

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Relationship Characteristics

Any relationship has to one degree or another three characteristics:

- They involve the exchange of information, ideas and opinions and feelings
- They require reciprocity (the meeting of each other's needs and expectations) to occur to some degree if they are to continue
- They require ongoing attention and maintenance if they are to persist

It is a constant challenge to keep relationships healthy.

Different types of relationships make different demands. More temporary and un-committed relationships (such as the relationship you might form with a clerk at the grocery store) can be mostly about the simple exchange of information (“Where can I find the milk?”). However, as relationships grow in commitment and permanence and become more personal, the need for mutual exchange, reciprocity and maintenance all become vital.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity means to do something for someone when they have done something for you such that you pay back your debt. Reciprocity is very important for all non-temporary relationships. People enter into relationships because they want something from one another, whether that something is money, attention, affection, sex, friendship, information, etc. They remain in those relationships so long as they each continue to get what they need from one another. Perfect reciprocity of exchange is generally not necessary; friends will frequently give each other the benefit of the doubt when there are failures to meet expectations (When one friend calls to cancel a date to go out to the movies on short notice, for example). However, relationships start to fall apart when one or both partners start to regularly fail to reciprocate towards the other. In order to keep your relationships healthy, it is necessary that you invest in them by figuring out what the people you are in relationships with need from you, and working to provide for that need.

Boundaries

In the physical world, boundaries are things that separate one thing from another, like walls that separate the outside of a house from the inside. Though they have no physical substance, personal boundaries act very much like walls, by separating the private parts of people from the public parts. Similarly, your relationships with other people are characterized by boundaries that define the degree of closeness appropriate to each relationship. For example, one such boundary might separate whether someone is a 'friend' or not (friends being 'inside' the boundary, while non-friends (strangers, acquaintances, etc.) are outside it). How a person will react towards you; what they'll be willing to share with you and what they'll expect of you in return will be in large part guided by where you stand with regard to each other's boundaries. You might share details of your personal life with friends, for example, but your decision to share the same information with the checkout clerk at the supermarket (a non-friend) might cause people to look at you funny. It is important to appreciate people's boundaries, and your own boundaries so that you don't do or say the wrong thing and upset an important relationship.

Each person's boundaries are partially drawn from their culture. Because of this, sharing a culture in common with someone you're interacting with makes it easier for you to understand what that person will be comfortable with and what they will be uncomfortable with. Some other portion of a person's

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boundaries will be personal and you will have to get to know them in order to know what they are. You will have the greatest success in forming and maintaining relationships when you stay within acceptable boundaries (cultural, personal, etc.) for the people you are relating to.

Understanding and respecting cultural boundaries is particularly important when you are dealing with people you don't know very well. For example, it is a good idea to respect established social taboos and to never consider yourself 'above the law' with regard to those you are in relationships with. Telling off-color or 'dirty' jokes in mixed company can be off-putting, for example. Worse, you might think that telling an off-color joke is merely an attempt at humor while someone in your audience might see it as sexual harassment. Do not assume that just because you think a particular behavior is okay that the person or people you are relating to will agree!

Knowing your own personal boundaries is also important. Part of becoming a successful recovering alcoholic, for example, includes learning how to be comfortable refusing alcohol even when it is socially appropriate to have a drink. Recovering alcoholics who do not learn to respect their own boundaries and limitations with regard to alcohol tend not to stay in recovery for very long.

Communication

Boundaries tell you how not to behave, but they don't help you get clear about how to behave. Relationship maintenance gets a whole lot easier when you learn how to communicate what it is you want from people in clear and unambiguous language. If you want to become emotionally close to someone, you'll need to share your feelings and thoughts with that person. You sabotage your chances for closeness and intimacy when you remain completely emotionally guarded and only discuss ideas.

The type of communication that is appropriate for any particular relationship is governed by the boundaries that exist (or should exist) between the partners. It is appropriate to share your feelings with your spouse, for instance, but not necessarily with your boss. On the other hand, your boss might be more interested in your intellectual ideas than your spouse.

Once a particular type of conversation gets started, keep in mind that it can be disorienting if one partner abruptly tries to switch to a different sort of conversation. This is exactly what occurs in marriages when one partner tries to communicate about feelings, and the other partner responds by offering 'solutions' or by trying to solve the problem rather than hear the pain. In such situations, the 'feeling' partner doesn't feel heard and leaves the conversation frustrated. It is especially important to take this into account before you speak or respond to your boss or your significant other, as you are likely to depend on these people the most.

Commitment

Being committed to a relationship basically boils down to taking that relationship seriously: showing reciprocity towards the relationship, respecting its boundaries and doing your best to communicate and listen clearly and well. By doing these things over time, you build up a sort of credit with your relationship partners. They come to trust and care for you and to expect that you will support them should they encounter difficulties. It is this credit that motivates others to support you when you need support. The high quality relationships that will sustain you during times of need and which encourage your resiliency will tend to be the ones you have committed yourself to. To the extent you cannot commit to a relationship (romantic or otherwise), you won't be able to depend on that relationship when you may need it.