



# **Safe Enough and Free Enough: Communication and Boundaries in Alternative Relationshipland**

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### **Introduction:**

- Western culture is appallingly lacking in focus on the importance of having good relationship skills, especially good boundary setting and communication skills.
  - These involve developing a certain amount of courage for asking for what we want, as well as diplomacy in doing this so that those whom we ask will respond positively.
  - They also involve being true to ourselves while speaking as our higher selves, i.e. from a place of honesty, authenticity, and consideration, both for ourselves and for our partners.
- Here we will explore the reasons for possessing these skills, and especially **why it is even more important** to have them if we are living a life that includes alternative relationships and alternative forms of sexual expression.

### **BOUNDARIES**

#### **Boundaries (a/k/a Deal Breakers, Non-Negotiables): What they are and why they are important**

- Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify for him- or herself what are reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave around him or her and how he or she will respond when someone steps outside those limits. (Consequences)
- Personal boundaries are the limits we set in relationships that allow us to protect ourselves from
  - Being manipulated by, or enmeshed with, emotionally needy others
  - Those with a tendency toward disregard for the concerns and rights of others.
- As the title here indicates, boundaries have a lot to do with developing a scenario where all concerned feel both safe enough and free enough to have their needs met without too much fear or too much restriction.
- Setting boundaries and defining consequences is important to truly owning our own life.
- Failing to set boundaries and being too self-sacrificing can result in losing a sense of our own identity - “I don’t know where you end and I begin.” (See co-dependence.)
- It’s always better to know what a partner’s boundaries are than to stumble across them.

### **What do healthy boundaries look like?**

- Healthy intact boundaries are flexible.
- They allow us to get close to others when it is appropriate and to maintain our distance when we might be harmed by getting too close.
- Good boundaries protect us from becoming engulfed in abusive relationships and pave the way to achieving true intimacy, which is the flipside of independence, as we grow to interdependence via the relationship of mature individuals.
- They help us take care of ourselves and respect the selves of others.

### **Why are boundaries important for alternative relationships?**

- SM/Leather Fetish - In order to have positive experiences and get what you want from your play dates and 24/7 relationships, it is essential that you talk clearly with all partners/masters/doms/slaves/subs about and agree to the necessary boundaries.
- Polyamory - Again, in order to have positive experiences and get what you want from multiple/open relationships, it is essential that you talk clearly with all partners about and agree to the necessary boundaries.
- This should not be a one-time discussion but should be revisited from time-to-time as people and practices evolve and change.

### **What boundaries are reasonable and what aren't?**

- Think about boundaries that exist in your life, with family, in the workplace.
- After identifying a few, consider why they exist.
  - Laws are boundaries.
  - Many will involve reasons of safety, freedom and fairness.
  - Relationship and play partner boundaries involve these for the same reasons - safety, freedom, and fairness.

### **Conflicts over safe enough and free enough**

- People trying polyamory for the first time are often fearful about sharing their partner. Doing so, at least at times, doesn't feel safe enough for their comfort.
- People anxious to try polyamory often chafe at the bit and don't feel free enough when their partner is showing signs of discomfort.

- People in the scene may want to be free to try a practice that intrigues them that an existing partner isn't interested in but also is fearful about their trying with another.

### **The right to set boundaries around nonconsensual and abusive behaviors**

- Bullying - This is never OK. Pressuring and coercing another to do something or behave in a way to which they do not consent and are not comfortable is unethical.
- Psychological manipulation - Another manner of compelling another that is unethical when there is no consent.
- Failure to respect another's autonomy (non-consensual possessiveness) - In the interests of fairness and to avoid resentment in relationships, in order for everyone involved to be free enough, it is important to come to very specific agreements and set specific boundaries around ownership in D/s relationships.
- Vanilla polyamorous relationships tend to highly value egalitarianism, which calls for eliminating attitudes and expectations around traditional possessiveness of one's partner.
- Failure to respect previously-agreed-upon boundaries - This is purely and simply failing to do what one says they will do and indicates a weakness around this aspect of personal integrity.

### **A Few Words of Caution**

- There are some people who are dangerous, or who love their power or control so much that a clear verbal boundary is seen as a challenge to be defeated.
- If someone has given you reason to fear them, be careful about how you set a boundary with them.
- Before deciding on what boundaries to set, first assess your own risk.
- If you, your children, your home, or your possessions would be endangered by setting verbal boundaries, create a physical boundary through distance, or by relocating.
- If you live with, work with or play with a person who could threaten you if you set a boundary, talk to a third person for counsel as to the best course for you to follow.
- As necessary, use lots of help from other good, trustworthy people to ensure your safety and security.

### **The Importance of Consequences and Identifying them In Advance**

- Identifying consequences is important. To some people this can feel very controlling, depending on how it is expressed. We also have to be clear with ourselves that the consequence is necessary to take care of ourselves, not to punish the other person.

- The trick is to be clear without being threatening. This is a fine time to incorporate the use of “I” statements, i.e. “In order to feel safe in our relationship, I need to know if there is someone new you are seeing - will you tell me if that happens? If you won’t, I may feel it necessary to reevaluate our relationship.” instead of “If you don’t tell me about it when you start seeing someone new, I’ll be out the door.”

### **The Importance of Respecting and Abiding by a Partner’s Boundaries**

- If you truly love your partner in a way that also respects their boundaries, you want them to feel safe and free. It is a gift of love.
  - To some safety is of more primary importance than freedom, and vice versa.
  - Consider putting boundaries in writing with all parties signing - this helps firmly affix boundaries in mind.

### **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

#### **Stumbling Blocks:**

- Poor timing/lack of preparation
  - Generally speaking, sooner is better than later.
  - Don’t having SRD’s (serious relationship discussions) if one or both are HALT (hungry, angry, lonely or tired.) Find a time when no one is overly stressed.
  - Prepare by letting your partner know ahead of time that there are things on your mind you’d like to discuss soon and only initiate SRDs with their consent - it will avoid resentment and help enhance chances of a fruitful discussion.
  - Give a lot of thought to what you want to say before you sit down to talk. There’s nothing wrong with bringing notes to the conversation to be sure to cover all important points and keep the discussion on track.
  - Giving others a heads-up about the desire to have an SRD will avoid help avoid unpleasant surprises and feelings of being ambushed.
  - During times of conflict and impasse’, consider bringing in a neutral third party to arbitrate. Choose someone everyone respects and welcomes/gives their consent to.
  - Alternately, if agreement can’t be reached, and especially if tempers are raised, consider invoking a 3 day veto/cooling off period.
- Avoiding Conflict: Those who are new to the concept of setting boundaries will be sometimes understandably reluctant to ask for what they want out of a desire to avoid conflict.

- Ironically, this is a good way to ensure that there WILL be conflict, especially around unspoken expectations, so developing a comfort level with effectively discussing boundaries is key to negotiating something that will work for everyone.
- Unspoken/unacknowledged Expectations
  - It is important to examine our ideas about what our relationships *\*should\** or are *\*supposed\** to look like and discuss those with our partner(s). Many a time have unspoken expectations caused a conflict, which usually goes something like this: Alice makes a date for Saturday with her partner, Jack. When she tells her partner, Judy, that she will be seeing Jack on Saturday, Judy snaps at Alice, “Ok, fine!” Clearly Judy isn’t happy, and when Alice asks why, Judy says “You know that Saturday is the annual Bi Women’s Ball, and I never dreamed that you wouldn’t think it important to keep that date open so we could go together.” Judy clearly had an unspoken expectation that caught Alice by surprise.
- Lack of clarity in communicating what we are willing to offer a partner or play mate and what we will not or cannot provide. This is especially important in developing new relationships while being obligated to other partners. When we have this, everyone is clear on their options and that they may need to seek to get some needs met elsewhere.
- Codependence (a/k/a co-narcissism or inverted narcissism)
  - A tendency to behave in overly passive or excessively caretaking ways that negatively impact one's relationships and quality of life.
  - It often involves putting one's needs at a lower priority than others while being excessively preoccupied with the needs of others.
  - Codependency can occur in any type of relationship, including in families, at work, in friendships, and also in romantic, peer or community relationships.
  - Codependency may also be characterized by denial, low self-esteem, excessive compliance, and/or control patterns.
- Power struggles
  - Trying to change others (we can only change ourselves)
  - Trying to control others as a means of feeling in control of life that feels out of control
  - Always lack consent
- The influence of unhealed trauma from abuse
  - Exaggerated sensitivity

- Avoidance
- Failure to take responsibility and be respectful
  - Narcissism/entitlement
- Speaking different love languages - the five love languages according to Gary Chapman.
  - Receiving Gifts
  - Quality Time
  - Acts of Service
  - Physical Touch
  - Words of Affirmation

### **Learning How and About What to Communicate**

- Basic communication tips:
  - Put friendship first, even ahead of love relationship. Be sure you are treating a partner at least as well as you treat your friends.
  - Don't bring up important issues during rushed or stressful times of the day.
  - Don't confront your partner with a "pre-set" judgment that he or she is wrong or at fault.
  - First know what you *do* want and focus on that at least as much as what you don't want.
  - Focus first on the person with the concern.
  - Address only one issue at a time.
  - Say precisely what you mean.
  - Practice active listening.
  - Use "I" instead of "you" statements.
  - No sweeping generalizations (you always, you never, etc.)
  - Make requests, not demands.
  - Reply to, rather than react to, your partner.

- Take responsibility for your feelings.
- Emotions are never wrong - it is how you react to them that causes conflict.
- Practice empathy.
- Tell your partner your feelings as soon as you realize you feel them and there is an appropriate opportunity. They will fester if you put them off too long.
- Be 100% honest emotionally, 100% of the time. This is where intimacy comes from.
- Vulnerability is a GOOD thing when feelings of vulnerability are shared with a partner with whom we feel safe to do so. This is also where intimacy comes from.
- Make it safe for your partner to raise difficult issues - don't overreact!
- Maintain a sense of lightness and humor.
- Don't be a mind-reader, and don't expect others to be one.
- Learn how to effectively apologize (Read Gary Chapman's The Five Languages of Apology: How to Experience Healing in All Your Relationships)
- Learn about each other's personality type - Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, etc.
- Identifying Important Issues
  - Things someone feels strongly about
- Compromise/flexibility
  - It's unreasonable to expect to get everything our way, and sometimes we may have to compromise against our better judgment. If we are willing to give it a try and discuss how it went afterward, we may find we are more OK with the compromise than we thought.
  - Be prepared with a Plan B, even a Plan C, until you find what works for everyone.
  - If you are a maybe, it's better to say no for the sake of clarity.
  - No may mean no today but not tomorrow, so if this is a possibility, say so.
  - After all has been said and done, accept a partner's no as graciously as possible. Avoid engaging in passive-aggressiveness or other forms of indirect manipulation and game-playing.

- Incorporating Respect, Compassion and Empathy
  - Be both firm and gently direct.
  - Coercion is not respectful.
  - Always try to put yourself in the other person's shoes.
- Educational Resources for Good Communication
  - Visit your local library.
  - Recommended reading list attached, which includes:
    - Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication
    - Jeffers's Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway
  - Book Store
  - Internet

**Conclusion:**

- Becoming comfortable with expressing the limits that help us feel safe enough and free enough and being able to find effective compromises - which can be renegotiated if they don't work - are key to getting the relationships and having the play experiences we strongly desire.
- The better we are at identifying and enforcing our own boundaries while respecting those of the people we care for and play with, the more smoothly our relationships and play experiences will go.
- Here's hoping you enjoy life and love while feeling safe enough and free enough!

## Recommended Reading:

### On Open Relationships -

Anapol, Deborah M. (1997) *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits*. IntinNet Resource Center: San Rafael, CA, pp. 49-64.

Taormino, Tristan (2008) *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*. Cleis Press, Inc.: San Francisco

Easton, Dossie & Hardy, Janet. (2008) *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Greenery Press: San Francisco.

### On Dealing with Fear -

Jeffers, Susan (2006) *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. Anniversary edition. Ballantine Books

### On Setting Boundaries -

Black, Jan & Enns (1998), Greg *Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life*

Cloud, Henry & Townsend, John *Boundaries Workbook (1995): When to Say Yes When to Say No To Take Control of Your Life*

Linden, Anne (2008), *Boundaries in Human Relationships: How to Be Separate and Connected*

Katherine, Anne (1994) *Boundaries - Where You End And I Begin: How To Recognize And Set Healthy Boundaries*

Katherine, Anne (2000), *Where to Draw the Line: How to Set Healthy Boundaries Every Day*

### On Communication -

Chapman, Gary (2008), *The Five Languages of Apology: How to Experience Healing in All Your Relationships*, Moody Publishing

Chapman, Gary (Reprint Edition 2009) *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* Moody Publishing

Myers, Isabel Briggs (Paperback - May 3 1995) *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type*

Keirsey, David and Bates, Marilyn (Paperback - Nov 5 1984) *Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types*

Keirsey, David (Paperback - Nov 5 1999) *Please Understand Me II: Temperament, Character, Intelligence*