Boundaries are limits that humans set up in their world to keep themselves and others safe, organized, and defined. Examples of boundaries are everywhere: Speed limits, hierarchies in leadership, fences surrounding properties, the walls and roof of a house, clothing people wear, skin that protects the inside of our bodies from spilling to the outside, the space people maintain between themselves and others, and the time limits we set for events we hold or the hours we work on a shift. Boundaries help us recognize what belongs to us, to others, and to the world around us. They also enable us to care for what is ours or someone else’s. Think about it, without the boundary line of a fence for example, it would be hard for a person to know if they were managing their property or trespassing onto that of their neighbor. Without borders between countries, it would be hard for one nation to care for and protect its interests because it would not know where its country begins or ends. If houses had no walls or roofs to set a boundary between what is indoors and the outdoors, weather and animals would quickly breach that space and create chaos.

Boundaries are being set all around us all day long. Depending on the setting we are in, boundaries sometimes stay exactly the same no matter where you go or what you do, and sometimes they can expand or constrict a little. Skin is a good example of this. Skin never changes its function of keeping what belongs on the inside of our bodies in that space but given temperature, weight gain or loss, or sun exposure, the texture, dimension, and color of our skin might will change in response. This
also applies to larger boundaries such as coast lines where the distinction between ocean and land remains quite distinct and yet is always flexing a little depending on the movement of water, the conditions of weather, or how we might place barriers around certain areas in form of harbors or breakwaters. So, some boundaries are constant and others are more fluid. Some can even be invisible though even these can often still be recognizable in the way that they are functioning when in place.

Where some boundaries are visible and invisible in the form of structures or spaces we create, others can also be set in physical and verbal ways. Physical boundaries can be seen in the way that we use or the clothing we wear, or in how we maintain space around our bodies in a group of people depending on the kind of relationships we have with them. Verbal boundaries can be found in the words we speak along with the facial or body expressions we make while speaking them. Invisible boundaries can be found in the ways that we choose to think or feel about something or someone.

Many boundaries are set by ourselves personally according to our needs and desires while others are set for us, like when authorities set laws and regulations for the sake of an entire community. Such boundaries can be seen in speed limits, quiet hours, access restrictions, or laws around the age at which certain activities are permitted or prohibited. Both strangers and the people we are close to set boundaries with us all day long. Many of these limits are so familiar to us that we respond to them without having to put much thought into it. Other times, boundaries might change or disappear completely which requires us to be aware of these changes and respond to them in appropriate ways. When people fail to recognize the boundaries that someone is setting, or choose to ignore or break past them, conflict can arise. Interpersonally this could lead to people reacting with anger towards us, making threats, ending relationships, or by withdrawing and creating greater distance (also a type of boundary) between us and them. Publically, we know that if certain limits are crossed – like speed limits or accessing restricted areas, there can be fines, or legal charges that suddenly become a consequence for disregarding a boundary. Some responses to boundary violations are quick and immediate and others can come slower and might not be immediately evident to us. Either way, it’s common for people and for systems to react when a boundary has been invaded or ignored.

After developing a general idea about what boundaries are and how they work, the following sections will examine boundaries in greater detail. Notice, while you read, what information seems like common sense to you and what aspects of boundaries might be new ground. Are there areas you have not considered yet where you might be unaware of how setting boundaries works? Can you recognize the types of boundaries that are used in the examples and find similar ones in your own personal and professional setting? As you read, make the material come to life in your own life and let yourself investigate how you navigate and organize your own boundaries.
LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK:

Let’s take a closer look at some examples of boundaries. Clothing is a good example to start with because it’s such a visible and tangible boundary we all have experience with. The way we dress when we go to work, when we socialize during our free time, or what we wear (or don’t wear) when we go to bed at night… these are all a very simple types of boundaries that we set for ourselves and others all day long. Depending on the setting we are in, we choose to put textile boundaries on our bodies that are appropriate to give us a sense of privacy and social acceptance. For example, it would be unusual for us to show up in our office wearing only a bathing suit. More than likely, such a clothing choice in a business setting would create uncomfortable experiences for co-workers and customers alike. It would probably be seen by others as evidence for a lacking understanding of boundaries between yourself and the people you work with. Such a clothing choice might also indicate lacking awareness of what is socially acceptable in terms of how much visual access is appropriate to give to others while in a professional office setting. The outcome of choosing bathing suit attire would most likely be disruptive to office workflow and business relationships. Now, if you were an employee at a community swimming pool, wearing a bathing suit might be absolutely called for, and wearing one would not be a boundary violation. So, we see that where one boundary (like wearing a swimming suit at a pool) is appropriate in one setting, it is not always appropriate in another (a place of business).

Most commonly, we dress more formally in an office setting, in ways that expose minimal skin. This also helps to create an atmosphere of professionalism. Sometimes, uniforms are called for, instead of civilian clothing. In a hospital or an auto-body shop, this is sometimes required to provide additional physical safety for employees and customers or patients so that dirt and germs are not spread outside the work environment. In addition to enabling a person to engage in acceptable ways in their social and professional settings, this example also highlights that setting or maintaining boundaries with clothing can go as far as to create physical safety for the person wearing them.

Of course clothing boundaries also differ depending on the cultural context that you are engaging with. In some Middle Eastern countries, it is socially and religiously expected that women cover up much more of their bodies than is expected of them in Western countries. Their public image is often strongly guarded with very specific and strict boundaries regarding clothing and behaviors that have severe consequences when they are violated. However, in private, boundaries in such countries are often quite different and much more relaxed depending on who is sharing that private space with them. Learning about your cultural setting and how boundaries work within that context is a very important part of developing boundaries in healthy ways. Take time to investigate your environment,
observe locals and their customs, and ask questions to get deeper insight into the areas where you might feel some uncertainty about how to create safe and appropriate boundaries.

TIME AS A BOUNDARY?

How people use time to set boundaries is another good example of how we navigate our world with limits. We organize our day and our relationships by time. The amount of time we spend with a doctor is very different than the amount of time we spend with a loved one like a child or a spouse. The time we take to eat lunch is much shorter than the time we take to sleep at night. The time we spend with a friend might be much longer than the time we spend with the person who does our taxes for us. The time the president of a company spends with an entry level worker as opposed to the vice president of the same company might also differ – this also shows the boundary distinction between hierarchies in the work place.

We are taught about time and how to value, use, and set boundaries with it from a very early age. The way our families’ navigated time and set limits on it will most likely have had an effect on how we manage our time as adults. Some families are extremely time conscious. They have very busy lives with many appointments and events. Time is closely guarded and their routines can be quite driven by the hours on the clock. Other families have more relaxed approaches with time and manage their schedules with more tolerance for starting or ending events with more flexibility. There is also a cultural component about how we set boundaries with time. In African nations for example, time is allotted very differently than it is in European contexts. In many Western cultures, being on time for an appointment is considered an absolute “MUST.” Like in Germany or Switzerland, and even in America this is a strong value and pushing boundaries around being late is not well tolerated when taken too far. In the Kenyan culture however, time is seen as quite flexible and more relaxed. Arriving within a certain time frame of the agreed upon hour is still considered polite and acceptable. In the Western world again, the time that is set for the duration of meetings is also an important boundary. When meetings or appointments go beyond their scheduled limit, then participants or leaders of such events can become discomforted or interpret this as bad form by the one in charge of the meeting time. In other countries, going “overtime” is not considered a serious boundary violation. Finally, there are also settings in which “time is money” and where boundaries are set specifically because each minute of a conference with a certain professional or in a certain type of setting will cost a person a significant amount of money. Such boundaries have been set up to ensure that neither party in such a setting is being taken advantage of.
PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES IN RELATIONSHIPS:

The way we set physical boundaries in relationships also varies depending on the type of relationships we have. When we meet a stranger at a bar, for example, we might set boundaries related to the topics that we talk about, the amount of personal information that we share, and the physical distance or space that we keep. And, we might set such boundaries differently again if we are at the same bar with a person we have an intimate relationship with and who we are not meeting for the first time. In the western world, setting boundaries with our physical behavior in public settings, like how close one stands to another person in an elevator or at a bus stop, how close one sits to someone in a train, or at a movie theatre, is commonly navigated and maintained depending on the type of relationship we have with the person in it.

If you were taking a bus ride with your boss for example, you might sit next to him or her on the bus but you would probably avoid physical touch if possible. If you were on the same bus with your girl or boyfriend or child, the boundaries of physical touch or closeness might be a little more intimate. The same might also be said of a similar trip to a restaurant. In other cultures around the world, Asia for example, physical boundaries are much different. In such settings, people often stand, walk, and sit much closer to each other. Sometimes this is due to space limitations and over-population, but most often it’s simply a difference in cultural boundaries. Many cultures around the world are much more intimate in personal interactions and in the physical space they maintain around themselves and others. In the West, people tend to value personal space and are sensitive when someone becomes too close without being invited.

In African and Middle Eastern settings however, having very little boundaries around personal space, even after only just meeting, can be normal. An example of this is when people greet each other by kissing on their cheeks, shaking hands and then continuing to hold each other’s hands while walking in the same direction, or sitting with your hand on someone’s knee. Most often such physical boundaries occur between people of the same sex. It would be inappropriate in the Middle East and Africa for a man to have this type of close physical contact with a woman and vice versa, but in general, men and women in these cultures interact physically closer with each other than they do in the Western world. So you can see how the area of physical boundaries is heavily influenced by culture and can vary quite strongly.

In 2010 the BBC News Agency ran an article titled “Jailed Dubai kissing pair lose appeal over conviction.” In this article, a British man and woman were reported jailed in Dubai for kissing in public. The article details various examples of other couples from other countries who also suffered similar
consequences in Dubai after failing to understand and enforce the country’s laws regarding public display of affection. This is an example of a boundary violation that many Middle Eastern countries take very seriously. In Japan, the boundaries between supervisors and employees are very strict, and in India, the Caste system is even more extreme with limits between social statuses, that have been strictly maintained for hundreds of years.

LANGUAGE AND BODY LANGUAGE BOUNDARIES:

Language is another area in which there are quite a few boundaries. How you talk to your boss might not be the same as how you talk to your partner in bed at night. How you talk to your three year old son or daughter might be different than how you talk to a police officer or the coach of your child’s soccer team. The way you leave a voicemail for your best friend, and again for your supervisor or even your own mother or father might be very different than when you leave a similar message with your bosses’ secretary... All these are examples of how we use language to navigate relationships and the boundaries we have around them. Tone of voice, inflections, and volume are also ways we set limits. A person yelling or whispering is sending a message about how they are feeling within their boundaries and how they would like you to respond. Yelling might indicate frustration and a desire for space. Whispering might signal that someone wants to be more intimate and wishes you to approach to a closer proximity. It might also indicate a level of discomfort and either a desire for or rejection of a decrease of the space between you.

Sometimes verbal boundaries can be very clear like when someone says to us “no” or “I don’t want this” or “stop...” So are some of the typical things we say when we are welcoming someone to come inside our boundaries such as: “yes, I like this,” “sure, I want you to ...” or “this is ok with me.” But other times verbal (and many other boundaries) are not always so clear. For example “I don’t know” or “maybe” can be taken in a variety of different ways depending on your audience. On a date, saying “I don’t know” or “maybe” might communicate to someone that more effort is called for, that a person is open for options, that they are still making up their minds, or even that they are no longer interested but are struggling to make it known that they want to set a boundary. Depending on someone’s culture or personality, such boundaries can be easily misunderstood and then we respond in ways that the other person does not appreciate.

All of these situations must be handled with great care and increased effort to communicate until it has become clear what it is a person needs or wants. In Asian countries it is considered bad form to say “no” to a guest or acquaintance. Setting a more fluid boundary like using the word “maybe” instead of “no” is a common way that Asian cultures save face – for you and for themselves. In European
cultures, a brisk “no” or “I don’t think so” can often be stated with much greater ease. So you see, especially verbal boundaries are quite complex and require a certain amount of dedication from people to ensure that they are not overstepping themselves and also communicating their boundaries in ways that can be understood by others.

Human beings are also very good at setting boundaries with their body movements and facial expressions. Think about it for a minute – how many limits can you set with someone just using your face and your hands? Raising the index finger comes to mind quickly, or putting the entire hand up to signal “stop” or “wait” or “hold on a second.” Shaking that same finger back and forth can also mean “no” or “don’t.” A smile, a frown, a lifted eyebrow…. Humans can use all kinds of expressions to set limits so quickly that almost an entire conversation can be had and boundaries set without having said more than a few words. Think again – if you wanted to get to know someone in a public place, how would you go about achieving that contact? Would you watch that person’s body language, their facial expressions? Would you assess through these if the person was showing open boundaries that indicated they were approachable? Interested? We download that kind of information in milliseconds and adjust our behavior and expectations according to this. All day long we send out physical and facial signals that inform people of our boundaries in unspoken ways.

CONCLUSION

So, as you see, boundaries are everywhere! They are both physical and visible like walls or clothing, and they are also invisible but present in the different kinds of relationships that we have with people around us. When we fail to recognize boundaries, set them too high or too low, or set none at all, our lives can become chaotic and our relationships can begin to get very complicated or deteriorate all together. A country that does not protect its borders is vulnerable to being invaded by another country’s military forces – such as occurred when Russia annexed a portion of the Ukraine in 2014. When an adult couple does not set relationship boundaries with mutual children, they can begin to invade that couple’s relationship and cause conflict, as can be the case when one does not set boundaries with people at work and they begin to encroach on personal time at home. Sometimes the families we are raised in did a good job of teaching us appropriate boundaries when adults around us demonstrated them in healthy ways.

Other times, we might have experienced severe boundary violations while we are growing up and such experiences cause us trauma. When this occurs, its common for children to grow up into adults who struggle with understanding and setting boundaries. An example of this is a child who experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or even emotional and physical neglect. The results of such painful experiences are vast for a child as it tries to cope with them. Often the child tries to counter these
experiences by setting very strong boundaries or by radically going in the opposite direction and sets none at all. This becomes evident in their behavior when they are young, but also when such children grow up and become adults. Their adult relationships can show many signs of boundary problems that are a result of the experiences they had while they were growing up. Especially children or adolescents who experienced physical boundary violations develop problems with boundaries in the future. They struggle to know how to set healthy boundaries for themselves physically and either give away too much and don’t protect themselves, or they seclude themselves and withdraw from others to overprotect a sense of vulnerability that still remains even after the abuse or neglect has stopped. It’s also common for people to struggle with both – sometimes being too loose with boundaries and then overcompensating and setting very strong and rigid boundaries. If you are in a relationship with someone who has a history of such abuse, or you are a survivor of it, you will know that boundaries can be a very painful and difficult thing to navigate and understand.

Knowing about boundaries, how they work, what they accomplish, and how they are set and maintained is an important part of social and personal engagement with the world around us. When it appears that relationships are chaotic or filled with conflict or misunderstandings, it can be possible that a boundary problem might be the origin of the trouble. Taking the time to learn about boundaries, how the culture around you sets them, how you have learned about them in the family setting you grew up in, and how you might be setting them successfully or a little unsuccessfully will enable you to manage the relationships you have in your life with much greater success. A good place to start is to ask someone you trust to give you honest feedback. You could ask them something like: “do you think I have good boundaries in my life?” or “how do you see me setting good boundaries in my life” or “do you think I do well with boundaries in my life?” Depending on the feedback you get, or the evidence you see in your life, you can then move forward in learning more about boundaries by researching books and articles on the topic or inviting other people you know to share with you how they do boundaries in their own lives. There are also some resources for you to consider at the end of this article.

Here are some statements to consider if you are trying to determine if learning more about boundaries might be helpful in your life right now. If you find yourself saying “yes” or agreeing with these statements, it might be a good sign to take a closer look at boundaries in your life.

☐ I often get feedback from others that I need to “take a step back” or “back off” or “settle down.”
☐ I frequently pursue people and get the feeling that they would rather avoid me or be left alone by me.
☐ I often spend more time with someone than I initially intended and people have to tell me to leave.
I often try to change someone’s mind after they have said “no” to something that I wanted from them.

I often think people misunderstand me or get upset with me for reasons I can't understand.

I often feel that people are impatient with me and seem annoyed with me when I talk to them.

I get upset when I’m told “no” and will try hard to get someone to say “yes” instead.

I often try to get closer or more intimate with people that I have only recently met.

I frequently shut people out by withdrawing socially or using humor or cynicism.

My relationships are often complicated and difficult and many don’t last very long.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Allison Bottke: Where to draw the line: How to set healthy boundaries every day.

Anne Katherine: Where to Draw the Line: How to set health boundaries every day.

Henry Cloud, John Townsend: Boundaries: When to say yes, how to say no, to take control of your life

Henry Cloud: The Power of the Other: The startling effect other people have on you, from the boardroom to the bedroom and beyond – and what to do about it