

How to Set Boundaries with Difficult People

By Keith Artisan

A lot of people talk about boundaries.

Identifying clear boundaries, implementing them and following through are all difficult skills.

And people who emotionally exhaust us are far more challenging to maintain boundaries around.

Of course, one person's drama queen is another person's best friend. The key is to choose to be around those with whom you thrive. What works for one type of person may not for others. Someone who may be "toxic" for one individual could be exactly the person someone else needs.

Boundaries are about discernment, not judgment. If you decide someone isn't healthy for you to be around, here's what you can do:

1. If there is no reason to associate with them, don't.

Ask yourself, when will you die?

An intense question demanding inquiry, it faces the fact of how much time each person has left. No one really knows how much time. An accident can reap the healthy at any moment. Time and chance happen to us all.

Then ask yourself, will you have used your time wisely? Is your heart content? Does this person contribute to or denigrate your wellbeing? If their presence is stressful, how much time is worth directing in understanding them, in putting out fires, in making the relationship work?

Is this person more worthy of your time and life than your family, tribe and loved ones who show up every day and have shown their loyalty, faith and support?

If not, cut your ties and your losses.

2. If you must associate with a difficult person, limit the exposure.

Family, work, school and social groups put people together who would otherwise never associate. Once a person from whom you cannot separate yourself has been identified as harmful, find ways to remain secure within regardless of their presence.

Remain private.

If physical distance is not achievable, emotional distance is. Simply don't share. Be polite and respectful. Listen. Head nod. Don't give advice. Be gracious, humorous and professional.

When some difficult people have lots of information about you, their knowledge becomes a weapon in their arsenal or a low-grade drain on your conversations and self-esteem. Remain free of the negativity by not sharing your own stories or advice. Simply do not engage energetically.

People are responsible for themselves. Allowing difficult people to be who they are, in their own space, is trusting them to figure it out on their own.

In this person's life, there are endeavors to complete, community to serve and family to love. Allow them the space to live their life as they see fit—from a safe distance.

They'll be taken care of, in their own way, according to what they are choosing and asking for. You don't need to take on the burden of "saving them". Indeed, this could be bad for both of you.

Boundaries have everything to do with the choices we make every day to nourish a healthy home, body, relationship and life.

Requiring no force, allowing people to be who they are and creating distance are the most elegant and effective of boundaries.