

BOUNDARIES

This is an excerpt from a Question and Answer Magazine column that Dr. Taft wrote several years ago and while the problems might not be the exact same as yours we feel the answers can be relevant and helpful to us all.

I have a hard time saying “no” to others and am worn out. Outwardly everyone thinks I am positive and energetic but inside I feel resentful and overwhelmed. How can I say “no” without being mean?

You have a common problem called being a “people pleaser”. You almost always take care of and please others at the expense of yourself. While you may receive a lot of praise and recognition for always helping others, your symptoms of resentment and exhaustion are signs of a boundary problem. You are confused about what is your responsibility and what is not. You seem to be taking on the responsibility for other people’s feelings and are probably afraid of creating conflict (you think saying no equals hostility).

Boundary problems come in many different forms and are almost always the result of upbringing. These emotional/behavioral patterns are firmly established by the time you are an adult and thus are difficult but not impossible to change.

To put your problem in perspective, imagine living in a neighborhood without physical boundaries for just a moment. How would you know who was responsible for what? If you lived in this neighborhood and were a people pleaser you would be taking care of everyone’s lawn, house and automobile maintenance. This is because people pleasers take on everyone else’s responsibilities. If this situation really existed you would be exhausted, overwhelmed and resentful. Sound familiar?

To change this pattern you first need to accept that you have a problem (which you seem to realize based on your question). Next, recognize that you need help. I suggest you start with a book on the subject (see the reference below for my recommendation). You also need to seek support

to look outside of your established family and friends since they are most likely a major source of your problem. However, if you do have supportive family members or friends they could be invaluable.

Next, learn and practice boundary-setting skills. This is very difficult and slow work because you will actually meet with resistance from both internal (your own feelings of guilt and fear) and external (your family and friends who are used to you being a pleaser) sources. When you are trying to change from a people pleaser to a person with healthy boundaries you will sometimes feel like the whole world is conspiring against you.

Keep working, learning and practicing good boundaries and with the help of your supporters you will find that things will change for the better a year from now. You might want to journal how you feel and whom you've surrounded yourself with right now and look back at it in a year and see how things have changed. If you choose to take this very brave step in your life, you'll be amazed and wonder how you ever took care of everyone but yourself and lived to tell about it!

Reference: Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (1992). Boundaries: When to Say YES When to Say NO To Take Control of Your Life. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.