

5 Lessons in Setting Boundaries that Every Caregiver Must Learn

<https://www.daughterhood.org/5-lessons-in-setting-boundaries-that-every-caregiver-must-learn/>

It seems like I've been exhausted for 20 years. In just the last few months I've been waking up to the realization that this fatigue is the direct result of much-too-loose personal and professional boundaries. I've spent so much time and energy in my life doing things that I can't or don't want to do –that I am just plain tired.

There's an epidemic of "*can't say no*" among the women I know. But, I think it's especially difficult for daughters – to say no to a parent who wants to move in, to say no to unreasonable requests from siblings or paid caregivers, or to bow out of community obligations that are just too much on top of caregiving demands.

As a caregiver, it's essential that you become an expert in setting boundaries. Boundaries are the flip side of asking for help. And if you can do both... if you can learn to say, "No" and "I need your help," you might just survive this experience.

It's all well and good for caregiving experts to say, "make sure you take care of yourself" but they skip a step when they give this advice. Because, let me tell you this. It's impossible to take care of yourself if you don't have good boundaries. But, just in case you're like me and it's never occurred to you that you might have a teeny tiny problem with boundaries, I am just dying to tell you the lessons I've learned over the last few months of working on this.

Lesson 1: Just because someone asks you to do something doesn't mean you should do it.

People are going to make unreasonable demands – that's what people do. But here's the thing: **Just because someone asks you to do something doesn't mean you should do it.**

This may seem obvious on the surface but you'd be surprised how many of us behave as if we must respond to every demand with an outpouring of our time and energy. I've noticed my own tendency to turn requests into objects of resentment because I immediately assume each one is a "should do."

Recently, I was composing a defensive, angry email in response to a colleague's request. Essentially I was saying, "How dare you ask me to do this... can't you SEE how busy and tired I am, and how big this thing is you are asking me to do??!"

But then, by the grace of God, I paused (pausing is *always* grace-inspired). And when I did, a huge blessing happened in the form of this idea: Rather than an email saying, “I can’t do that,” what if I sent an email that said, “Here’s what I *can* do (instead).”

Turns out that what I could do — as opposed to what I was asked to do — was 100% satisfactory.

So the next time someone asks you to do something that you can’t or don’t want to do, just try thinking about what you can or do want to do — even if it’s less than or different from the original ask — and offer that as your response! I think this can be a very powerful form of self-love.

Lesson 2: It’s not your job to make everyone else comfortable all the time.

My biggest confusion in life, I think is deciding whether something is a necessary obligation or a problem that isn’t mine to solve. In the addiction recovery literature, solving problems that aren’t yours is called “enabling.”

Here’s an example. If you live near your mom but your big sister lives far away, she could be feeling helpless and guilty. So, to ease her feelings of guilt and helplessness, she might be demanding a daily update from you that’s difficult and time consuming to provide. While you may want to ease your sister’s difficult emotions, you can’t agree to add work to what you’re already doing just for that purpose.

And this is important: If she’s annoyed with you for not emailing or calling her every day with an update, her annoyance isn’t an indication of your incompetence, it’s a sign of her discomfort — which (even if you are sympathetic) is NOT your problem.

You’ll develop good boundaries only to the extent that you can get in the habit of noticing the difference between what’s your problem and what isn’t.

Lesson 3: Guilt won’t kill you.

Guilt is normal. Unless you’re an enlightened being, you’ll feel guilt as a caregiver. But also know this: guilt is the ego’s sneakiest disguise. Guilt will keep you trapped in a false world of heroic “should”.

You have so much to offer the world and if you’re agreeing to energy-sapping demands that run contrary to what you want and can do, you’re siphoning off the very energy that makes you an effective citizen of the world.

So, acknowledge guilt when you feel it, let it roll over you and then move on. Because, if guilt is motivating you to say yes when you want or need to say no, then it’s limiting

your potential to have the impact you were born to have.

Lesson 4: Set boundaries with yourself.

Treat your superego – the one who wants everything to be perfect — like the person who just asked you to volunteer for a big job at your kids' school. You gotta respond to this voice in your head just like you would an actual person who is making suggestions that require a firm “no.”

I have to warn you though — this voice is very insidious. I call my voice “Tiffany” – don't ask me why, I don't know exactly. But, yesterday, Tiffany suggested that it would be fantastic if the house were decked out for Christmas like never before.... She showed me some pictures of what my house could look like during the holiday and she even photo-shopped my kids into the picture. They were sitting around a brightly lit fireplace with cocoa mugs and ...

She's very persuasive, this Tiffany. She should get a job at an advertising agency. But, I am really clear with her that I don't have the energy to realize this perfect picture because I care so much more about writing this blog. So today you're getting this blog while my house sits undecorated.

Most Important Lesson 5: Your being is more important than your doing.

Whatever you're doing to please other people is only temporary relief for that deep feeling of uneasiness about yourself that almost everybody has to some extent.

I've often felt that I need to do more in order to make up for something I feel is lacking in who I am. That if I do more that'll help everyone get past the general concern they all must have about my worthiness.

But, actually, this is complete fiction. Nothing you do – whether good, bad, or great, can change the fundamental awesomeness of who you are. You are enough without DOING anything. This is the lesson that nearly every spiritual tradition and practice teaches – so take some time every day to try and absorb that truth and remember.....

YOU are enough.

*You viewed this article on the Caregivers Nova Scotia website www.CaregiversNS.org. For more information, contact us toll-free at 1.877.488.7338.