

# BOUNDARIES: *the key to healthy relationships*

Setting clear limits and being able to say no with ease creates a happy and long-lasting connection with your loved ones, says relationship expert *Jan Day*

## ***Understanding what having clear boundaries means and maintaining them is essential for healthy relationships.***

However, being able to establish these limits – which involves being aware of what you need to feel okay within yourself, as well as being able to help with what your partner needs – is not always easy. I believe they are definitely possible with practise though.

## **WHY BOUNDARIES MATTER**

Having limits is basically about being able to say no and yes with ease. It's about saying no to what you don't want, and also being able to hear and understand what others don't want. Although this sounds very simple, it requires a level of honesty that most adults find really challenging.

Have a think about all the times in the past week when you said yes but in reality you meant no. Of course, you have all manner of handy excuses for doing that. The most frequent one I hear is that people don't want to hurt their friends or partners. Instead, they subvert all their own needs to please the other (or at least do what they imagine would please them because they don't actually know) so that they can be happy and harmonious. Except that isn't usually the result.

The result is that we flatten all our authenticity, and hence our self-esteem, and also close the door to real love because we aren't able to see each other. We avoid the depth of vulnerability that would arise if we allowed ourselves to say we want something different, and in avoiding that vulnerability, we lose the possibility of intimacy and real love. We can't really connect with each other if we aren't being seen as we are, and that can't happen if we don't show who we are. In addition, when we live behind a smoke screen of niceness, we lose self-esteem – it's as if we are saying to ourselves: 'my views don't matter'.

This kind of honesty and authenticity are the foundation of healthy relationships. However, most of us also have a deep in-built fear of hearing no and as a result we fear saying it as well. For most of us, our childhood need for love and approval leads us to avoid situations where we would receive a no, and we tend to associate hearing it with rejection or abandonment. Approaching this topic, therefore, is bound to bring up our defensive walls and our vulnerability. However, the gains are enormous. They include increased vitality in the relationship, a boosted sense of self-worth,

a deeper sense of connection and love with our partner, and even better sex.

## **JUST SAY NO**

Most of us would be mortified if we thought that someone else was sacrificing themselves in order to please us. Being able to say no is very different to the art of compromise and co-operation. Of course, there are times in a relationship when we need to give and take, and show a willingness to try things that maybe aren't our first choice. However, that is very different from not telling our friends or partner where our no is.

If we're not confident in our ability to say no at the point when we need to, then it's likely we'll say it much earlier to avoid the situation. Often we don't even know if we want to say yes or no. We de-sensitise ourselves so that we don't have to feel the pain of having our boundaries stepped over, whether accidentally or deliberately. This de-sensitisation leads to a loss of pleasure, a loss of feeling and a loss of our own sense of aliveness. And our relationships suffer as a result.

## **TRY IT YOURSELF**

A good way forward is to practise using yes and no consciously with your partner. Here is an exercise for exploring boundaries in the context of touch. It is important to be willing to go slowly enough that you stay connected to what you are feeling and not to expect any particular outcome. Be aware that you and/or your partner may or may not get aroused. It is important to explore in this exercise with no expectations of what might happen and for both of you to commit to being open, honest and vulnerable.

1. Plan a time when you won't be disturbed and agree to be honest, gentle and authentic.
2. You will both take turns, and so first agree the amount of time that each turn will take. Around 30 minutes is good but you may want to start with a shorter time and then progress. That will give you both a chance to experience and feel what is possible. Agree beforehand whether you want to be clothed or unclothed.
3. One will be receiving touch and one will be giving touch. The receiver will use a limited vocabulary: yes, no, pause, please, stop.