

Session 12: Boundary Setting and Management

In a general sense, most people understand that boundaries are spoken and unspoken invisible rules about personal space. However, the challenge becomes that the definition of “personal space” is nebulous – there are so many dimensions that most people are blind to their own boundaries until faced with a violation. This lesson works to expand knowledge of personal space and understanding of other’s personal space. For the sake of clarity think of the following definition

“A boundary is a limit or edge that defines your unique perceptions of what is acceptable and unacceptable during interactions with the world.”

With that definition in mind, how realistic is that definition? What is your experience with that definition, and are there things you would add or take away from the definition?

General categories of boundaries can include:

- Physical Space (how close or far someone is okay with being physically to others)
- Emotional Space (what emotions are expressed to certain people)
- Spiritual Space (what values and meanings are attached to interactions with others)
- Mental Space (what topics are okay to talk about with others)
- Sexual Space (what affections are okay to express with others)
- Relational Space (the connections defined about different relationships)

These are just broad examples, but understanding how someone might have boundaries in one of those categories can be very helpful to navigating different relationships. Think about these questions for each:

- 1) What are examples of boundaries someone might have in this category?
- 2) How could you notice someone has boundaries in this category?
- 3) How could you ask questions to someone about their boundaries in this category?
- 4) What boundaries exist in formal gatherings, and/or shared spaces?

The following pages provide POSSIBLE answers for each category. You can use them as a guide to consider your own boundaries, and the boundaries of those closest to you.

Write your initials next to ones you have in your life, and put a star next to those your intimate partner has, and a check-mark next to those you know others close to you (family, children, coworkers, etc) have in their lives.

The following is an excerpt from a curriculum written and edited by Christopher M. Hall, MSW. The exercise

Physical Space Boundaries:

Examples of physical space boundaries:

- Do not talk to others closer than 3-4 feet away from them
- Hugging others as greeting or farewell
- Noticing and caring how someone shakes hands with you
- Sharing your possessions with others
- Showering daily
- Brushing teeth twice per day
- Keeping clothing neat, folded, ironed
- Making eye contact with others when talking
- Food choices that avoid certain food, or often eat the same things
- Exercising in a specific way (weights, running, sports, etc)

Noticing physical space boundaries in others:

- Someone backing away from you if you get too close
- When touching/hugging someone, they go stiff and do not return the gesture
- Verbal statements about physical boundaries (“can you not stand so close” etc)
- Looks down, avoids eye contact, non-verbal communication
- When someone feels pressured or their boundary is violated, they become angry
- How someone decorates their surroundings (notice style, organization, interests)
- Avoidance of contact, not following through with social gatherings

Questions to ask to learn about other’s physical boundaries:

- “Can I hug you?”
- Asking to borrow someone’s possessions, offering to share your belongings with others
- Stating concerns about hygiene or warning others about certain appearances (“you have something in your teeth,” “did you notice your collar is not tucked in?”)
- Asking about a person’s background, family practices, culture, dietary restrictions
- Learning and asking about culture, intentionally engaging in conversation over culture

Physical boundaries in formal gatherings and/or shared spaces:

- Rules against over-talking, interrupting others
- Keeping chair legs on the floor, not leaning back or putting feet on desks
- No eating/drinking in certain locations or events
- Boundaries about falling behind in payments to a group/organization you belong to
- Whether or not guests are allowed at certain events or locations
- Clothing requirements / uniforms
- Dining rituals / customs at certain restaurants or homes
- Practices and comfort with activities such as alcohol use, drug use, smoking
- Timeliness and lateness acceptance or limitations

The following is an excerpt from a curriculum written and edited by Christopher M. Hall, MSW. The exercise m

Emotional Space Boundaries:

Examples of emotional space boundaries:

- ___ How someone expresses emotions, or avoids expressing certain emotions
- ___ Avoiding talking about a topic
- ___ Displays of grief and sorrow
- ___ Expressions of happiness and joy
- ___ Methods of showing disgust and dismay during situations or over other's behavior
- ___ Individual ability to name and identify different emotional sensations
- ___ External expressions of anger
- ___ Internal nonverbal communication of anger
- ___ Comfort and method of showing love and affection to others

Noticing emotional boundaries in others:

- ___ When someone changes a topic of conversation
- ___ Continuing to want to talk about a topic, resisting attempts to change the discussion
- ___ Tone of voice, and how it displays/expresses emotion
- ___ Outward emotional displays
- ___ Gestures and facial expressions
- ___ Details someone gives when telling a story or talking about an emotion
- ___ Someone not responding or communicating verbally during a topic
- ___ Tone of voice indicating emotional alignment or contention

Questions to ask about emotional boundaries:

- ___ "What does that gesture mean?"
- ___ Asking others how they feel about you, about a situation
- ___ Express your emotions to others
- ___ Work to know someone over time, learning about their emotional experiences
- ___ Ask direct questions such as "what makes you happy in life?" "how do you express grief?"
- ___ Discuss your own background and history growing up and expressing emotions, and learning from parents, adults, peers, media, and others

Emotional boundaries in formal gatherings and/or shared spaces:

- ___ Situationally driven events (funerals, weddings, birthdays, etc) hold expectations for certain emotional expression
- ___ Locations have unspoken rules based on social context (no laughing in a church service, raising your voice in a courtroom)
- ___ Gender roles play into emotional expression and expectations (men not crying in public, expressions of anger and frustration during sporting events might be acceptable for men, women's emotional expression may be accepted or comforted)
- ___ Emotional expressions by children may or may not receive correction based on age, location, and context within the situation (children playing may express a variety of emotions)

The following is an excerpt from a curriculum written and edited by Christopher M. Hall, MSW. The exercise m

Spiritual Space Boundaries:

Examples of spiritual space boundaries:

- ___ Individual moral codes, verbally stated or acted upon
- ___ Group ethical practices, enforced in group policies, discussed, and acted upon
- ___ Values attached to behavior, and how they are verbalized
- ___ Individual or group goals and accomplishments
- ___ Considerations of what someone appreciates, how they express these things or demonstrate them
- ___ Practiced rituals, ceremonies, or customs – sometimes associated with religious activity
- ___ Avoidance of certain practices, behavior, or events
- ___ Personal displays of faith, value, interest (such as hobbies, entertainment choices, etc)

Noticing spiritual boundaries in others:

- ___ Displayed religious symbols or texts
- ___ Decorations of space
- ___ Clothing choice and style
- ___ Listening to other’s expression of philosophy, ideas, and personal statements
- ___ Reading written text, signs, digital posts of articles or information that indicate a person’s values
- ___ Avoidance of topics, discomfort in certain settings or situations
- ___ Observing how someone’s image fits into a setting or circumstance

Questions to ask about spiritual boundaries:

- ___ “What do you value in life?”
- ___ “What gives your life meaning?”
- ___ Discussions of politics, religion, life, cultural experiences
- ___ Learning about culture different from your own
- ___ Talking about doubts in life, listening to others talk about theirs

Spiritual boundaries in formal gatherings and/or shared spaces:

- ___ Encouragement for group values (displays at gyms, public service announcements, religious tracts)
- ___ In religious settings, practices regarding prayer, sermons, music, holidays, etc
- ___ Employee handbooks, policy and procedure manuals
- ___ Posted rules and requirements at public gatherings / social events
- ___ Customs surrounding eating meals and group dining
- ___ Overall etiquette and manners (often regional)
- ___ Group gatherings that celebrate shared interests and activities
- ___ Measurements of success via evaluations, grading, etc.

The following is an excerpt from a curriculum written and edited by Christopher M. Hall, MSW. The exercise

Mental Space Boundaries:

Examples of mental space boundaries:

- ___ Ability, willingness, desire to have a conversation on a topic or subject matter
- ___ Expression of stress (positive or negative)
- ___ Resistance to facts or assertions over a topic, including unwillingness to have critical thinking
- ___ Emotional fatigue over a topic/subject
- ___ Excitement over a subject of discussion
- ___ Preparation of materials on a topic
- ___ Choices in career, studies, work duties
- ___ Ability and desire to think “outside the box” on a topic

Noticing mental boundaries in others:

- ___ Verbal expressions of like, dislike, or discomfort over a topic
- ___ Investment of time, resources, and focus on a topic
- ___ Displays of disinterest in a subject
- ___ Repeating opinions, claims, or general information on a topic as a method of debate
- ___ Sticking to common responses, ideas, talking points on a topic – discomfort at new ideas
- ___ Signs both verbal and nonverbal of being overwhelmed or pressured
- ___ Displays of interest via possessions, symbols, or discussions (different but overlapping with spiritual boundaries where these things are both values and hold interest in ongoing thinking over a subject)

Questions to ask about mental boundaries:

- ___ “What do you think, what is your opinion in this situation?”
- ___ Ask about someone’s experience, learning, schooling, education, knowledge
- ___ Share your experiences and knowledge with others
- ___ Ask to talk about a specific topic/subject
- ___ Offer support for someone’s stress

Mental boundaries in formal gatherings and/or shared spaces:

- ___ Subject content in schools, markers of learning and success
- ___ Evaluations of staff, work, progress
- ___ Public debates over policy issues
- ___ Creative expression such as art, music, etc. (may also demonstrate spiritual boundaries)
- ___ Forbidden topics of conversation, stated or unstated
- ___ Use of certain words, phrases, or content (such as swearing, oppressive language – often overlapped with spiritual boundaries of value for such avoidance)
- ___ Notes on shortcuts, tips, and details on how to do different tasks
- ___ Sign-up sheets for volunteering or contributing

The following is an excerpt from a curriculum written and edited by Christopher M. Hall, MSW. The exercise may

Sexual Space Boundaries:

Examples of sexual space boundaries:

- Comfort with varying levels of affection (holding hands, hugging, kissing, loving gestures)
- Verbal discussions of sexual behavior and intimacy
- Family planning preferences
- Likes and dislikes during intercourse
- Use of and comfort with sexually explicit materials
- Gender specific interactional boundaries (how men show affection to men, women show affection to women, non-intimate partner affection between men and women, etc)
- Rules and ideas about dating and foundations of relationships
- Boundaries regarding sharing of space with an intimate partner and build-up of commitment (living together, marriage, sharing finances)
- Public displays of affection

Noticing sexual boundaries in others:

- Discussions about intimacy including passion, closeness, and commitment
- Avoiding physical touch
- Discomfort in or avoidance of discussing sex and/or intimacy
- Use of birth control medical planning for children and family (pregnancy, adoption, etc)
- Expressions of pain, discomfort, or pleasure during intimate physical contact
- Comfort level expressed verbally or nonverbally regarding opposite or same-sex interactions
- Discussions of dating plans, relationship development, complaints about intimacy issues

Questions to ask about sexual boundaries:

- "What is your sexual line / limit?"
- Discussions of sexual desires
- Negotiation and compromise over differing sexual desires
- Ask about specific desires you are interested in, checking in to see if intimate partner is interested
- Talk about reproductive beliefs, family planning, birth control issues
- Discussions of prior sexual relationships and partnerships
- Forcing information out of someone, using jealousy to justify controlling behavior over sexual issues

Sexual boundaries in formal gatherings and/or shared spaces:

- Marriage ceremonies
- Religious rules about sexual behavior
- Boundaries of showing affection in public places
- Settings that encourage sexual discussions (counseling, marriage

Relational Space Boundaries:

Examples of relational space boundaries:

- Willingness to divide household tasks, negotiate details, assist partner
- Dismissiveness of personal responsibility for household tasks, avoidance of chores
- Shared parental decision making
- Divisive parental orders contradicting other parent
- Financial partnership, making decisions together or via negotiated arrangement
- Financial control and/or deceptiveness in a relationship
- Interactions expected with family members, customs of showing affection
- Communication about shared goals in relationship
- Avoidance of contact or communication with intimate partner
- Patterns and choices regarding ending relationships
- Shared vs individual decision making (over which topics)
- Public displays of affection (both a relational space and sexual space boundary)

Noticing relational boundaries in others:

- How strictly someone adheres to chore roles, ability to change roles, willingness to work together
- Noticing how an intimate partner expresses discomfort with you and your behavior
- What happens when you take action without asking for input or feedback
- Talking about the future, and plans together or within a group
- Direct distancing from you, or behavior behind ending a relationship
- Activities chosen separate from individual partner or group
- Complaints about other's activities in relation to you or your group

Questions to ask about relational boundaries:

- "Which chores are you most comfortable with?"
- "What is your style of parenting? How would you like me to relate to your son/daughter?"
- How do you know other's opinions about relationships so you can support them where they are at?
- Knowing and asking which decisions are best made independently and which are made as a group
- Asking about someone's goals, how they fit into a group, their value for a group

Relational boundaries in formal gatherings and/or shared spaces:

- How someone speaks about their relationships and life within a group space
- Interactions with others in a social group, expectations behind such interactions
- Various rules and things that are accepted in different social situations – spoken and unspoken
- Written rules within an environment that say what can and cannot be done or said
- Ideas about how people should be treated within a certain environment
- Methods of consequence for when someone violates a boundary within a shared space
- How someone is considered when they violate spoken and unspoken rules in a shared space