



## **How to Recognize a Good Boundary When You See It:**

**Part 2 of 3 in Dr. Dabney's  
"Nice Guys Have Great Boundaries" series**

# How to Recognize a Good Boundary When You See It:

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By: Dr Laura Dabney

As I wrote last month, I've had a number of male patients in my office lately who suffer personally at the expense of being a "Nice Guy." Last month we tackled the question of *how to set boundaries with family and friends during the holidays*. This month, we take a closer look at the boundaries themselves.

### How to Recognize a Good Boundary When You See It

Maintaining good personal boundaries is a crucial element of positive mental health. Boundaries protect us from manipulation and from being taken advantage of. They help minimize hurt and frustration. They build our self-confidence and even help improve our relationships. **But, what are they and why are they so difficult?**

In my experience, most patients believe they have better personal boundaries than they actually do. They say, *"I'd never tolerate [x]" or "I'll never put up with [y] again."* But when it comes time to exercise those boundaries, they don't. They loan the money or swallow the insults or ignore the behavior they swore they'd never ignore again. And the cycle repeats itself.

Since this is such a common cycle, I'd like to examine the basic elements of healthy boundaries. To illustrate, let me tell you the story of my patient, Gary.

Gary couldn't say no.

"Gary" was a successful real estate broker who couldn't say no to his adult daughter. Every time she needed money -- whether two hundred dollars or two thousand dollars -- he gave it to her. Then when she spent it on expensive clothes or indulgent nights out, he'd despair that she'd essentially thrown his money away. He made comments about her being irresponsible. He told her he wasn't going to give her any money unless he knew exactly how she was going to spend it. Then **they'd argue** and she'd cry and **he'd feel terrible** -- and always, **he ended up writing his daughter a check.**

I asked why he couldn't say no to his daughter's requests. He explained that he and his wife divorced when his daughter was young. *"It was so hard on her,"* he said. *"I don't want to hurt her anymore than I already have."* Then he added, *"Plus, I have the money. I've done really well for myself. Why wouldn't I share it with my daughter?"* The answer to that question is where Gary and I began our work together.

Boundaries are rarely black and white

Gary had a partial understanding of personal boundaries. He saw them as absolutes, as lines in the sand. *"I would never give her money for drugs,"* for example. Boundaries, however, are rarely so black and white. Instead, they're more effectively viewed as limits, as the **threshold between when an interaction goes from feeling good to feeling bad.** To have great boundaries, I told him, you must **learn and understand your limits.** *You must learn to recognize and respect the "gray area" in which your emotional senses perk up and say, "Warning! This behavior or interaction is about to cross a line."*

For Gary, that meant learning to respect the boundary between when he felt good about giving his daughter money and when he felt taken advantage of. He felt good, for

example, when he was able to help invest in her future--her education, unexpected or large medical expenses, or taking a family trip. In contrast, he felt taken advantage of when she asked for money to pay off credit card debt or to subsidize a lifestyle above her means. Being able to identify that boundary zone was the first step in being able to change his relationship with his daughter.

## Why boundaries feel so uncomfortable to protect

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For most people, the difficulty with boundaries can be summarized in one word: **Guilt**. We simply don't want to make other people feel bad.

- We hate to say no because it will hurt our loved one or force them to alter plans.
- We tolerate rude or hurtful comments because we don't want to be rude or confrontational in return.
- We ignore inappropriate behavior because confronting it could lead to a very uncomfortable situation.

In Gary's case, he felt enormous guilt about how he believed the divorce affected his daughter. So he made up for it with money. As if he were saying, *"I hurt you when you were a child, but look at how much I'm doing for you now."*

The problem with ignoring our boundaries, however, is that **the hurt, frustration, and anger we're avoiding has to land somewhere -- so it lands on us**. In an effort to avoid hurting other people, we end up hurting ourselves and, in turn, our relationships.

- Gary can't say no, but he seethes about his daughter's financial choices and makes passing comments to her about her "irresponsible" lifestyle.

- A husband tolerates his wife's criticism, rationalizing it by saying "that's just how she is," but isolates from her more and more because he doesn't enjoy the time they spend together.
- A son puts his parents' needs above the needs of his own wife and kids, dropping everything when they call, saying "They're my parents. I don't have a choice." Soon his marriage is in trouble because his wife feels overshadowed and abandoned.

It's no wonder we resist setting boundaries with the ones we love. Boundaries require us to put our needs above the needs of others. They require us to quit taking responsibility for other people's feelings. Protecting our boundaries forces us to say, *"I know this is going to feel bad for you, but I'm going to do it anyway."*

Yet consider this. When we don't set and protect our boundaries, our emotional health and our relationships suffer. Gary resents his "irresponsible" daughter, the husband isolates from his wife, the son risks losing his marriage. Avoiding the discomfort of boundary-setting is a temporary, short-term fix. But our lives and our relationships are long-term investments. To keep them healthy, we need a long-term solution.

Next month we'll examine some of the excuses Nice Guys make when they're avoiding boundary-setting. But today, take a minute to examine your most important relationships and ask yourself this question: **Where is the threshold between when my interactions go from feeling good to feeling bad?**



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