

Where do we draw the line?

22nd Apr 2017 - D.H

TO EACH THEIR OWN In the many relationships that we deal with in our lives, some are intimate, some not so much. But with each of these, where do we draw the boundaries and give both the parties some 'space'? **Deepa Ballal** explains

One aspect of our lives that can either break us into a zillion pieces, throwing us into the dungeons of depression and remorse or turn us into individuals flying high on our self-esteem, is our ability to have healthy relationships. Many a time, we find ourselves in situations wherein we feel extremely uncomfortable, but are not in a position to express the same, for fear of being rejected or ridiculed. To be treated as a doormat or an equal in any relationship lies primarily in our hands. It's time to delineate those boundaries in relationships.

"Even without realising it, we all create boundaries in our relationships. When we're happy to shake hands with one friend, but are ready to hug another, we have defined a boundary. When a child listens to a parent, but not a grandparent, she's defined a boundary. When we're happy to have long conversations with our mothers but not with our mothers-in-law, we have defined a boundary. A boundary is not a *lakshman rekha* saying thus far, no further. It's a line representing how much we are willing to extend ourselves to accommodate the needs of another person," explains Dr Vijay Nagaswami, author and Chennai-based psychiatrist.

Staying guarded

Perhaps a quick peek into Robert Frost's poem *Mending wall*, will throw more insights. In it, he writes, "*Good fences make good neighbours.*" Do they, though? Yes, say researchers. The day my uncle built a concrete wall dividing our property and his, there indeed was a strong message he was sending across. It was pretty clear. We knew where our freedom ended, and his began. Later, he placed potted plants on the wall, and we knew for once, that now, even climbing it was ruled out. Even when the branches of trees, rooted in our garden, spilled over to his (now clearly marked) territory, they were duly ordered to be cut. Over the years, I would say that the relationship has neither soured nor sweetened — it has merely existed.

The kind of wall or fences one builds for oneself, more often defines not just one's equation with the other, but the person itself. This holds true in the case of relationships too. "We don't create them. We define and refine them. This we do by being mindful and conscious of how much we can extend ourselves in



Boundaries in intimate relationship (as summarised by Ajanta De, counsellor)

- Be okay with saying no and be okay to hear no as well.
- Don't share too much too soon.
- Recognise your own needs. Discounting them and taking responsibility for your partner's happiness will lead to lapsing of boundaries and may later result in resentment and conflict.
- Acknowledge that your boundaries are different from those of others.



our close relationships. And knowing how much of extension we are capable of, we can have tight boundaries where we extend ourselves minimally, or lax boundaries where we extend ourselves more," says Dr Vijay.

While Ajanta De, counsellor and co-founder of InnerSight Counselling and Training Centre, Bengaluru, says even

defining boundaries is hard, as they are unique for each individual. "Simply put, it denotes what is acceptable or unacceptable and these parameters are something you decide," she elaborates.

According to Dr Vipul Rastoji, consultant, Neuropsychiatry, at Medanta, Gurugram, one starts defining these boundaries in the very initial phase of

interaction with another person. "It is similar to making a first impression of a person. As the interaction develops, the boundaries can become both rigid or flexible, and it will be defined by the social space (of the interaction) and the personalities of the people involved," he says.

Healthy boundaries in intimacy

"Giving the other person the freedom to feel whatever they want and not dictating terms as to how s/he should feel is the first step towards creating healthy boundaries," says Monisha Srichand, director, TalkItOver Counselling Services, Bengaluru. "Having a healthy boundary basically means being in a position to take responsibility for one's actions and not blaming others for how you feel," she adds. More often than not, people fall into two categories, the ones who blame others for everything and the ones who blame themselves for everything. But with strong boundaries, one learns to be more assertive and less complaining.

Counsellors find that in many instances, one of the biggest markers of someone struggling to set boundaries is this inability to say no, which could be stemming from a fear of rejection or abandonment. "Once a person can work through this fear and is able to identify and communicate his/her boundaries, it will most likely lead to feelings of empowerment and healthy self-esteem," reiterates Ajanta.

Incidentally, when people get into a romantic relationship, they share the deepest of thoughts and the most intimate moments of their lives. "And the boundaries here get blurred, when they tend to lose not just themselves, but their individuality too. Both ought to have their own lives, pursue their own interests," says Monisha. This invariably jogs her memory to Khalil Gibran's beautiful lines — *But let there be spaces in your togetherness.*

Married for 18 years, Arun Kumar thinks understanding one's spouse and

respecting each other's boundaries is what earns one the title of being "happily married." While Shalini Pais feels the role of communication to be at the helm. "But there have to be lines drawn and respected by all. The beauty and quality of every good relationship is having a good understanding, especially of the unspoken words," is her simple explanation.

What if we don't have any boundaries? "Without boundaries, the world will be chaotic, with no thought given to a person's feelings, and life will be miserable for most," says Dr Vipul. He reasons that with no boundaries, the comfort level of the person is not defined. As a result, some people may make their comfort bubble too restricted and will struggle to adapt, while some may leave it too wide and not be considered as serious people in work or personal space.

Even relationships need an update, refresh or the reset button. An abusive relationship especially is most often marked by a distinct lack of boundaries. "But it is never too late," says Meera Ravi, family counsellor and founder of Prerana Academy, "to build boundaries." Counsellors in unison believe ignoring, silent treatment and showing great hostility towards others help, as one is not taking responsibility for one's actions. Mustering the courage to say, "stop it," goes a long way. But the reasons for the weak boundaries and why the abuse happened in the first place have to be analysed. Speaking up, reporting it and not tolerating it should be the steps in dealing with it.

"If we don't have boundaries, we will end up over-extending ourselves for others and burn ourselves out," says Dr Vijay. He briefly and aptly sums it up by saying that it's not a question of "do we need boundaries, it is a question of 'Are we conscious of the boundaries we have?'" Let's hit the refresh button, define those boundaries, and get the life we so rightfully deserve to live to the fullest.

FEEDBACK

You can write to us at: dhliving@deccanherald.co.in or **LIVING**, c/o Deccan Herald, #75 M G Road, Bengaluru-560001