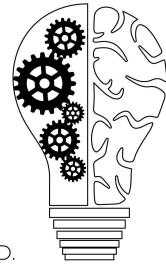


## **Episode 026: Setting Boundaries in**

### **Relationships**

*David Puder, M.D.*



DAVID PUDER, M.D.

**PSYCHIATRY &  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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There are no conflicts of interest for this episode.

## **What are Boundaries?**

When we refer to boundaries, we are talking about emotional walls that are healthy. Boundaries are meant to keep us in relationship with the people that we love.

Think of them as your property lines around your house. You know where your lines are, where your property ends and your neighbors begins. Therefore you know what you are supposed to take care of and what your neighbor is supposed to take care of.

A boundary defines our self. Within ourselves, our “property” consists of our physical body, our desires, our intellect, and our ability to make decisions. It gives us a sense of defining what is “me” and what is “not me.”

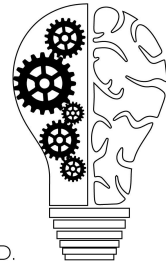
We are not supposed to take on too much of other people’s emotional experiences. When I was a newly practicing psychiatrist, I didn’t know that, and I felt depressed after meeting with a depressed patient. It is possible to have an understanding of what is happening in someone’s emotional world, but not take it on yourself.

There is a psychological principle that is common among people who struggle with having good boundaries with others. It’s called “siding with the aggressor.” For example, if someone grows up in a home where the father is constantly displaying angry behavior, a child might learn to develop a sense of humor if he or she learns that will diffuse the situation. Rather than running away from, or fighting back, these people joined with the aggressors, paying attention to them, calming them, helping them.

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Early on in childhood, people who side with the aggressor understand how to make others happy. This continues into adulthood and is formative in new relationships in how the person would choose to interact with others.

I don't think of it as a weakness, I think of it almost as a superpower—these people are incredibly skilled interpersonally when they get older. They know how to react to others, how to make others happy, and how to make angry people calm down. They are great peacemakers, therapists, and psychiatrists. It was an adaptive feature for them in childhood.

But as they grow into adulthood, they need to learn to choose when to use this superpower, or when to have a boundary.

My wife, Lindsay, first began learning about boundaries when she was experiencing burnout as a young, working woman. She never said no, always went above and beyond the requirements of her job. And at the end of the night, she was exhausted. After awhile, she started to become upset—upset at herself, and even at her situation.

Within the Big 5 personality types test, Lindsay scores high in **Trait Agreeableness**. People who are high in that trait value relationships, are empathic and helpful. They will do things they don't want to, merely to maintain their relationships. Women typically test higher in the trait than men.

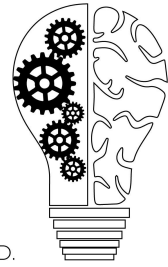
I see many women come into my practice who have high markers of agreeableness—they haven't found (or been able to express) their boundaries. They have issues with chronic pain, problems with expressing anger, either within themselves, or towards others.

It's also common that these people have no idea that their "helpfulness" is causing them huge amounts of physical pain. People who are caretakers, who feel looped in to being someone's source for happiness, life, wellbeing, often get looped into these types of situations if they don't have a strong sense of self. Obviously, many people are caretakers for their relatives. I'm not talking about being a nice person versus being selfish, or being a caretaker versus letting someone you love be alone.

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**PSYCHIATRY &  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

I'm talking about the emotional position of your heart during those situations. Are you able to say no when you need to? Are you asking for help when you need to? Are you taking time for yourself? Are you in pain? What is your emotional state when someone calls and asks for help? Do you check in with yourself before you say yes?

## **How do you know when you need to start establishing boundaries?**

Typically, with people who have no boundaries, the resentment will build and build, and they will do something drastic to relieve their pain—cut off the relationship, quit caretaking altogether, stop being friends with the person, get a divorce. Or the resentment will build up in their body, causing either depression (as the anger is turned inward) or body pain (as the body carries the burden).

The truth is though, that when someone with no boundaries says yes, it might be ingenuine. They are saying yes out of guilt and obligation, not out of a true desire to say yes.

When we do things out of obligation or compulsion, we lose passion for that task, and begin to build resentment. If we aren't making the choice to say yes, we are thus protecting our ability to say yes to our passions, joys and desires.

## **Good Fences Make Good Neighbors**

As you're setting up your "fence," you want to keep the bad out, but it will also keep the good in.

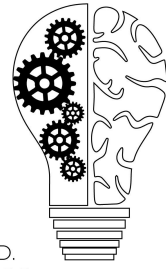
When we talk to people about boundaries, they are often scared of beginning to say no.

When you learn to say no, and you begin to make new friendships with people, you will tend to set higher standards for how you want to be treated during those relationships.

## Episode 026: Setting Boundaries in

### Relationships

David Puder, M.D.



## How to Set Up Healthy Boundaries

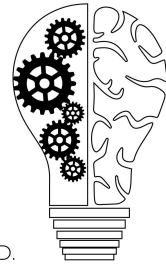
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1. Look at the people you have a hard time saying “no” to. Is it your boss? Someone in authority? Someone who is a family member?
2. What do you fear losing from them if you say no? Is it love? Respect? Provision? For a boundary-less person, being a pacifier has some advantage. Maybe you were the peacekeeper in your house growing up. Maybe you weren’t allowed to say no. Maybe abuse was involved. Or maybe you were simply a sensitive, sweet child who heard repetitively that it was a good thing to be kind and helpful. Whatever the case, there is some sort of relational reward to say yes, and to keep the peace. Pay attention to what you’re getting out of saying yes to that person.
3. Become aware of body sensations you’re having when you think of setting boundaries, of saying no to someone. Do you feel tightness in your chest? Numbness in your hands? Is your heart racing? Do you have anxiety?
4. Have a pre-programmed response for when someone asks you for something. Lindsay likes to say, “Can I get back to you later with an answer?” It allows her to take off the social pressure of saying yes immediately, and be able to respond with a truthful answer later on.
5. Before you say yes to anything, think about your ultimate goals and boundaries. We all have a purpose, we are all unique. If we spend all of our time doing only what other people want us to do, we won’t accomplish our goals. When we start to focus on ourselves more, we can see where the opportunities to say yes, or no, will take us, and we can see if they line up with our ultimate goals.
6. Have safe people in your life, so that when you don’t have the strength to say no or speak up, you can talk to them. You can ask for help. It could be a therapist or just someone you can feel safe with. Lindsay has a group of women she has talked to once a week for 12 years. On that phone call, they discuss what they are dealing with and how they are growing.
7. Have conversations with your current friends where you set boundaries. I go on walks with people all of the time. I often ask if we can switch topics on the way back. Normally I would be the listener the whole walk, but with my new boundary, it lets me also talk about something that’s going on in my life. People are always

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**PSYCHIATRY &  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

responsive when I ask for this, and it's always positive. People who are higher empathy have a harder time asking for what they need.

8. Throughout our lives, we have new possibilities for relationships every day. We can take care with adding those who are good, positive, safe people, who will understand our “no” and will allow us to uphold our new boundaries. When you're looking for new, good friends, look for people who are full of grace. They are also full of truth—they are kind and open, but also honest.

## **Parenting and Boundaries**

Children are difficult to have boundaries with. It can be because we love them and want to give them the world, because we know they aren't fully emotionally developed, or because we want to ease some of our own exhaustion by giving in!

One key to holding our boundaries when our kids throw temper tantrums is to respond to tears with empathy, not just say “yes” to ease our discomfort. If we resonate with them, it will help both us and them. For example, if your child is screaming and crying about leaving the park early, try saying, “I know it must feel hard for you to leave something that is so fun. We will come back again. Nevertheless right now, it's time to go. At home, you have toys too and can play with them.” This offers empathy, hope and it keeps a boundary.

If we give in and let them stay, we are teaching them a bad habit. We should never set a boundary that we aren't willing to follow through on. It helped Lindsay and I to remember the statistic that even giving in to 1 out of every 8 tantrums taught the child that tantrums worked, and they would win. It reinforced their negative behavior.

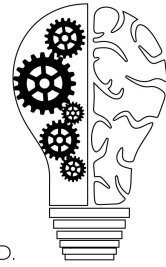
If we make them leave and don't care that they are upset, we aren't recognizing their emotions and are being unempathic.

Letting children feel stress, and being empathic and reassuring when they've completed the task, is more helpful for them as they grow. If you step in every time and relieve the

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**PSYCHIATRY &  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

stress (such as not making them go to school when they don't want to), you're not preparing them for adulthood.

Keep your boundaries, and express empathy.

## **Boundaries in Romantic Relationships**

Dating is hard work. There are several boundaries to navigate during dating. When you have talks about boundaries in dating, if they don't respond appropriately, you definitely need to evaluate whether you want to continue dating them or not.

Be honest and open right from the start.

### **Physical boundaries**

This is a hot topic in society today—consent, verbal consent, being able to talk and have conversations. Many of my patients do not want to follow through with physical relationships with people, but they have a hard time saying the actual word “no” when they are in the moment. Define what you want and don't want, long before you get into another relationship. If someone does not respect your “no” that should be a deal breaker.

### **Spiritual boundaries**

Define what you want and don't want, what you believe spiritually. What are your worldview deal breakers? Defining your deal breakers and writing them down, and asking your friends to help keep you accountable, is important.

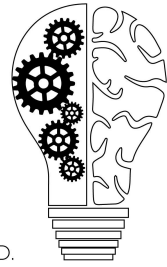
If you are Muslim, Jewish, or Christian, make sure that you know what you want in a partner, and that you aren't letting go of boundaries that will one day matter to you again, just so you can date someone.

### **Conversational boundaries**

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**PSYCHIATRY &  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Part of dating now is “ghosting,” or shutting down communications when you don’t want to have real conversations about how you’re experiencing someone. I believe this has developed unhealthy communication patterns in society.

When Lindsay and I were dating, she almost broke up with me because I demonstrated some anxious behaviors during our dinners together. I would shake my leg, or eat three loaves of bread in ten minutes! She nearly ended it without telling me why—she just thought I was odd.

But when she talked to her friends, they urged her to communicate how she was experiencing me. When she told me what she was feeling, and I told her I was behaving that way because I was nervous—I was so into her! She was pleasantly surprised and we continued dating. Now, we have been married for 6 years and have two children together.

When you’re dating, make it a point to not shut down just because you’re having a negative experience of someone (if that experience isn’t too bad, of course). Try communicating to the person what you’re feeling. This will go a long way in setting up the relationship (and changing your personal habits) to developing positive communication patterns.

## **Dealing with Relationships and Change**

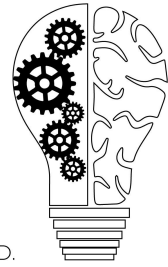
People view consistency as a positive. That means that as humans, we are wired to strive for create an equilibrium in our relationships. And agreeable, boundary-less people strive for consistency in behavior more than others.

When someone that didn’t have boundaries starts saying “no,” the people in their lives start to sit up and notice what they would deem “inconsistency.” The first time you say you cannot help with that thing you’ve helped with every week, they may be nice about it. But the second and third time, they’ll start to say that sentence we all fear...“you’ve changed...”

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PSYCHOTHERAPY**

When you grow in your boundaries, there will be people who don't like them. They will shame you, yell at you, push every button that they can to get you to comply in the way that you used to.

Understand that by saying no, you may not be as helpful in relationships, volunteer organizations, or work situations as you used to be.

But, by saying no, you will also free up your time to be able to accomplish what only you can accomplish in your life. Saying no to trivial things that are daily time-vampires will free you up to do the things you are passionate about. That passion will grow, your freedom will grow, and you'll be able to really start to feel in control of your own life and schedule again. People will respect you.