soon-Yi any cues that she resents her behavior. To restore balance to their friendship, Becky needs to give Soon-Yi some loving feedback. If Becky is truly a good friend, she'll see this as an opportunity to make Soon-Yi aware of how her behavior is negatively affecting others. If Soon-Yi is truly a good friend, she'll welcome the opportunity to learn and grow.

Neither compliants nor controllers are necessarily bad friends – but without boundaries, both these types can behave in ways that sour a friendship.



## **Personal boundaries are important in professional life, too.**

Ahmed has a great reputation at work. He's a can-do guy, a team player who always goes above and beyond – even when that means working late nights and weekends. What's great for his working life, though, is terrible for his family life.

Ahmed thinks the problem is that he just can't say no. Ahmed's wife, Julia, sees it differently. Ahmed's great at saying no. He says no to his family all the time. He's just more comfortable asserting boundaries in his personal life than in his professional life. But Ahmed needs to learn that boundaries are as crucial at work as they are at home.

**The key message is: Personal boundaries are important in professional life, too.**

The stress of proving ourselves to be reliable and professional causes many of

us to neglect our personal boundaries at work. But just because you're on the clock, your need for boundaries doesn't cease to exist. There are a few common pitfalls concerning work and boundaries. One is that in the workplace, you might be *overresponsible*, meaning you're always taking on responsibilities that aren't yours. You're motivated by the fear that a colleague's undone work, or their lackluster performance, will reflect poorly on you. If this sounds like you, take a step back, own your problems and tasks, and leave others to own theirs.

Another common mistake is *overworking* – trying to manage more work than one person can possibly do! When you're overloaded with work, it can feel like your problem to deal with. But if you're habitually overworking, you're not to blame – your boss is; he doesn't know how to allocate and manage work. Don't take responsibility for a problem that's not yours.

It isn't just bosses who can be a problem – coworkers who are habitually critical can be very stressful to deal with. But remember how boundaries are all about ownership? Well, you don't own anyone's negative attitudes toward you. If the situation calls for it, you can confront a coworker about her attitude, giving her the opportunity to learn and grow. But your coworker's issues with you belong to her – and her alone.

Finally, at the end of the day, remember to create a boundary between work and home by leaving work stress at work, and home stress at home. Recognize that work is infinite – there's always more to do – but your time is finite. Remember, if you can't say no to work, then you're saying no to other things that make life worth living.



## Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

When life spins out of control and relationships feel unmanageable, it's often because there's a lack of boundaries. Boundaries empower us to own and address our own problems, desires, and feelings. They help us support others in their problems without shouldering their burdens, and enable us to ask for and accept help. Boundaries aren't just necessary; they can be a source of love and joy in our lives.

Actionable advice:

**Form a boundary support group.**

It takes a lot of strength to identify, create, and maintain boundaries in your life. Ever heard the saying “strength in numbers”? Form a boundary support group, where you can flex those

boundary-setting muscles in safety. Discuss boundary-related successes and failures, and even test boundary-setting out on each other!

## **Got feedback?**

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [remember@blinkist.com](mailto:remember@blinkist.com) with *Boundaries* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

## **What to read next: *Necessary Endings*, by Henry Cloud**

The blinks to *Boundaries* will set you well on your way to asserting healthy boundaries in your life. But what happens when a boundary between you and a toxic situation, dynamic, or person, just isn't enough? In *Necessary Endings*, co-writer of *Boundaries* Dr. Henry Cloud walks you through when, and how to give up on the things that aren't working in your life. Learn to identify what's

standing between you and the growth,  
faith, love, and life you want and deserve  
by diving into the blinks to *Necessary  
Endings*.



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