

# What is a relationship 'boundary?' And how do I have the boundary conversation with my partner?

July 18 2023, by Raquel Peel

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Text messages showing actor Jonah Hill asking his ex-girlfriend Sarah Brady to consider a dot point list of relationship "boundaries" have

sparked an important conversation.

Two different interpretations of these texts are dominating the discussion.

Some have understood Hill's dot points as a reasonable set of relationship expectations or "preferences" for a partner. Others see Hill's list of relationship deal-breakers as a controlling behavior.

So what is a relationship "boundary" and how do you have this conversation with your partner?

## **What are relationship boundaries?**

Boundaries are personal and influenced by one's values. They can be emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual and cultural.

The purpose of creating, understanding and respecting boundaries is to ensure one's [mental health](#) and well-being are protected. Used well, they can keep relationships healthy and safe.

Setting boundaries can also reinforce values and priorities important to you.

## **Some 'boundaries' are controlling and go too far**

That said, relationship boundaries can become unsafe for the people involved. Some cross the line into coercive control.

For instance, one might be able to justify to themselves they need to know where their partner is at all times, monitor their communications and keep tabs on their partner's friendships because they just want to

keep their partner safe.

But these are not boundaries; this is coercive control.

If your partner is describing these as their relationship boundaries, you should feel comfortable to say you are not OK with it. You should also feel comfortable explaining what boundaries you need to set for yourself and your relationship to feel safe.

In fact, [research](#) has found that even cyberstalking offenders might struggle to acknowledge how their behavior can be perceived as intrusive by their partner. They may also have trouble understanding how it contributed to their break-up.

My [research](#) on how people can sabotage their own relationships revealed a [lack of relationship skills](#) is often a key factor in relationship issues.

The same [research](#) highlighted how people who fear their relationship is at risk can end up indulging in controlling behaviors such as partner monitoring, tracking how a partner spends their money and emotional manipulation.

In other words, people can sometimes employ unhealthy behaviors with the intention of keeping their partner but end up pushing them away.

## **Understanding partner and relationship expectations**

We might have a vision in mind of an "[ideal partner](#)." But it's highly improbable one person can ever meet such high standards.

Rigid partner and relationship standards, just like unreasonable boundaries, can cause distress, hopelessness and resentment.

So healthy romantic relationships need clear communication and negotiation. Sometimes, that involves being flexible and open to hearing what the other person has to say about your proposed boundaries.

Relationship boundaries are a life skill that needs constant learning, practice and improvement.

## **Having a conversation about healthy relationship boundaries**

Some mistakenly believe having any relationship boundaries at all is unreasonable or a form of abuse. That's not the case.

In my [research](#) on relationship sabotage, many people spoke about how being able to clearly communicate and set relationship expectations has helped them maintain their relationships over the long term and dispel [unrealistic](#) standards.

Communicating expectations can also help people deal with common relationship fears, such as getting hurt, being rejected and feeling disrespected.

But for an important conversation about boundaries to take place, you first need the environment for an open, honest and trusting discussion.

Partners should feel they can talk freely and without fear about what they are comfortable with in a relationship. And, be able to discuss how they feel about a boundary their partner has proposed.

### **Clarify and discuss**

If you're having the boundary conversation with your partner, clarify

what you mean by your boundary request and how it might work in practice. Examples can help. Understanding the nuances can help your partner decide if your boundary request is reasonable or unreasonable for them.

Second, negotiate which boundaries are hard and which are soft. This will involve flexibility and care, so you're not undermining your or your partner's, freedom, mental health and well-being. A hard boundary is non-negotiable and can determine the fate of the relationship. A soft boundary can be modified, as long as all parties agree.

What constitutes a healthy boundary is different for each individual and each relationship.

Regardless, it is a conversation best had in person, not by [text message](#) (which can easily be taken out of context and misunderstood). If you really must have the discussion over text, be specific and clarify.

Before setting [boundaries](#), seek insight into what you want for yourself and your relationship and communicate with your [partner](#) openly and honestly. If you're fearful about how they'll react to the discussion, that's an issue.

An open and honest approach can foster a productive collaboration that can strengthen [relationship](#) commitment.

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