

Need
Better
Boundaries?

20 Questions
to Put You on
the Right Track



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Are you giving up too much for your relationships?

People will usually push you for one of two reasons: either their values are at stake or they're simply not interested in yours. Often it's both – because their values are nothing like yours.

We all have different values, different beliefs and different experiences. If you give everyone what they want, you're likely to wake up one morning wondering what happened to your life – or the person you used to be.

Whether you're looking for approval, trying to keep the peace, or just wanting to do what's right – choosing the right boundaries can be hard. How do you know when enough is enough? What are the telltale signs that it's time to put yourself first?

The answers to these questions are different for everyone. And sometimes the best way to answer a question is by asking a few more. That's why I created this “20 questions” guide.

You can approach these questions any way you like. You can start with the first, contemplate it, and move on. You can read them all and start with whatever draws your attention. You can work with many or just a few – even just one. The important thing is that, once you see something in yourself that's been stopping you from setting smarter boundaries, you do something about it.

So let's get started!

1. **Do you trust too easily?** You treat people with respect. You consider everyone's needs before making important decisions. But not everyone is as thoughtful as you. In fact, some people will say or do just about anything to get what they want. You know who they are; they've hurt you before.

You tell yourself that this time will be different – but will it? It's OK to believe in the goodness of human nature – just don't assume that nothing will interfere with it. Watch people for a while and pay attention to their interactions. Base your decisions on the evidence rather than your feelings.

According to psychopathy expert Robert Hare, PhD, taking your time is crucial. He puts it quite simply: "In short interactions, anyone can be duped." That's why you can't rely on your feelings – even if that usually works for you.

So hold back a bit. Don't make important decisions about people you hardly know – even if it feels like you've known them forever. Let them prove themselves first. As the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words.

2. **Do you trust your gut?** How many times have you had that nagging feeling that something isn't right – and ignored it? And how often have you regretted it?

It can be all too easy to trust someone else's opinion more than your own – especially when it comes packaged with charisma and confidence. But those opinions are based on someone else's values, beliefs and life experience. If you're lucky, that might work for you... this time. But you're the only one who really knows what's right for you. Why rely on luck when you can learn to rely on yourself?

Trust your feelings to tell you that something's wrong. Then get the information you need to figure out what it is.

3. **Are you being pressured into a quick yes?** Creating a false sense of urgency is a common manipulation tactic. And when the urgency is real, it's often because someone other than you dropped the ball. Make this problem go away today and you can expect plenty more like it tomorrow. If someone needs an answer right this minute, take a deep breath and tell them you're not available. Refuse to be rushed.

If you struggle with how to get the time you need, check out [7 Easy Ways to Say NO to Almost Anyone](#). The first chapter has lots of ideas for you.

4. **Do you know what matters most to you?** If you don't, you can't make decisions that work for you. And even when your decisions are good ones, you'll doubt yourself. When you're not sure what to do, take the time to think about what matters most to you in the situation. Is it your time or money? Is it doing the right thing? Or is supporting the other person what matters most right now? Answer this question and you'll know what to do.
5. **Do you let sympathy override your common sense?** How often do your friends and family, even co-workers, ask you to clean up their messes? When you feel sorry for someone, it's tempting to jump in and save the day. Ask yourself how things got to this point, who's responsible, and what's likely to happen in the long term. Respect yourself – and others – enough to hold them accountable. Rescuing is for children, puppies, and people trapped in burning buildings.
6. **Are you sacrificing your integrity?** There's nothing wrong with compromise and negotiation – as long as your integrity isn't on the table. Are you dealing with a simple ego issue, or is there more to consider? Make sure that whatever you're being asked to do won't compromise your values. If going along will leave you feeling used, weak or generally “less than”, consider your decision carefully.

7. **Do you give in too easily... especially when someone won't take no for an answer?** It's best to remind yourself that it's **your** answer – whether others accept it or not. It always feels better when people agree with you – or at least agree that you have the right to do what's best for you. But no one feels good all the time, and sometimes the price of giving in is just too high. If your decision is important to you, stick with it. You don't need anyone's permission to do what's right for you.

If you're not sure why you give in (or don't set good boundaries for yourself), you might want to read [What About Me? An Insider's Guide to Better Boundaries](#). It's all about what's stopping you from doing what you know is right.

8. **Are you asking the right questions?** Often there's more to a situation than meets the eye. Before taking on more responsibility, you may need to look a little deeper. Here are some things to consider before making up your mind:
- a. Are you helping to solve a problem, or just allowing people to avoid responsibility? If you're being asked to rescue someone – especially if this isn't the first time – you may find yourself doing it again... and again.
 - b. Is the favor bigger than it looks? Make sure the job you've been asked to do really is as simple as it sounds. People often oversimplify things to get you to say yes. They know that once you make a commitment, you'll have a hard time taking it back.
 - c. Why you? Sometimes people ask for your help because of your wisdom, knowledge or experience with their problem. But sometimes everyone else has had enough... and you're just the easy way out.

If you'd like to learn more about asking the right questions, check out [No Guilt, No Games, No Drama: The 7 Keys to Smarter Boundaries](#). The fourth key, *Know What's Missing*, has even more questions to consider asking.

9. **Are you putting other people's wants and need ahead of your own?** People push you too hard for one of two reasons: either their values are at stake or they're simply not interested in yours. Often it's both – because their values are nothing like yours. The people who really care about you will treat your wants and needs with respect, even when it's difficult. Those who don't are definitely not worth worrying about.
10. **Are there toxic people in your life?** A toxic relationship is emotionally damaging. If you typically feel worse about yourself after spending time with your friend, what is that "friendship" based on? Spending time with people who make a habit of putting you down, saying things that lead you to doubt yourself or expecting you to put them first is not good for you. Walk away from them if you can. If you can't, or don't want to, then give some serious thought to the amount of time you're willing to spend with them.
11. **Do you say yes when you actually mean no?** Remind yourself that every yes contains more than one *no*. Clubbing with a friend means giving up a quiet evening at home. Making one person happy may mean disappointing someone else. And doing something you're not comfortable with means saying *no* to yourself. Before you agree to something, think about what you're sacrificing.

12. **How often do you take responsibility for other people's problems?** Stop taking responsibility for everyone else's mistakes. If someone you care about has dropped the ball, stop seeing her as a victim who needs rescuing. Consider the possibility that she's a capable adult who's simply looking for an easy way out. Let her know that you can't take on her problems, but you have faith in her ability to sort things out. Offer to be a sounding board if she needs to explore her options (unless you think she'll use that time to play on your sympathy). Everyone needs to grow. Don't become someone's reason not to.
13. **Do you take responsibility for their emotions, too?** The fact that someone feels sad, hurt or angry about something you did doesn't mean that you were wrong. If someone close to you feels hurt by your words or actions, talk about it. Clear up any misunderstandings and apologize if you didn't consider someone's feelings. But don't forget that sometimes we need to do things that others don't like. Don't change your mind or beg for forgiveness just because someone gets all emotional on you!

14. **Do you run away from conflict?** Conflict is part of life. Instead of running away from it, focus on resolving it – or at least understanding what’s behind it. You just might learn something! Try to pay more attention to the content (What are you really disagreeing about?) than the way you feel. But insist on a reasonably polite conversation. When respect leaves the room, you should follow.

Standing up for yourself can be an emotional landmine; dealing with your fear of conflict may be just the beginning. Guilt, sympathy, a desire for approval and even loneliness can play a role. If you’d like to know more about the emotions that stop us in our tracks, check out [*No Guilt, No Games, No Drama: The 7 Keys to Smarter Boundaries*](#).

15. **Are you buying into other people’s opinions?** Other people’s opinions can hurt, but only if you believe them. Sometimes they’re not even genuine. Has anyone ever tried to make you feel selfish or stupid just to get what he wants? Ignore the insults. Take a deep breath and get over your “need” prove them wrong. Just focus on the facts.

And remember... even an honest disagreement doesn’t mean you’re wrong. Hear everyone out. Then think about how their opinions relate to your priorities. Once you realize that your own opinion is the one that counts, you can stop trying to satisfy everyone else.

16. **Can some people talk you into anything?** You know who I mean. Some people know how to use words to their advantage. They make you feel sorry for them or convince you that they need you right this minute. They may even tell you (directly or indirectly) how selfish it would be to walk away. Consider removing these people from your life. If you can't (or don't want to), do your best to avoid them until you learn how to deal with their tactics.
17. **Do people use anger or intimidation against you?** When people try to intimidate you or use anger as a weapon, respect has left the building. If someone is too angry to treat you decently, let him get back to you once he's calmed down. When you allow personal attacks, you're sending the wrong message – not only to the attacker, but to your unconscious mind. Repeat that message often enough and it will destroy your self-esteem. Remember, there's no reasoning with bullies, and there's no need to tolerate that kind of behavior. End the conversation and refuse to engage until respect is restored.

18. **Do you apologize when you've done nothing wrong?** Apologizing whenever things get uncomfortable makes you a prime target for manipulators. It tells them that you're probably one of those over-responsible people who can be convinced to solve problems they didn't create. It opens the door to arguments like, "You're the only one who can do this." Even if that turns out to be true (Is it ever?), it has nothing to do with responsibility or accountability. When you're in the wrong, apologize and do your best to make things right. When you're not, you don't have to say a thing.

19. **Do your buttons get pushed too often?** Insults and intimidation, guilt trips, disapproval and sob stories all take your attention away from what really matters. As long as you're focused on your hurt, anger, or even pity, you're not thinking about how to respond. Strong emotions interfere with rational thought, so you'll want to get away from the situation as quickly as possible. Once the emotions pass, you'll be in a far better position to deal with whatever's going on.

20. **Do you give people what they want just to shut them up?** Some people get what they want by exhausting you. You tell your friend why you can't lend her money right now. You explain your project deadlines to your sister so she understands why you can't babysit this weekend. But no matter how hard you try, they just don't get it.

That's because they don't want to. They know how much you want their agreement, so they purposely withhold it. They're counting on you to collapse into a crumpled heap and give them what they want. Don't surrender just to end the conversation. End it yourself by walking away – and don't look back.

How did it go?

Did you relate to some of these questions? If so, it's probably time to do some boundaries work. That might mean reading some books or blogs, attending workshops or mentoring sessions – or diving right in and setting some much-needed boundaries. The next step is up to you.

Not sure where to start? Need some support to get past the voice in your head that says you can't say *no*? You don't have to go it alone. Send me a note at steph@stephsterner.com and ask for a strategy session. I'll spend 20 minutes with you, free of charge, to see how I can help.

Whatever your next step is, get started on it today – because setting the right boundaries can change your life.

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