
The Ins and Outs of Setting Boundaries With the Words and Actions of Others

by Chaplain Joy L. Smith

Someone once said, "If it feels like a kick in the stomach, it's probably a kick in the stomach." That is true. Yet, you can mentally block the kick as adroitly as one practicing the martial art of Aikido. Once you get the feeling that you have been struck unkindly by words or actions, breathe in deeply, allowing your brain a fresh and full supply of oxygen. Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain scientist assures us in her book [My Stroke of Insight](#) that if we can allow 90 seconds to pass before speaking, the quantity of emotion felt will change. Her claim is that when our emotions are hot, simply waiting 1 ½ minute will bring the emotion to a much more manageable level. I recommend Dr. Taylor's book as a great tool for understanding much about how the brain works.

Life hands us plenty of difficult moments. For example, envision yourself driving down the road, taking your time at the speed limit. Suddenly, someone passes you, then while you are along side at the stop light yells, "Hey stupid! Get your butt in gear! Where did you learn to drive—the nursing home?" Yelling something back will serve to escalate things. For sure, we don't know who is packing a gun these days. So, here is a place for setting boundaries with yourself, meaning to quietly ignore the castigation. This is not your problem. And, the signal light will change. You were served an out of bounds ball. Now, the ball is in your court. You can deal with the feelings that arose. Help yourself out with a deep breathe, honor the feelings by identifying them. Then, after breathing them away, you can mosey on, knowing that you responded well. You stood tall and did not react.

Deep breathing will help in every difficult instance, supplying your brain with maximum oxygen. At times when you need to interact with another person, one with whom you must deal more directly, listen to what is said. Then, once you have cooled down, here are three examples of responses that serve effectively to set boundaries: "Pardon me for saying so, but that is not helpful." Or, "I am uncomfortable with this conversation. We can talk again at a later time." Even a stronger statement is just as appropriate. For instance, "I prefer not to talk on this subject, again." These statements set boundaries. If these boundaries are crossed, you can walk away. When boundaries are not honored they are disrespected. Setting boundaries means there must be consequences when they are disrespected. Without consequences, boundaries will vanish into thin air.

Few people like to confront. Yet, setting boundaries with another is the best mode for helping others know how you want to be treated. Usually, people will respect you for taking good care of yourself in this way, although your strength might not be appreciated in the moment. If a person does not respect your boundaries they are being rude and controlling. The key to success during confrontation is to modulate these three aspects of your communication: manner, timing, and intensity. These are elements of speech over which you do have control.