

Boundaries and Relationships



Boundaries: What and Why?

Like the geographic boundaries that mark the end of one state or city and the beginning of the next, personal boundaries are the mental, emotional, and physical limits we set in our relationships with others.

Boundaries clarify our identities and our interactions with others.

- They help us sort out our personal lives:
 - what we need from ourselves and others to keep us functioning well;
 - who we must pay attention to and who we can let go;
 - how we are feeling about something and why.
- They identify appropriate limits for different relationships.
 - You would not talk to or interact with a stranger the way you would with a friend;
 - or with a friend the way you would with a supervisor;

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- or with a supervisor the way you would with a brother or sister.

If you have lived a long time in a cult or high-demand group, you may be accustomed to sharply defined boundaries dictated by leaders, with your personal needs and preferences deemed unimportant.

- Members are “in.” All are required to get along with, perhaps “love” every other member.
- The relationship of the member to the group supersedes all other relationships.
- Leaders and those “above” are deferred to. All their questions must be answered, and their orders obeyed.
- Those “below” must answer to those “above.”
- Disagreement or questioning is not allowed.
- Close—or any—friendships and intimacy (except with the leaders) are generally discouraged.
- Nonmembers are “out,” and communication with them is kept to a minimum or even forbidden.

3.8.1 Sales/Customers
3.8.2 Colleagues
3.8.3 Supervisors and supervisees
3.8.4 Teacher-Student Relationships

In mainstream American society,

boundaries depend on specific circumstances such as place, organization, age, or status. The descriptions here of different kinds of boundaries are broad outlines to provide general information, not prescribed rules to follow.

Some generally accepted boundaries apply throughout the country. No one is entitled to

- attack you physically or sexually, or even touch you against your will;
- abuse you emotionally or verbally;
- take your money or possessions without your consent;
- coerce you as an adult to do something you don't want to do;
- infringe upon your legal rights (see [Rights](#)).

These boundaries may cause you some confusion for a while. If, for example, in the group you were used to

- taking what you needed without bothering to ask, because everyone "owned" everything; now you're expected to ask.
- expecting immediate, unquestioning compliance from those "below" you;

now you're expected to listen to subordinates and respond to their concerns.

- exerting yourself without reservation to accomplish assigned tasks; now, you're expected to reserve time and energy to take care of personal needs and responsibilities, as well.

Occupational and Employment Boundaries

Occupational boundaries are the limits and responsibilities connected with one's occupation or profession. The term refers to

- knowing the limits of your qualifications and abilities (what you can do well and what you can't).
- abiding by behaviors and activities appropriate for your work. (It would be very surprising, for instance, if a shoe salesman wanted to look inside your mouth; but it would be equally surprising if a dentist did *not* look inside your mouth.)
- behaving appropriately on the job (see [Your Basic Responsibilities](#) for a detailed description).

- Complying with ethical standards for practicing your profession (such as respecting confidential information).

We are all responsible for knowing and observing the boundaries of our occupations, so it is important to clarify boundaries before you take a job.

- What are the specific tasks of this job? If you are caring for children, for instance, will you be expected to cook their dinner? Do their laundry?
- What hours will you work? Will there be overtime or on-call requirements?
- Who will supervise you? When you need help, whom do you ask?
- How much and how often will you be paid?

A potential employer who objects to questions like these or doesn't answer them raises a "caution" flag. Good employers are willing to explain and respect these kinds of boundaries.

If an employer oversteps boundaries

If an employer requires tasks that aren't part of the job, demands longer or different hours, or does not meet payment obligations, for instance, it's up

to you to protect yourself.

- In a genuine emergency, it would make sense to help out if you can.
- But if, for example, you are constantly being asked to pick up the dry cleaning on your way to work, or your paycheck is coming later and later, you are in danger of being exploited and may want to take steps to enforce the boundaries, even though doing so may put your job at risk.
 - **“My schedule has changed and I can’t [work late, pick up the dry cleaning, etc.] today.”** Note that you’re not obligated to explain in detail, although if you want you can always say you’ve taken on another job or are going to a class.
 - **“You’ve not been paying me on time, and it’s causing me serious financial problems. I need the check today.”**

Employers’ boundary violations may be personal rather than job related. Some might amount to [harassment](#). In other cases, you might have to deal with [unwanted touching](#).

Confronting an employer about these problems may be difficult, even scary; but the alternative is to expose yourself to continuing, and possibly escalating exploitation and the accompanying emotional and/or financial turmoil. The best solution if problems like these recur may be to find another job.

Personal Boundaries

Personal boundaries are those that you set for yourself as an individual. Personal boundaries may be

- Physical
 - What foods do you like best?
What foods do you refuse to eat?
 - What exercise and other activities best keep you healthy and well? And what do you dislike and stay away from?
 - Whom will you touch or caress? Whom do you allow to touch or caress you?

- Emotional
 - What situations and people do you like and seek out?
Dislike and avoid?
 - Whom do you trust? Try not to confuse "liking" with "trust." You may find that

you dislike, but trust,
someone, or that you like,
but distrust, someone else.

- What in your immediate environment makes you comfortable or uncomfortable?
 - Can you say “no” to an unreasonable request?
 - Can you tell if your demands on others are reasonable?
- Mental
 - How close to reality is your picture of yourself?
 - How do you make decisions?
 - How best do you learn and think?

Finding and setting personal boundaries requires serious self-examination, and, when necessary, sharing the results with others. A good first step is to become aware of your personal style.

Personal Style

Personal style is each person’s way of looking at and reacting to the world.

Personal style strongly influences

- where we set our boundaries,
- what we say and do,
- how we communicate, and
- the relationships we build.

There is no “right” or “wrong” personal

style, just a host of possible combinations of a wide variety of characteristics. Among other characteristics, people may be

- outgoing and social types, who love to be with lots of others; or quiet types, who like to be alone or with one or two friends;
- cautious, finding it hard to adopt new ways of thinking about or doing things; or flexible and readily open to new ideas or activities;
- casual and given to last-minute planning, or organized and preferring to plan well ahead;
- worriers, heavily focused on negative possibilities; or enthusiasts, constantly expecting the best;
- confident and comfortable that they are equal to their tasks, or anxious and uncertain about whether they will succeed in their undertakings.

People may change their personal styles over the years as they grow and change.

Enforcing Personal Boundaries

From time to time, someone may intrude, intentionally or unintentionally, on your personal boundaries. It's up to you to

inform them and enforce the boundary.

Unwanted touching

Unwanted touching is not always sexual touching. You may be uncomfortable with a “motherly” hug, or an unnecessary grasp at the elbow. You may not know until someone touches you in a particular way that you don’t like that touch. If you do not want to be touched,

- You may not need to say anything, just move yourself out of reach or remove the unwanted hand or arm.
- Or you can simply say **“Please don’t [do whatever it is],”** or **“I prefer that you don’t [do that]”** or **“I don’t like it when you [whatever it is].”**

Emotional intrusions

You need not accept an intimacy you don’t want; say something like

- **“I don’t want to discuss this with you,”** or
- **“I feel uncomfortable listening to this. Let’s talk about something else,”** or
- **“I’m just not interested in taking this any farther.”**

You may feel uncomfortable, guilty, or fearful about clarifying personal boundaries, a legacy of involvement in the cult, where asserting yourself drew punishment. But, feelings aside, you have a right to protect yourself.

Similarly, if someone warns you off their personal boundary, you need not feel guilty or offended. However, an explanation may sometimes be in order, depending on your [relationship](#).

You might also like to look at some other ways of [saying "no"](#) in the section on that topic.



Relationships

Relationship is a broad term that includes all kinds of connections with others. You can have a relationship that is

- healthy without being close.
An employee can have a healthy relationship with a supervisor, or a salesperson a healthy relationship with a customer.
- close without being healthy.
Relationships between spouses, or between parents and children, can be severely unbalanced or conflicted.
- voluntary or involuntary.
Neighbors, co-workers, and

customers are not necessarily all people we enjoy being or working with.

- with an individual, or with a group or organization.

People in high-demand groups and cults may be pressured into relationships that violate privacy, distort feelings, and/or are even traumatic.

- People who leave such groups may have difficulty forming healthy relationships or may be uncertain about forming their own relationships.
- Some individuals, deeply harmed by negative experiences in the cult, may want to avoid relationships altogether.
- Some may be so accustomed to control by others that they fall into new cult-like or abusive relationships. They may not realize that the relationship is abusive; or they may think that all relationships are like this; or that, for some reason, they deserve the abuse.
- Some people may encounter many difficulties in relationships because of uncertainties about how to

go about making and
keeping those relationships
healthy.

Yet we human beings are social beings. We need the companionship of others. We need stimulation, balance, confidence, and emotional support to cope with the realities (both good and bad) of life. It is unrealistic to expect relationships to be perfect, and some relationships not of our choosing—such as those with family members or supervisors—may be quite difficult. But all of us can realistically hope to form some healthy relationships.

Here are some ideas and information about relationships to help you feel more comfortable about your interactions with others.

Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships are those in which participants mutually trust each other, agree on boundaries, and communicate well with each other. Parties in a healthy relationship need not be equal, but they

- can listen to each other and express themselves honestly,
- give and receive support as needed and fitting,
- respect each other, and
- agree on the level of intimacy that best suits the

relationship.

Although sharing is important, healthy relationships don't require equality of "give" and "take." A healthy relationship

- does not demand more than you are willing to give;
- does not insistently give more than you want to receive;
- may be inherently unequal, such as parent to infant; and
- may be occasionally unequal, as when you are cared for during an illness.

You can have a healthy relationship with an adversary or competitor.

- Members of Congress may oppose each other's legislative positions, but may interact cordially in the gym or on social occasions.
- Players on competing teams may be friends off the playing field.

Caring Relationships

Caring relationships are those that confirm our individual worth, accepting us for who we are, and not because of any exterior circumstance like wealth or current personal position. Every human being needs to feel cared for and valuable. And every human being needs

to care for and value others. Intimacy can develop only within a caring relationship, fostered by mutual compatibility and growing trust.

We can form caring relationships with

- a supervisor or teacher who supports and helps us advance
- a neighbor with whom we share local concerns and whose house we watch while he's away
- friends
- family members

Love may be part of a healthy or caring relationship, but not all love relationships are healthy.

- One may love one's spouse or parents or children, but have a strained or stormy relationship with them.
- It is possible to love someone, even though anger or grief may make you think you don't.
- Sometimes it is love that actually makes a relationship stormy, as when parents oppose a son's or daughter's involvement in—or departure from—a cultic group.

Maintaining Relationships

Because both people and situations are subject to change, most relationships are “works in progress,” changing over time to reflect changes in the participants’ lives and personalities.

- An infant grows up.
- Your or a friend’s interests change and you grow apart.
- Tensions arise that need to be addressed.
- One of the parties moves to a faraway part of the country.

Every relationship may feel a strain from time to time. That doesn’t mean it’s over. You can use **communication skills** to share and discuss sensitive issues, ask questions, and develop ways to maintain or repair a relationship.

Quick relationship health check

A quick health check of a relationship might include questions like these:

- Is the relationship the way you want it to be? If not, why not?
- Are there conflicts? What about? How might you try to resolve the conflicts?
- Notice your own feelings:
Do you look forward to being with this person (or

these people)? Find it boring to be with them? Actually not want to be with or talk to them?

- Notice their behavior to you: Do they return calls, texts, and emails? Do they suggest get-togethers? Do they cancel get-togethers?
- Are you noticing changes? Are you comfortable about the changes? How do you feel about discussing the changes with the other person? Is there an apparent reason for the changes, such as illness or other crisis?

If you decide to end a relationship, try to do it as respectfully as possible.

Sometimes there's no need to be explicit—the relationship draws to a natural end.

Other times, you may feel the need to explain. There are some special considerations if you are [ending a dating relationship](#).

Risks in Relationships

Caring about someone else makes us vulnerable. When relationships falter or fail, we can be hurt. Sometimes we can repair a relationship that's in trouble, sometimes not. Sometimes, we may decide just to let it go. Sometimes it makes sense to get professional

[counseling](#) about a difficult or conflicted relationship, or to help us through the aftermath of a bad relationship.

Following are a few of the ways relationships can hurt us.

Dependency

We all depend on others in particular ways or to a certain extent, and sometimes that need may temporarily be extreme. We may have to rely on a family member for temporary financial support or to care for our children, for example.

But when you rely on someone else to the extent that you are unable to function without that person, the relationship is seriously unbalanced.

- You are vulnerable to exploitation, even abuse, in this kind of relationship.
- Your personal growth may be stunted or warped in directions not of your choice.
- Your choice of friends, activities, or even occupations may be limited or controlled.

If you find yourself more and more needing to follow someone else's directions, it's important to ask yourself why that is happening and just how

controlling it is. If you cannot restore a healthy balance, you may need to consider breaking off the relationship.

Rejection

Rejection is always painful for the person being rejected, and it may be painful for the person doing the rejecting.

- Even comparatively impersonal rejections, like not getting a job you want, are painful.
- It's far more painful
 - to hear from someone you like she's not interested in you, or
 - to hear from a parent that you've failed him.

Ironically, people sometimes postpone an act of rejection because it is hard for them to fire an employee or tell a friend they're moving on to other friendships. But delay may make a bad situation worse. Ultimately, if it isn't working, letting a person know is kinder than dodging the issue.

If you've been rejected, it's best to accept the rejection, mourn your loss, and move on. It's entirely acceptable to feel sad, and it may be constructive to think about what happened and why, not to find fault, but to understand, and perhaps to draw lessons for the future.

Betrayal of trust

Betrayal of trust may attack your core self-confidence and make you question your own judgment. Whether the betrayer is

- a friend who spreads abroad a private confidence,
- an employee who steals from the company, or
- a con man who uses you for his own ends,

the emotional impact may be so painful that you find yourself unable to trust anyone or unable to trust in certain ways for a long time to come. This is one reason that it's important to move slowly as a relationship develops, and not let yourself be rushed or pressured into situations you're not comfortable with. It's not unreasonable to be cautious, and it's entirely reasonable to be doubly cautious when someone is pressuring you or trying to justify a "shortcut" in a business or social situation.

There is seldom a quick recovery from major betrayals of trust, especially if you are betrayed by someone such as a parent, therapist, or clergyman in a position of trust. It is entirely reasonable for people in this situation to be extremely cautious about forming trusting relationships.

Relationships and Boundaries



There are many kinds of relationships. For example, not all relationships are voluntary. We don't choose our families of origin. We may choose a neighborhood, but not our neighbors. We may choose a place of employment or a university, but not our co-workers or fellow-students. It's not necessary to like everyone, but we can benefit from understanding and respecting the boundaries that fit the relationship.

Relationship boundaries may

- differ in different cultures or different parts of the country;
- reflect differences in age, or social or economic status;
- shift as a relationship changes. (A co-worker may become your supervisor. A teacher may become your colleague. The neighbor down the street may become your mother-in-law.)
- conflict because of differing perspectives about where a boundary is: A friend may feel entitled to interrogate you about matters you don't want to share; someone you are dating

may press for a permanency
that you don't want.

There is an immense amount of Internet advice about relationships. However, the overwhelming bulk of that advice focuses exclusively on romantic relationships, which are important, but far from comprehensive. Following is a general guide that describes some basic relationships and their boundaries.

Strangers

Strangers are the people we pass on the sidewalk, share an office elevator with, and sit next to on the bus.

- In most urban areas, people avoid eye contact with strangers and seldom exchange more than the most perfunctory remarks: for instance, "Nice day, isn't it?" if there is a long wait for the bus.
- In some cities and towns, it's customary to make eye contact and nod.
- If you do get into a conversation with a stranger, it's advisable to avoid giving out personal information, such as your name or place of work.

Casual Acquaintances

Casual acquaintances are people we frequently encounter in the course of the day's activities, like the mail carrier, the bus driver, and the neighbors. Some acquaintances are people we seldom see, while others are people we see regularly. Some relationships that start as casual acquaintances—like those with neighbors or fellow students—may grow to become friendships, while others will just remain casual.

In casual relationships,

- Boundaries are high. One doesn't
 - share personal information,
 - borrow money from or lend it to each other, or
 - believe everything the other person says.
- There is no need to answer casual acquaintances' questions about your past, personal preferences, plans, or in fact any questions you don't feel like answering.
- It's helpful to notice and respect others' boundaries.
 - Someone may have lunch with you every day at work, but not accept your invitation for a weekend activity.

- Or he may accept an invitation from you, but not offer an invitation in return.
- You, of course, can do the same.

Casual acquaintances may grow into friends. This is usually a slow process, starting with some mutual interest. Trust grows gradually with time and experience, and boundaries shift in the same manner.

Groups

Groups are basic units of society that form around common interests. Although people who have left a cult or high-demand organization may be suspicious and distrustful of organized groups, involvement in a group can be both safe and rewarding. Here are few guidelines for participating in groups:

- *You're not obliged to participate in every activity, unless that's a clear precondition for joining. If you need to miss an activity, it's polite to explain the problem to the appropriate person:*

"I work evenings, so I can only attend weekend meetings."

- *Feel free to decline tasks that you can't reasonably*

commit to:

“I’ll help with the party, but I can’t afford to contribute to the costs.”

- *Share your opinions,* especially if you feel strongly, in ways that accord with the group’s procedures:

“I’ve listened to the arguments in favor of this proposal, and there certainly are advantages. But I think many members—including me—would find it too expensive. So I will vote against it.”

- *Take your time about developing friendships* with people you meet through the group. Wait until you’ve shared a few projects before you reach out for greater intimacy.
- *Pay attention to feelings of discomfort.* If anything about the group makes you uncomfortable, figure out what it is and why it bothers you. Then you can make a decision whether it’s trivial or whether you need to take action. Sometimes the discomfort has little to do with the group, but

relates to you.

- *A group may be undesirable even if it's not a cult.*

Groups may be irresponsible, mismanaged, or simply not what you are looking for. Consider dropping out if you find that

- there is undue pressure to take on more chores or otherwise increase your level of commitment;
- group activities cost more than you can comfortably afford;
- you don't enjoy the group's members or activities; and/or
- leadership is irresponsible, incompetent, or careless.

Friends

Friends are people one chooses to be with. Friends have common interests and like to do things together. Friends enjoy each other's company and share personal information, such as what kind of car they might buy, or where they're thinking of going on vacation.

- Friends have enough in common that their recommendations about restaurants, doctors, cars, movies, and other items or services are likely to be

helpful to each other.

- As friendship progresses, friends may have intense conversations, including disagreements, about topics like politics, religion, or their favorite sports teams.
- Friendships are often connected to different activities. One set of friends may play soccer together; another may be fellow students; and another may be co-workers.
- People may have friends who dislike each other. Not all friends have to be friends for all occasions.
- Friends may exchange gifts or favors, such as birthday treats, or rides from each other to events.
- Depending on place and circumstance, it may or may not be OK to borrow from or lend money to friends.
- Some people may be “friends” as the result of common ties—long years of acquaintance and a shared history, rather than personal preference.

Intimate Friends

Intimate friends share high levels of trust

and compatibility:

- They share deep feelings with each other, exposing their vulnerabilities and fears.
- They freely ask each other for help and support.
- They freely offer help and support to each other.
- Close friends may have a shared history and memories that bring them together, even though their interests and personalities are very different.
- Close friendships usually evolve gradually from among the pool of acquaintances and friends.
- Most people have very few, perhaps only one or two, truly close friends.
- Close friends might hug each other when they meet and part.

True intimacy comes slowly. People sometimes try to rush it, sharing personal information with others they don't know well; but doing this can cause misunderstandings and hurt. At the same time, if you have left a setting where intimacy is not allowed, it may seem not worth the effort to achieve intimacy. But the reward of intimacy is that you are no longer alone. There is someone you can

turn to at all times, whether happy, sad, or just plain hard to bear; and someone who turns to you the same way.

Dating Relationships

Dating is a relationship with someone who is potentially or actually a romantic interest. A dating relationship explores the potential for a couple to move from casual acquaintance or friendship to close, perhaps enduring, intimacy in a sexual relationship.

- The short-term goal of dating is to do something pleasant together and enjoy each other's company.
- The long-term purpose is to find a companion for a social and sexual union in a committed, exclusive relationship.
- A dating relationship that becomes romantic is not healthy unless both people are legally and emotionally available to form an intimate union.
- Dating is a highly personal process that depends heavily on both parties' personal preferences and situations, as well as on the environment they live in.

Dating may be a bewildering, even intimidating, process for people who have

been involved in groups where intimate relationships are discouraged and sexual activity -- from abstinence to promiscuity -- is dictated by the leadership. If you have such feelings, you are not alone. Dating is a confusing and challenging activity for millions, hence the multitude of advice columns in local and online publications about various aspects of dating. The following suggestions may help you identify your preferences and clarify your thoughts about dating.

Dating prospects

Meeting people you'd like to date may not be easy, especially if you are shy or don't feel confident about yourself.

- Look for people with the same interests or occupations. Many dating advice experts suggest hobby groups or volunteer activities because you are likely to meet compatible people through these activities.
 - If you are uncomfortable in group settings, don't bother trying this. The discomfort will make it very hard for you to be yourself.
 - Doing something with a small group of four to six people,

however, might make it easier for you to relax and feel safe in the presence of a potential date.

- You can focus on other ways to meet people with similar interests—at work, in your neighborhood, in classes, and so on.
- People who are friends of your friends are likely to have similar viewpoints and interests.
- Some ideas about the kind of person you'd like to date—outgoing or quiet, artistic or scientific, religious or agnostic—can help you limit the field.
- But excessive concern about physical attributes like tall or short, dark or blond, or external characteristics like occupation or education, can arbitrarily exclude someone you might really enjoy knowing.

Blind dates are those arranged by a third party, usually a mutual friend, who thinks the two of you will hit it off.

- This is not an easy way to meet people and may put you in not one, but two

awkward situations: ending an unsuccessful date, and telling a friend how wrong he or she was.

- If a friend wants you to meet someone, try to arrange for an introduction at a party or in a small-group setting. In that setting, you have the option to talk as long as you like or move on and talk with someone else in a natural, unforced manner.

Internet dating sites have a mixed record. They are becoming more and more popular as a way of meeting others, but it's easy to embellish—or even fake—an online self.

- Internet profiles may be rosier than the reality—ignoring, for instance, the existence of a spouse.
- In contrast, many happily married couples report that they found each other through Internet dating sites.
- Most of the reputable sites charge a fee that can range from a small monthly amount to a larger, one-time fee for matching up your profile.
- You can find specialized

sites, such as those for people wanting to meet others of the same religion, or large general sites.

- Sites with the word *adult* in the title are for people primarily interested in sexual activity. If you try this method of meeting people, carefully review the site's policies and fees before you commit.

If you make a connection through an Internet site, set up a first meeting in a well-lit, centrally located place like a popular coffee-shop, so that you will not have to disclose your address or phone number before the personal encounter.

First dates. Unless they are brief get-togethers over coffee, first dates are best if they include a planned activity that also leaves opportunities for talking: a lunch, a walk, or a bike ride; a trip to a museum or zoo. Movies and concerts don't give you much opportunity to get to know each other, since most of the time you're focusing on the show.

- Dating is as much about choosing as it is about being chosen.
- On a first date, note whether or not you're having fun, how you feel about your date's

appearance and behavior,
what you are learning about
the person.

- No need to make momentous decisions—just one about whether or not you'd like to get to know this person better.
- For ideas about what to talk about and how to size up your date, see [Conversations](#).
- For ideas about discouraging unwanted touching, see [Enforcing Personal Boundaries](#).

Dating and money

In some sections of the country, paying for a date is still the man's responsibility. In other places, the "rules" are not so clear. Not only are women likely to be earning as much as men, but also not all dates are heterosexual. Who is paying can become a source of tension if there's a misunderstanding. If you don't know how you should respond, make sure that you can afford whatever cost you're likely to incur:

- If you issue the invitation, be prepared to pay all the costs, or
- If you need to share costs, make that clear when you issue the invitation.

“It would be fun to go to that concert with you. If you want to go, we could each buy our own ticket, and I’ll cover the parking.”

- If you accept an invitation, be prepared—and offer—to pay your share of the costs. The resulting discussion—or lack of discussion—can tell you a lot about your date.

Dating and sex

The days when couples were routinely supposed to abstain from sexual intercourse unless they are married are gone. While some people still adhere to this standard, when and whether to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage has become a personal choice. Sex is a powerful instinct; and if you are sexually attracted to someone, it can be difficult to control the desire to move forward. However, this is not a choice to make lightly.

- A sexual relationship can blind you to significant problems with your partner.
- Sexually transmitted diseases are widespread, and carriers may not even know they are infected.
- Read the section on [Sex and Health](#) for details, and

take care to protect
yourself during sexual
encounters.

Breaking off a dating relationship

Ending a relationship may not be easy; but once you've decided that this person is not the right one, the sooner you do it, the better. Prolonging a relationship that isn't going anywhere is keeping both of you from finding better prospects. Breaking off the relationship will hurt, whether you are the "dumper" or the one being dumped; but the sooner it's done, the less it hurts. Here are a few suggestions for minimizing the hurt:

If you are the one who's ending the relationship:

- Do it in person.
- Do it as kindly as possible:
"I'm clear that continuing to see you isn't right for either of us," not "You are just too wimpy for me!"
- Use **"I" Messages** to explain: **"When I'm with you, I feel like I'm constantly trying to fit somewhere I don't belong,"** or even **"I just don't feel the kind of attraction for you that I want to have with someone."**

- Let the other person respond. Listen to what she has to say, but stay with your decision. **“You may be right about all that, but I still feel _____.”**
- Be careful about “second chances.” You may already have given the relationship a second, or even a third chance.
- Be careful, too, about shifting from a romantic relationship to being friends. It can be done, but only if neither party is secretly hoping to renew the romance.
- It isn’t over till it’s over. As long as you are talking on the phone, texting, or emailing, the relationship isn’t truly ended.
- Don’t be surprised if you feel sad about this. You may feel both that it was the right thing to break up, and that you’ve lost a friend; or you may feel guilty about hurting someone.

If you’re the one who was dumped:

- Accept the rejection. You might be able to pressure

her into continuing the relationship, but you'll both know it's under compulsion, not really a free choice.

- Ask why and listen to the response, however painful. You may learn something useful about yourself— although that may not be immediately apparent.
- Feel free to respond to any explanations, but try to sort out realities from hurt feelings. **“I understand you feel I’m too dependent and clinging. I guess I need to look for someone who doesn’t feel so burdened by me.”**
- Let yourself grieve. You’ve suffered a painful loss, not just of present companionship, but of hopes for the future.
- Take your time getting over this. All of us are more vulnerable to flattery and scams after we’ve been cast adrift.

Family

Family relationships may be the most difficult of all. Here is where emotions rise up and overcome reason; where anger, jealousy, hurt, and unhappy memories are most likely to fog or even

disrupt communications entirely.

Because of the emotional ties in a family, conflict is inevitable, although it's not necessarily a symptom of something wrong.

The goal is to emerge from tense family encounters feeling that you have said what you needed to say in the least harmful way; and that, where possible, you have done what you could to reconcile the conflict.

For ideas about coping with family conflicts, read about [Conflicts](#).

Just who is "family"? The word can

- mean people biologically related to us: parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and so forth. Unlike friends, biological family members are not people we choose to know, but people we have to acknowledge.
- refer to biologically unrelated people who live together.
- also mean people who just feel like family members.

In Robert Frost's poem, "The Return of the Hired Man," a man who had been

fired from a farm returns there to die,
rather than go to his own brother,
because the farm is "home" and home is
"The place where, when you have to go
there, they have to take you in."

Family relationships and boundaries
differ from culture to culture, family to
family, place to place, and person to
person.

- Some families maintain close and loving ties, while others are distant or hostile.
- Boundaries in some families are blurred or lacking almost entirely, with family members constantly and deeply engaged in each others' affairs.
- Family disputes may leave relationships complicated and uneven, with some siblings close to each other, for instance, but not on speaking terms with others.
- Family relationships may be based in the past, refusing to acknowledge change, like the 87-year-old woman who told her 83-year-old sister, "I'm older than you and I know better!"
- Different family members have different perspectives on what the boundaries and

relationships should be.

- A parent may feel entitled to know far more about an adult son's life than the son may feel obliged to share.
 - An adult son or daughter may be hurt and angry to discover that a parent's serious illness or other problem was kept secret.
- The idealized family of ads and Christmas time, where all are kind, loving, and respectful, probably does exist, but
 - For many people, family life is ugly, unpleasant, or nonexistent.
 - For most people, working to keep family relationships comfortable and fulfilling is an ongoing task that is never finished.

Boundary-setting with family members may be a struggle, with family members striving to meet their own needs, in conflict with others' needs.

- It helps to retain control over your own behavior: what you do, what you share with whom, and how you share it.
- You can advise or urge

other family members, but you can't control them.

- Even if family members refuse to speak to you, you have the option of continuing to send communications if you wish.
- You can't make family members speak to you if they really don't want to, even if they are your parents.

Work Relationships

The workplace has more clearly defined boundaries than the social world or the family, although these boundaries can be complex.

- In settings like the military or a hospital, the ranks are clearly delineated, and in some cases, extend to social boundaries.
- In small businesses with few employees, relations tend to be informal.
- Every workplace, even different branches of the same company, has its own culture and characteristics.
 - Some characteristics, such as dress codes, are easy to check out.
 - Others, like the company attitude toward employees

at various ranks, are more difficult.

Basic work relationships are *sales*, (both as customers and suppliers), *collegial* (with co-workers), *supervisory* (whether as supervisors or supervisees), and *casual*.

Sales/Customers

Sales staff is expected to get along with customers, even when the customers are rude, lying, or abusive, in order to keep the business thriving.

- Large companies may train their sales staff in ways to deal with angry customers. In a small company, you're likely to be on your own.
- Difficult as it may be to stay calm and polite, any other response is more likely to hurt you than to improve the situation.
- Relationships with customers may be long-term and personal. In some businesses, sales staff is expected to cultivate social relationships with customers, such as taking them out to dinner or a show.
- These relationships are primarily business, however;

and you will make more sales if you listen sympathetically to the customers' problems, but refrain from sharing your own problems.

Colleagues

Colleagues are our workplace equals.

They perform roughly the same tasks we do, but may vary widely in age, seniority, background, and experience.

- We may have little choice as to which colleagues we work closely with, and we may find some of them difficult to work with.
- Others may become close friends.
- People are expected to get along with co-workers, no matter how much they may dislike or disagree with each other. In mainstream society, it's OK to express disagreement politely, but it's not acceptable to
 - refuse to work with someone because of his race, gender, or religion; or to
 - use work situations to harangue him; or
 - discriminate either for or against anyone because of

his race, gender, or beliefs.

Supervisors and supervisees

The supervisor directs and watches over a given unit, which may be as small as a few people, or as large as an entire multinational conglomerate.

- Supervisors are responsible for creating and maintaining a safe, fair, and efficient workplace, and for providing the tools, equipment, and information their supervisees need to accomplish the tasks assigned.
- Supervisees are expected to follow the supervisor's directions. Depending on the workplace environment, it may or may not be OK to question directions or suggest improvements.
- Supervisors are usually open to questions that clarify or expand upon their directions.
- In some workplaces, everyone is on first-name terms. This informality does not mean equality.
- Only trivial financial dealings—such as collecting for an office gift or birthday party—should take place

between supervisors and supervisees.

- An unfair or incompetent supervisor can make your life miserable, yet until she leaves or you can find a different job, you must somehow try to get along with her.
 - Usually, you are not the only person suffering in this situation. Co-workers may have good advice about how to cope.
 - Keeping an accurate, detailed record of tasks you've accomplished and hours you've worked will help you if you are being unfairly criticized.
- A supervisor who appears to favor you can be an equally difficult problem because co-workers will see and resent the apparent favoritism, whether or not it's real. Here, carefully watching the boundaries can help a lot.
 - To avoid misleading impressions, it's a good idea to refrain from one-on-one social activities—up to and including romantic

involvement—with a supervisor.

- It is unwise to give or accept any sizable gifts or loans, or receive any special treatment from a supervisor.

- A supervisor can be a mentor, who supports your work and helps prepare you for advancement.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The teacher-student relationship is vaguer and more subjective than the supervisor-worker relationship. You may be able to challenge a supervisor's unfair evaluation with objective evidence of tasks you have accomplished; but there is little option for appealing a teacher's grade, especially in college or university. Because of the lopsided balance of power, it may be hard to manage this relationship.

At some colleges and universities, professors may invite students for coffee, or even to their homes. At others, these options are unheard of. You need to check the boundaries at your institution if you receive this kind of invitation.

A personal relationship with an instructor may develop if, for instance,

- you have taken more than

one course from the
teacher, or

- you have shown unusual interest or ability in the subject area.

Such a relationship may help you with career choices, further education, and networking opportunities. At the same time, a close social relationship can lead to complications, such as a romantic relationship (forbidden by most institutions because of the potential for abuse of the teacher's authority).

While most teachers are careful about boundaries, some are not. If a teacher—who can give you a passing or failing grade—asks you to babysit, or to perform other chores “as a favor” (meaning, without paying you), it's hard to say “No” without worrying about the consequences.

- Most of us don't mind doing someone a favor once, but it's important not to let it become a habit.
- If this kind of thing happens often, it's advisable to find a paying job or other solid reason to refuse.
- For help in situations like this, you might also look for advice from fellow students.

College and university professors may have strong opinions about particular

subjects and may consider their positions “right.” A teacher may welcome *intellectual* challenges from students, but may not relish *ideological* challenges. For instance,

- An economics professor who is convinced that the country thrives best on little or no government regulation has a low opinion of those who maintain that more regulation is essential for a healthy economy.
- A sociology professor who believes that a cult’s unconventional belief systems and ideology excuse its misbehavior, or who thinks freedom of religion includes freedom to violate the law, may dismiss the notion that cult involvement can be harmful or even catastrophic.

If you run into this kind of conflict, it is especially important to keep a respectful tone in any discourse.

[TOP](#)