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Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast. I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four — soon to be 5 — books on mental strength.

It feels great to say “soon to be five books.” My newest book is a workbook. It’s called 13 Things Mentally Strong People Don’t Do: Workbook. It’s filled with exercises, strategies, and quizzes that will help you build the mental strength you need to live your best life. It’s available for pre-order now, and it officially hits the shelves in March of 2023.

Right now, you’re listening to The Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys.

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

Today I’m talking about boundaries. It’s a hot topic right now. And while it’s great to set boundaries, there are a lot of misconceptions about what it means to set healthy boundaries.

So today I’m talking about the five biggest boundary mistakes that you’re going to want to avoid. Making these mistakes can make things worse, not better. But they’re really common.
And unfortunately, the misconceptions about why to set boundaries, or how to set them, often spread like wildfire on social media.

So today we’re clearing up those misconceptions so you can set the boundaries you need to experience inner peace.

Before we talk about boundary mistakes though, let’s discuss what boundaries are and why we need to establish them.

A boundary is a rule that you set about how you’re going to allow other people to treat you. There are different kinds of boundaries. A physical boundary might involve telling someone that you aren’t comfortable giving hugs right now during the pandemic. An emotional boundary might involve telling your aunt that you aren’t comfortable talking about whether you plan to have children. A financial boundary could include saying no to someone who asks to borrow money.

The reason we need boundaries is that they show other people what we’re willing to tolerate. Without boundaries, you will likely feel uncomfortable, you might grow angry and resentful, and other people won’t know your expectations. Your relationship will become damaged because the other person won’t necessarily know they’re harming your relationship or doing things that cause you discomfort.

Healthy boundaries can lead to healthy relationships. But you don’t need to just set boundaries with close friends or immediate family members. You might also need to create boundaries with your boss, your co-workers, your neighbors, and other people whom you interact with.

Setting boundaries can feel a little overwhelming and complicated at first. But once you start creating them, life gets better. You’ll experience greater inner peace, and you’ll waste a lot less time worrying about what other people are doing, complaining about the behavior you don’t like, or tolerating things that really bother you.

So when it comes to setting boundaries, here are five things you don’t want to do:
1. Don’t use boundaries as a way to control someone else.

Boundaries are meant to help you manage your life — not to control someone else’s life.

But it’s easy to get those things mixed up. Sometimes, as a well-meaning person, you might create a rule more out of your concern for someone else than out of a concern for yourself.

One of my therapy clients was happy when her adult son moved back home. He was going through a divorce and was going to stay with her until he could get back on his feet. The mom was concerned that her son was going out with friends after work and staying out — rather than working on himself. So she told him that he needed to come home earlier every night because he always woke her up when he came home late. In reality, she was never actually asleep when he came home. She was usually just reading a book in her bed, and she didn’t mind that he came home late. But she used it as an excuse to try and motivate him to come home earlier. She told him if he couldn’t be home by 11 PM, he should stay elsewhere.

Her son decided he didn’t want a curfew at the age of 35, and he also didn’t want to keep his mother awake at night. So he moved out and started staying with a friend. His mom regretted ever setting the boundary because it was never about her anyway. She assumed this boundary would make her son come home earlier, not move out. But boundaries should not be used to control someone else.

If you’re going to set a boundary, make sure that it’s about protecting your inner peace, not about trying to force someone else to change.

2. Don’t automatically announce your boundaries.

You’ll hear a lot of people say you have to communicate your boundaries. But you don’t necessarily need to communicate your boundaries with words. You can show people what your boundaries are with your behavior, which can be much more effective.
Let’s say your family drinks a lot at their family gatherings. You don’t want to be around them when they drink heavily. But you do enjoy seeing your family and want to go to a BBQ with them.

You don’t have to announce loudly that you’re going to leave as soon as people seem to be getting intoxicated. Instead, the minute you see things getting a little out of hand, you might just pack up and leave. You don’t need to offer a lengthy explanation or bring up all the problems your family has had with drinking in the past.

Your behavior will speak louder than your words. And if you did this a few times, your family will likely figure out why you leave.

So keep that in mind. Similarly, if you have a family member who texts you throughout the work day, repeatedly telling them that you can’t reply when you’re working might not do any good. But if you stop replying to them until after work, they’ll see that you aren’t replying during the day, and they’ll stop expecting an immediate response.

There are times when you might want to communicate your boundaries with your words and then follow up with a change in your behavior. But you don’t always have to announce it. If you choose not to tell people what you’re doing, and instead decide to show them, this doesn’t make you a poor communicator. Instead, it might just mean that you’re taking action — not just talking about taking action.

3. Don’t set boundaries when your emotions are running high.

We’ve likely all made some sort of threat when we’re upset, thinking we were setting a boundary, but really said something outrageous that we didn’t really mean.

So when your emotions are high — whether you’re really angry or anxious — don’t set a boundary. Wait until you’re calm.

And if you do make a boundary that you don’t really intend to keep, by all means, step, explain yourself, and apologize if necessary.
I had a dad that I used to work with in my therapy office. Out of sheer frustration one day, he told his kids he was going to throw away any toys that weren’t put away whenever he got home from work because he was tired of how messy the house was. He said this after walking into a huge mess after work one day when he was angry. So while he didn’t actually want to throw their toys away, he thought he should be a person of his word. So sure enough, the next day he threw away some of their toys. It pained him to do it because he had bought most of these toys.

When he came to therapy that week, we talked about his options. He felt terrible about throwing the kids’ toys away. And we discussed how he could have used that as an opportunity to apologize and show his kids how sometimes when we’re angry, we say things we don’t mean. Then, he could have offered a better consequence — like taking their toys away for the day rather than permanently throwing them away.

Boundaries are rarely an emergency. So take your time to think about them when you’re feeling calm.

When all else fails, you can create a temporary boundary. You might decide right now you aren’t going to accept phone calls from an ex, or for the time being, you aren’t going to loan someone your car because you need time to think about things.

4. Don’t abandon your boundaries just because someone gets upset.

When you set a boundary with someone, they may get mad. This doesn’t mean you should change your boundary.

In fact, the other person’s anger might be a sign that you did the right thing by setting that boundary. They may start to misbehave because they don’t like the fact that you’re taking steps to preserve your own mental health.

If you say no when your sibling asks to borrow money, and they yell at you, this doesn’t mean you should change your mind. Instead, it might mean
that they really don’t respect your decisions and you sticking to this boundary might show them that you respect yourself.

People who get mad about your boundaries might go away for a while. But they usually come back. If they don’t, consider it proof that you did the right thing by showing yourself some self-respect because they didn’t respect your wishes.

**5. Don’t avoid creating boundaries altogether.**

If you don’t typically set boundaries, it might seem like you’re being rude or mean. The idea that it’s somehow harmful is what keeps many people from creating boundaries in the first place.

But setting boundaries is actually a kind thing to do. Instead of tolerating behavior you don’t like until you get frustrated or end the relationship, it’s about saying, “This is what I need,” and trusting that the other person can respect your wishes and remain in your life.

We’ve all had times, though, when we didn’t set boundaries and should have. Rather than tell a coworker that you can’t keep talking and you need to go back to work, you might have complained to someone else in the office about how your co-worker steals your time. In reality, you just didn’t set a clear boundary.

Or maybe you complain about how your mother constantly critiques your spending habits. But this could be a sign you aren’t setting healthy boundaries with your mom. You might tell her you’re not going to talk about money, or you might simply say, “I have to go,” every time she starts lecturing you about your spending habits.

In these situations, the best thing you can do is address the problem head-on by establishing better boundaries. It’s actually the kindest thing you can do in the long term, and it will be best for your relationship and mental health.
So those are five things to avoid when you’re setting boundaries: don’t use boundaries as a way to try to control someone else’s behavior, don’t automatically announce your boundaries, don’t establish boundaries when your emotions are running high, don’t abandon your boundaries just because someone gets upset, and don’t avoid creating boundaries altogether just because it feels uncomfortable.

Keep in mind that boundaries can be more of an art than a science sometimes. There’s no right or wrong answer. These are your boundaries. It’s OK to be flexible with them at times, and it’s OK to change your mind.

But it’s important to check in with yourself sometimes and consider whether there are any changes you want to make to the boundaries you have in your life.

If you want to learn more about boundaries, listen to episode 54 — “How to Set Boundaries” with therapist Nedra Glover Tawwab. She’s written a book on boundaries, and she offers tons of great tips for setting boundaries in your life.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them! Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who sets boundaries that prevent me from touching his podcast recording equipment because he thinks I’ll break it), Nick Valentin.