



Three Ways to Set Your Boundaries Over the Holidays:

**Part 1 of 3 in Dr. Dabney's
“Nice Guys Have Great Boundaries” series**

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By: Dr Laura Dabney

Lately, I've had a number of male patients in my office who let the people in their life walk all over them. And they all do it in the name of keeping their reputation as a "Nice Guy."

My first questions are always the same. I say,

Where is it written that Nice Guys can't say no?

Is there a law that to be a Nice Guy, you have to put up with abusive comments and invasive questions? Does the dictionary define Nice Guy as, "A man who allows others to take advantage of him"? The answers? *No. No. And No.*

I've had so many Nice Guys in my office and heard so many stories about the pain they're in that I've dedicated a three-part series on the topic. This month, with Thanksgiving approaching, we tackle the holidays.

My message for Nice Guys everywhere: **It is possible to set and maintain your boundaries with friends and family without turning into a jerk.**

Three tactics for Setting Boundaries this Holiday Seasons

While it's impossible to control what people say to or expect of us during the holidays, there is a lot we can do to manage our behavior while we're with them. I tell my patients to practice three boundary setting tactics:

- Preemptively set boundaries
- Change the subject when faced with inappropriate comments
- Stop inappropriate behavior in its tracks

One: Pre-setting Boundaries

One of the most effective strategies for reducing interpersonal stress over the holidays is to set your boundaries with friends and family in advance of your time together. This requires some preparation on your part, but it's terrifically effective.

For example, I had a patient whose high school-age daughter had been struggling with substance abuse. She'd been in trouble at school and with police, and her parents were taking appropriate steps to get her professional help in her recovery. Understandably, this was a highly sensitive topic for my patient, and the last thing he wanted to discuss at Thanksgiving dinner was his daughter's struggles or her parents' choices about how to help her.

Instead, my patient and I practiced setting preemptive boundaries with his family. In a role-play in which I was one of his relatives, he said, "It's true that our daughter is having problems in school, but it's upsetting for me, so I don't wish to talk about it during our visit. Thanks for understanding." That was all. He didn't have to defend his feelings (everyone has the right to their own emotions) or give any detail about their family's struggles (it wasn't anyone's business besides the parents, the school, and the professionals). A simple statement about what he didn't wish to discuss was sufficient.

When my patient was comfortable, he delivered the message we'd practiced to his family. By preemptively establishing this boundary, he made his expectations clear, without making a stink. Even more, he knew that if any family members chose to cross his boundary, he didn't have to answer their questions. If they chose to ignore his wishes, that was their problem, not his.

Two: Change the subject when faced with inappropriate comments

A second highly effective strategy for maintaining your boundaries over the holidays is to go into your celebration armed with a neutral statement you can use in response to inappropriate comments.

For example, I had a patient who was in the process of finalizing his second divorce. This was obviously an upsetting time for him, and he didn't look forward to the comments he anticipated he'd get from family during an upcoming visit.

To prepare, he came up with a response that was neutral enough not to sound angry or defensive, but direct enough that it made clear he wasn't interested in discussing his situation. **He simply chose to change the subject whenever he felt hurt or uncomfortable.**

Sure enough, he later reported to me that one of his cousins made a cutting comment about his divorce. "*You sure know how to pick the winners,*" he'd said. But, armed with his neutral response, my patient was able to keep his cool and exit the conversation.

"Speaking of winners," he said, "should we head over and look at the Anderson's house later? They won the neighborhood Christmas light contest again this year."

Changing the subject is an excellent, non-verbal way of saying, **"I am not going to grace that with a response."**

Three: Stop inappropriate behavior in its tracks

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Finally, one of the most anxiety-producing holiday situations my patients experience is the feeling of being “stuck” with people whose behavior makes them uncomfortable. This can be physical, such as relatives who don’t share the same boundaries around hugging or kissing, etc., or it can also be environmental, such as the relative who loves to bring up touchy subjects like politics. No matter what form the inappropriate behavior takes, you don’t have to spend the holidays “stuck” in its net.

For example, one of my patients doesn’t enjoy large amounts of physical contact with anyone except his wife. His wife’s family, however, is very physical and he used to dread spending time with them because they had no inhibitions about snuggling up to him on the couch or touching his arms or legs while in conversation.

Now, instead of feeling uncomfortable and “stuck,” he promptly moves his hand or foot, etc. out of physical contact and says calmly, “I’m a bit uncomfortable with that. Thanks for understanding.” His wife’s family, he told me, got the picture pretty quickly.

Other patients feel trapped by family or friends who insist on discussing uncomfortable topics. We can’t, of course, stop those people from bringing the subject up, but we can remove ourselves from the discussion.

Two great ways to remove yourself from an uncomfortable discussion:

Walk away. This is one of my favorite boundary-setting techniques because it works so well. If you don’t trust yourself to stay calm or neutral, simply use one of my patient’s trusted tactics and say, “I really need to get a glass of water,” or, “Do

you know where the restroom is?" Neither of these statements causes you to lie, and they allow you to step away and regain your composure.

Turn your attention to someone or something else. Sometimes we find ourselves in discussions from which we can't physically remove ourselves, such as the dinner table. In these situations, you may not be able to change your location, but you can change the object of your attention. If your father-in-law goes on a political rant at Thanksgiving dinner, for example, simply begin a conversation with the person sitting beside you. Say, "I've been meaning to ask you about your new job," or "I noticed your new car in the driveway. Tell me about it." It's even excusable to put your phone to your ear and pretend you have an important call or to stand and offer to begin clearing the dishes.

The holiday season can be stressful for Nice Guys, but they don't have to feel helpless. Set yourself up for an enjoyable holiday by taking the time today to identify your boundaries and the tactics you can use to maintain them. You don't have to like everything about the holidays, but with a bit of preparation, you don't have to dread them, either.



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