



Setting Boundaries With Family: The Top Five Myths

Welcome!

I'm so glad you're reading this little guide.

I imagine that, if you signed up to receive it, some part of you resonated with the reality of having a difficult family member in your life and you're looking for support with that.

I want to see if I can support you with that in the coming pages.

Let's face it: setting boundaries with family members is a tricky and not-too-often talked about topic.

In my ten years as a therapist I've heard *countless* stories from folks about what is and is not possible when it comes to boundary setting (or, I should reframe, what *feels* possible and not possible).

These stories, these internalized beliefs, are what I call myths when it comes to setting boundaries with family.

They may feel true but it doesn't mean they *are* true.

Today, I want to share five of the top myths I hear from folks when the topic of setting and holding boundaries with families comes up and why the myths aren't true at all.

If you've been struggling with identifying and asserting your boundaries (or even believing that you *get* to hold boundaries!) with challenging family-of-origin or in-law relationships, this guide is for you.

Before diving into the meat of the guide I do want to make a few things clear:

I am not anti-family.

In fact, I'm pro-family inasmuch as I believe that, when the family system is healthy and functional, it can be the greatest source of care, safety, and well-being for us in the world.

But if you come from a family system that is not healthy and functional, you may not experience your family as a source of support.



Quite the opposite, in fact.

And in both of these cases, it's more accurate to say that I'm pro-self-care rather than I'm pro- or anti-family.

Essentially, I'm a proponent of making choices that ultimately protect your dignity and well-being and value this far above any promulgation of a system or institution (be it family, a corporation, a religious doctrine or political affiliation) that impinges and infringes upon this.

So again, I'm not an anti-family therapist.

I'm a pro-self-care therapist.

Sometimes self-care and family go hand in hand.

Sometimes they do not.

This little guide is written for those times when they do not.

Also, as you read this little guide, I want to invite you to consider something: no one can tell you what the right thing to do is when you're dealing with a difficult family member.

Only *you* are the expert of your experience and only you can decide how and if you might want to make changes/requests/boundaries with someone in your life.

I'm not going to tell you what to do in this guide.

What I am going to do is provide information and ideas that bust some of the most common boundary-setting myths so that you can arrive at the decisions you may need to make that are best and right and most true for you.

Finally, while this guide is geared towards talking about families (and I do intend this to include families-of-origin as well as the families we may marry or partner into), the principles of relationship navigation are universal and can apply to any challenging relationship you may have in your life (such as with a coworker, friend, or roommate).

I hope this little guide brings you comfort and clarity in some small way.

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Myth #1: I don't *get* to set boundaries with my family.

Let's face it: we live in a world that is and has historically been very pro-family.

Often, religions, communities, and families themselves across the globe have promulgated variations of this message:

"They're family, you have to accept them and forgive them no matter what!"

Messaging like this can often leave someone who is dealing with a difficult family member feeling isolated, ashamed, and alone if they find themselves challenged by someone they're related to and needing help around how to deal with them.

This idea, this myth that you don't get to set boundaries with your family because they are your family is false. Completely and utterly.

In fact, it's often in the most unhealthy and dysfunctional systems that the message of *"you can't set boundaries here or with us!"* persists and breeds.

In other words, in healthy, functionable, flexible family systems (not to mention systems of politics and enterprise), boundaries are welcomed, respected, and invited because those system members *recognize* that boundaries are a normal extension of being an esteemed individual in relationship to self, others, and the world.

Boundaries are not anathema in these healthy systems; they are *welcomed*.

So when you are dealt the message, *"They're family, you don't get to set boundaries!"* and when you hear this phrase echo in your own mind, please remember that this is reflective of the health (or lack thereof) of the system promulgating the message and it is not, in fact, an empiric fact.

You absolutely get to set boundaries with anyone and in any circumstance.

That's one of your fundamental human rights and when someone tries to tell or teach you otherwise, that should be a source of concern about that individual/system/environment, and not a myth you should swallow whole.

You get to set boundaries. Even - and sometimes especially - with family.

Myth #2: It's selfish to set boundaries with family.

One of the other big myths I hear from clients is some version of this: “It’s *selfish to set boundaries*.”

This myth - very much akin to the belief that you don’t get to set boundaries with family - is also inaccurate. Here’s why:

Setting boundaries means that you’re in touch with your needs and wants and can assert them to remain in an honest and open relationship with another person.

When we can be honest with another person, we give them the opportunity to trust us to take care of ourselves, to alleviate their concerns that we can’t and won’t say something if we don’t like something.

It gives both of us the opportunity to arrive at decisions, compromises, and solutions that feel good to *both* parties versus just *one*.

Let me ask you: have you ever stopped yourself from saying something to a friend about what you really, strongly would have preferred versus what they chose? I’m not talking about little things. I’m talking about things that really, strongly mattered to you.

You may have withheld your opinion but did you feel great as the plan/time together progressed? Or did you feel some resentment, fatigue, annoyance, and irritation?

Would you have felt better if you had actually said something? Probably.

Would your friend have welcomed your honesty? Maybe.

I don’t know how your friend would have reacted but the point here is this: when we notice, name, and assert our boundaries (and look, you can substitute the words “preferences” or “choices” instead of boundaries), we show up more *honestly* in our relationships.

We take care of *ourselves* and reduce the possibility that others will worry about caretaking *us*.

Boundary setting doesn’t just benefit you; it benefits the other person in relationship with you too because it leads to more honest, authentic relationships.

Myth #3: I'll lose them. It will damage the relationship.

This is probably the *biggest* myth that often stops people from setting boundaries.

The myth of believing and the fear that if you do set boundaries you'll lose the relationship or that it will permanently damage the relationship.

Realistically, you *may* come from a background where it wasn't safe and welcomed to set boundaries.

Very possibly as a kid, if you did set boundaries, you might have experienced your mother or father lash out/withdraw their love/be threatened by you. Which probably taught you that boundary setting *wasn't* a safe thing to do. So you come by this belief honestly.

But if you're reading this little guide, you're likely *not* a child anymore and you likely have more choices available to you now. You can likely set boundaries without your well-being being so at stake.

And still, if you're concerned about setting those boundaries because you might lose the relationship given what you know about that person/those people, consider this:

A) That fear is reflective of the unhealthiness of the person/system (again, bear in point Myth #1);

and B) Time has passed, the roles have changed and you *don't* empirically know if you might lose or damage the relationship permanently now.

It could be that, with the passage of time and the shifting of roles (e.g.: a child becoming an adult and now being in a new kind of relationship with their adult parent, etc.), the individuals who previously negatively reacted to your boundary setting could *surprise* you in terms of their receptivity now.

But, and I want you to really hear this, if they *don't* respond well to your boundary-setting, you need to seriously consider how *much* of a relationship it even is if you don't get to state your needs, wants, and preferences.

So, again, consider the possibility that the person you want to set a boundary with may surprise you in terms of how they respond and also know that if they do respond negatively, there's another myth you can challenge to draw comfort from should this happen.

Read on to explore Myth #4.

Myth #4: It will *always* be this way.

I think many of us stop ourselves from setting boundaries because we tell ourselves some version of the story, “If I set a boundary it will *always* be this way. Things will *always* feel this hard. Things won’t get better.”

In other words, if I set a boundary and the person/people I do that with don’t like the boundary, then things will *always* feel hard and bad in that relationship.

We scare ourselves by saying, “*The relationship will always be damaged and won’t get better ever.*”

Look, not to be sarcastic, but none of us have a crystal ball.

We don’t know what the future holds and we can’t predict how time, and the growth path of that other individual (or ourselves) will shift dynamics among us.

I’ve seen and experienced incredibly surprising and positive responses from family members in my personal life and in my professional career working with hundreds of clients.

I’ve seen people respond with more grace and flexibility and understanding than I would have given them credit for, and I’ve seen brittle, broken relationships come back together and heal after boundaries were set and held.

So if you’re stopping yourself from setting boundaries that you really want and need to set because of a fear that things will *always* be bad and hard if you do, I want you to really challenge that thought and to consider that you *simply don’t know* what the future will hold.

You only know how you feel right now and what you may need and want now (in terms of boundary setting) to take care of yourself.

You can’t predict the future and the behavior of other people if you set that boundary. All you can do is try to take care of yourself (however that looks) now in the present.

Myth #5: I'm the only one who has to do this with my family. Others won't understand and there must be something wrong with me if I need to do this.

One final big myth that stops so many of us from setting boundaries is the fear that we're the *only* ones who have to do this with our families.

We tell ourselves that other people have easier times with their families than us. We imagine other peoples' families are more functional than ours.

We scare and stop ourselves from taking the action steps we need to because of the shame we feel for being isolated in our experience. Of being the only one that has to estrange ourselves from family. Of being the only one who stops visiting during Thanksgiving and Christmas in order to take care of our mental health.

These stories we tell ourselves can often evoke so much loneliness, shame, and guilt about our experience that we don't take the steps deep down we know we need to for our own well-being.

I'm here to tell you though: if families and boundary-setting were easy, my whole field likely wouldn't exist and every therapist I know likely wouldn't be fully booked with a waitlist.

Families can be HARD.

MOST of us have hard times with our families-of-origin and in-laws from time-to-time (if not all the time) and yet it's not like we're all standing around the water cooler talking about it, are we?

Anecdotally I'll share with you that, in the ten years I've been a therapist and in the prior four years when I lived and studied at the Esalen Institute, I've come to realize how incredibly *common* it is to not only have strained but also estranged relationships with your family.

It's so common, much more so than anyone would guess, and that leads me to say this: You are *not* alone in your experience of having a hard time with your family members.

You are not the only one who has to actively set and hold boundaries - sometimes quite extreme boundaries - with family members.

This experience is way more common than you might imagine so please don't let the story, the myth, of being the only one who has to do this let it stop you from holding the boundaries that you know to be best and right and true for you.

In Closing:

Very few of us get taught about boundary setting either in our families or in school as we grow up.

And yet, we hear the word “boundaries” seemingly all of the time.

If you’re struggling with setting boundaries with your family-of-origin or with your in-laws (or really, in any relationship whatsoever), I hope that this little guide that busts some of the most common myths that stop people from boundary setting felt helpful.

And if you’d like even *more* support to dive deeper on this subject, if you’d like someone to proverbially take your hand and support with you with every single step that comes with setting boundaries with difficult and challenging family members, I’d like to invite you to consider taking my course, “[Hard Families, Good Boundaries.](#)”

This course will teach you:

- What boundaries actually are and how to know if yours are being crossed;
- Why having and holding clear and firm boundaries actually benefits you *and* that other family member;
- How to hold boundaries even when you’re afraid to (and especially when you feel like you “can’t”);
- A step-by-step guide to identifying the boundaries you want to hold and the research-backed effective and supportive scripts and steps you need to take in order to set them;
- The critical steps you need to take in order to cope with any external or internal backlash (strong, hard feelings from them or from inside of you);
- Plus bonuses designed to support you around specific topics: taking care of yourself and coping with Weddings/Funerals/Graduations/etc; Getting through family-centered holidays and family events; How to talk to kids about the impacts they may notice when you set boundaries; and more!

In Closing:

This course, Hard Families, Good Boundaries, is a culmination of all that I've learned in my 37 years of struggling through every iteration and manner of boundary setting you could imagine, and also in my decade of training as a therapist specializing in complex relational trauma.

I wrote this course to be of support to you, imagining it to be the material I needed so badly about 10 years ago, and my hope is to save you the pain I went through by sharing with you all that I've learned personally and professionally.

I can't wait to launch this course and will be sending out more information about it soon. In the meantime, I hope that the information I shared today felt helpful.

I look forward to being in touch with you soon!

Warmly, Annie