10 TIPS TO BUILD BOUNDARIES WITH YOUR MOM

HOW TO SAY NO WITHOUT BREAKING HER HEART AND LOSING YOUR MIND

Material excerpted from Boundaries and How to Have That Difficult Conversation You’ve Been Avoiding
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10 Tips to Build Boundaries
With Your Mom

A woman in her fifties came up to me (John) at a conference and said, “I have a problem with my mother. She calls me all the time, sometimes more than once a day, and it’s very inconvenient for me.”

“What would you like to be different?” I asked.

“I would like to talk to her two or three times a week,” she said.

I replied, “That sounds as though you would still be giving her a generous amount of talk time. Have you told her this?”

She looked shocked. “No, no! I couldn’t tell her that this is a problem.”

“Why?”

“She would be upset,” she exclaimed.

I responded, “Maybe, maybe not. If something is very important to you, it might be worth it to bring it up in a kind way.”

The woman gave me a strange look and repeated, “But it might upset her.”

I attempted to reason with her by saying, “Perhaps. Sometimes people get upset when they work out problems, but it isn’t the end of the world.”

By this time, I became aware that this woman was trapped in her past. I could see the scared little girl in her eyes, as she said once more, “But she might get upset.”

I said to her, “I understand that the prospect of upsetting your mom sounds very frightening to you. So at this point, if I were you, I probably wouldn’t bring it up to her until I dealt with my anxiety first. Talk to some wise people about why confronting your mom is so scary for you, work through that, and then approach her about the problem.”

I felt sad for this woman, knowing that, in the space of a couple of minutes at a conference, I could do no more to help her. She had hit a wall inside of her, where the rule was this: At all costs, don’t upset Mom.

Confronting a mother who reared us is probably the most complex of all face-to-face boundaries. You are now an adult, but you have a long history of being her child. You have been under her care, authority, training, and nurturing. You have been corrected and confronted about your life and behavior. Her primary job was to help you grow. Your primary job was to grow.

Then, in your adulthood, the tables are turned. The one who was corrected is now doing the correcting. The one who confronted is now being confronted. Even when the process works well, it can seem weird. When it goes bad, it can be disastrous. Having healthy boundary conversations with parents can be helpful, producing growth and building relationship.

When the Bible speaks about the value of speaking the truth in love to each other (see Ephesians 4:15), it includes your parents. Your mother and father need
confrontation the way anyone else does. And who is better qualified than an adult child who understands them, knows them, and loves them?

However, for the process to go well, you need to understand the uniqueness of your relationship with your parents. Here we will present 10 tips for building appropriate boundaries with your mom.

**Tip 1 – Love and Honor Your Mother**
First, make sure you love and honor your parents. Your mom and dad need your love, and the Bible singles them out as deserving of honor: “‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—’that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth’” (Ephesians 6:2–3).

All confrontations require love so that the person you confront can metabolize the truth without feeling hated, bad, or defensive. When we honor our mother, we respect her previous role in our lives. We do not pretend that she was perfect, nor do we thank her for something that was not good or right. Even so, loving and honoring may be difficult if your mother was unloving, controlling, abusive, or absent, or if she did something that injured you deeply. In these situations you may feel that your mother does not deserve love and honor. It doesn’t seem fair. In reality, it is not fair that the person you needed for survival, love, and guidance didn’t provide for you or even wounded you.

But God understands your hurt; in fact, he acts as one who will provide what you did not receive: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me” (Psalms 27:10). Yet, every adult child must come to a point in her life when she gives up the demand for justice and lives in grace. She accepts God’s solution of forgiveness and acceptance—the one he showed us in the “unfair” death of his Son—so that we can live in relationship.

As we live in grace, we are to extend it to others, especially our mother: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). If you cannot love and honor your parents, get into God’s healing process: Find a trusted friend, a support group, or a counselor to help you deal with the wounds your parents caused. This will help you come to love and honor them.

**Tip 2 – Do Not Obey Your Parents**
Loving and honoring do not equal obeying. God placed you with your mother for a season of time to help you grow into a mature adult. At some point this season ends, and your relationship with your mom changes from child-to-parent to adult-to-adult. The roles change from dependency and authority to mutuality. While you are to respect and care for your mother, you are no longer under her protection and tutelage. Children are to obey parents, while adult children are to love and honor
them. Therefore, sometimes you will need to confront your mom, disobeying her desire for you to agree with her or go along with a bad situation.

People often have difficulty confronting parents because, like the woman in the opening story, they still feel like a little child with them. Emotionally they have not left home, so they do not feel free to be separate, truthful, and honest with them. There is too much to lose.

I don’t know anything about the woman at the conference, but I suspect that she still needed something from her mom she never received—nor was she likely to receive it, barring some big changes. She may never have received love, validation, affirmation, freedom, or respect. If this sounds like you, it might be very helpful to work on these issues in a small-group setting or with a counselor in order to free yourself up from the past so that you can be an adult in the present.

One concrete example of moving out of obedience and dependence on parents happens when you decide that you will not spend some traditional holiday time with your parents. This can often be a cause for a confrontational talk:

You: “Mom, I wanted to let you know as soon as I could that I’ve made plans to go to the mountains with some friends this Christmas. I know this will be the first Christmas I won’t be with you and Dad, so I wanted to talk to you about it.”

Mom: “What are you talking about? You always spend Christmas with us. Your father will be so hurt.”

You: “I’m so sorry you feel that way. I would never want to hurt you. But this year I have a really good group of friends that I want to spend the holidays with. It’s not about not caring about you; it’s about wanting to be involved with these people at a deeper level.”

Mom: “Can’t you do that at another time? I mean, it will ruin our holiday.”

You: “I hope it doesn’t ruin things for you. That’s why I’m telling you this several months in advance, so you can make sure you have time to make any other arrangements you need to so your holiday will be good.”

Mom: “Don’t you care about how we feel?”

You: “Yes, Mom, I care very much. And I do like spending time with you. If you think that I don’t care, then maybe we can talk at some other point about your feelings, because I would like to reassure you that I care. But the point of this phone call was simply to give you a heads up so that we can plan and adjust for this change.”

In addition, don’t forget that your mom may need for you to be a change agent in her life. You may be one of the few people in her circle who is aware of her hurtful behavior or attitude. So, just as her job was to correct you in years past, your job (without the parental authority role) may be to correct her in the present. I know of
many situations in which an adult child’s confrontation of a parent was life changing for both.

Tip 3 – Recognize Guilt Messages
Ted telephoned his mother, and she answered the phone weakly, with hardly any voice at all. Concerned, thinking she was sick, he asked her, “Mother, what’s wrong?” “I guess my voice doesn’t work very well anymore,” she replied. “No one calls me since you children left home.”

No weapon in the arsenal of a controlling person is as strong as the guilt message. Daughters or sons with poor boundaries almost always internalize guilt messages leveled at them by their mother; they obey guilt-inducing statements that try to make them feel bad. Consider these:

▪ “How could you do this to me after all I’ve done for you?”
▪ “It seems that you could think about someone other than yourself for once.”
▪ “If you really loved me, you would make this telephone call for me.”
▪ “It seems like you would care enough about the family to do this one thing.”
▪ “How can you abandon our family like this?”
▪ “You know how it’s turned out in the past when you haven’t listened to me.”
▪ “After all, you never had to lift a finger around here. It seems like it’s time you did.”
▪ “You have no idea how much I’ve sacrificed for you.”
▪ “Maybe after I’m dead and gone, you’ll be sorry.”

Sometimes guilt manipulation comes dressed up in religious talk:

▪ “How can you call yourself a Christian?”
▪ “Doesn’t the Bible say ‘Honor your parents’?”
▪ “You’re not being very submissive. I’m sure that grieves the Lord.”
▪ “I thought Christians were supposed to think of others.”
▪ “What kind of religion would teach you to abandon your own family?”
▪ “You must really have a spiritual problem to be acting this way.”

A mother who says these types of things is trying to make you feel guilty about your choices. She is trying to make you feel bad about deciding how you will spend your own time or resources, about growing up and separating from her, or about having a life separate from the family.

However, in the biblical parable told in Matthew 20:15, the Bible says that we are to give and not be self-centered. Notice that it does not say that we have to give whatever anyone wants from us. We are in control of our giving.

You can probably recognize guilt messages when you hear them. But if you feel bad about your response, maybe you have not looked specifically at the approach your mother or other people are using. Here are suggestions about dealing with these external messages:
a. Recognize the guilt messages. Some people swallow guilt messages without seeing how controlling they are. Sure, we need to be open to rebuke and feedback, because we need to know when we’re being self-centered. However, guilt messages are not given for your growth and good. They are given to manipulate and control.

b. Guilt messages are really anger in disguise. The guilt sender is failing to openly admit her anger at you for what you are doing, probably because that would expose how she is trying to control you. She focuses on you and your behavior, rather than on how she feels. Focusing on her feelings would get her too close to responsibility.

c. Guilt messages hide sadness and hurt. Instead of expressing and owning these feelings, some parents try to steer the focus onto you and what you are doing. Recognize that guilt messages are sometimes an expression of a person’s sadness, hurt, or need.

d. If guilt works on you, recognize that it is your problem. That’s right, the core issue is not your mother’s problem. Realize where the real trouble resides, which is inside your mind. Then you will be able to deal with the outside correctly, using love and limits. If you continue to blame your mother for “making” you feel guilty, then she has power over you. And, you are saying that you will only feel good when she stops doing that. You are giving her control over your life. Stop blaming other people.

e. Do not explain or justify. Only guilty individuals defend their position, and that only plays into the guilt sender’s message. You do not always owe an explanation. Just tell what you have chosen. If you tell your mother the reason why you made a certain decision in order to help her understand, that is okay. But, if you justify your reason in order to get her to stop making you feel bad or to resolve your inner guilt, then you are playing into the guilt trap.

f. Be assertive and interpret guilt-styled messages as being about the other person’s feelings. “Mom, it sounds like you are angry that I chose to...” “It sounds like you are sad that I will not...” “I understand you are very unhappy about what I have decided to do. I’m sorry you feel that way.” “I realize this is disappointing to you. How can I help?” “It’s hard for you when I have other things to do, isn’t it?”

The main principle is this: When someone tries to make you feel guilty, empathize with the distress that she might be feeling. But, make it clear that it is her distress.

Remember, love and limits are the only clear boundaries. If you react negatively, you have lost your boundaries. Proverbs 25:28 says, “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man without self-control.” If your mother has the power to make you react, then she is inside your walls, inside your boundaries. Stop reacting. Be proactive. Give empathy. “Mom, it sounds like life is hard right now. Tell me about
it.” Sometimes people who give guilt messages just want to tell someone how hard it is. Be a listener, but don’t take the blame.

Remember our earlier example of the mother who tried to make her son, Ted, feel guilty? A man with good boundaries would empathize with his mother and say, “It sounds like you are feeling lonely, Mom.” He would make sure she hears that he knows the feeling beneath the guilt message.

**Tip 4 – Confront from Concern, Not Dependency**

Before you confront, however, look at your motives. The highest and best motive, of course, is love: “The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Confront because you want to help solve a problem getting in the way of your mother’s love, growth, or relationship with you and others.

Sometimes the motive waters are muddied because we still have needs from the past that get in the way. We have mentioned how the inability to leave home may prevent confrontation. Here the adult child may confront for the wrong reasons.

For example, a woman may want to talk with her mother about the loving, warm relationship she never had with her. The right motive for the talk might be that she wants to forgive her and reconcile with her. The wrong motive might be that she wants her to give her the warmth she missed as a child. The problem here, of course, is that time has moved on. She needs to get those intimacy needs met, not by her mom, but by God’s other resources, such as a healthy support group. Her mom can’t “reparent” her.

Another problem motive is when the adult child has a desire to punish or get revenge. That is, to be able to feel connected and whole, he wants his mother to experience what he himself went through. While bad parenting can cause very deep hurts, revenge is not in our hands, but the Lord’s (Romans 12:19). Deal with those feelings elsewhere, and confront not out of revenge as a hurt child, but out of love as an adult.

**Tip 5 – Don’t Idealize the Confrontation**

Sometimes a person will think that when she finally confronts mom’s drinking or controlling attitude, she will be free of the past and be able to move on. She sees this as the emotional key that unlocks her life.

While a good confrontation with parents has great value, it is not the key to freedom. The key to freedom is spiritual and emotional growth: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). When you go through the steps of healing, recovery, and growth, you receive the good you did not get, and you are repaired from the bad you did get. In fact, often a confrontation is not the way to healing, but the result of healing. When you have worked through the leaving-home
issues, you are better able to validate what you have done by having a successful adult talk with a parent.

In fact, often when people resolve their childhood issues, they feel less of a need to confront their parents. Things that weighed heavy on them do not bother them as much. The focus of the confrontation changes from things that affected them as children to things more destructive for the parent now. For example, a slightly complaining mother may not bother an adult child much as he moves past his dependency on her, but her addiction to prescription pills might be the impetus for a serious talk, because it harms her.

**Tip 6 – Distinguish Between Hurt and Harm**
Ultimately, you may have to distinguish between hurting and harming your parent. You might cause your parent discomfort in the conversation, which hurts, or you might say something unkind or unloving, which harms. The truth you want to communicate may be painful for your mother (hurt her), but it will not injure her (harm her).

Some adult children perceive their mother as fragile and brittle, and they do not confront needed problems because they fear any hurt will injure her. Give parents time and space to evaluate their reactions, and see if they are being hurt or harmed. If they are angry or somewhat pouty, that is one thing. But if they seem more deeply affected—for example, withdrawing from the relationship due to pain, rather than in a manipulative “Look what you did to me” way—that is another thing. Consult with others who know your mother to see whether she is genuinely unable to digest feedback without injury or is merely reacting.

**Tip 7 – Convey Your Love and Honor**
When you decide to have a conversation with your mom, make sure you are explicit about being “for” her in your conversation. If you have never confronted her before, she may not be prepared for this role reversal. She may feel persecuted, betrayed, or unloved by you. Try something like:

*You:* “I want to talk about a problem that concerns me and gets in the way of our relationship. You mean a lot to me, and I want you to know I really love and honor you for being my parent.”

*Parent:* “No, you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t say these things.”

*You:* “I’m sorry you feel that way. It must be horrible to feel I don’t care, but I do.”

You may need to return to the love and honor time and again during the conversation, especially if your parent can’t hold onto the grace you offer. Just stop making your point and go back to the reassurance, as you would with a frightened child.
**Tip 8 – Know Your Mom**

Context is very important in parental confrontations. Is she generally a person who welcomes feedback? Or is she resistant or defensive when something is brought to his attention? You might want to address resistance or defensiveness as issues in and of themselves, especially if your parent has a history of problems in this area. Try something like this:

“When I have brought up the issue of my feeling criticized a lot by you, it hasn’t seemed to go well. I think you may feel that I’m misunderstanding or attacking you, and I don’t want you to feel that way. Is that how it is for you?”

Sometimes this approach will help a mother work through her perceptions and make it safe and normal to discuss problems.

Take into consideration her life situation, also. If she is dealing with serious health problems, a job or marriage loss, or aging issues, you may want to be sure those are stabilized before bringing up a problem. This is part of honoring a parent as she becomes older and more burdened with the cares of age.

**Tip 9 – Evaluate the Resistance**

If you encounter resistance or defensiveness, figure out if your mother resists everyone or only you. Some parents can accept feedback from others, but they haven’t yet made the transition to seeing their child as one who can give them feedback. You may need to address that with them.

*You:* “Mom, it seems to me that when I talked to you about how you sometimes disrespect Dad, you become really angry and upset with me.”

*Mom:* “You had no right to talk to me that way.”

*You:* “I’m sorry it affects you badly, and I want to resolve this with you. But I also noticed that at the party, your friend, Alice, said something to you about it, and you listened to her.”

*Mom:* “Alice made sense.”

*You:* “I’m sure she did, but she said essentially the same thing I did. I’m wondering if it is more difficult to hear things from me, as your daughter, than to hear it from others. Can we talk about what that might be like for you? Is it difficult to have me bring up this problem with you? I don’t want you to feel that I don’t respect you. At the same time, I want for us to treat each other as adults. In fact, I do want to hear how you feel about me, as we talk.”

Make your approach as humble, equal, and mutual as you can.
**Tip 10 – Be Direct**

Recently a woman asked me, “How can I get my mom to open up and be more involved in my life?” “Well, have you asked her to?” I responded. “Sure! I told her that it would be nice if she asked me how my life was going, but she still didn’t do anything.” “Well, let’s not say that you asked her anything. Call it a suggestion, or maybe a mention of a good idea. But there was no direct request. If she didn’t respond, you probably need to ratchet it up a bit to something like, ‘Mom, you rarely ask me about myself; I seem to be the only one asking you about your life. I’d like you to ask me how my work, kids, and activities are doing.’”

It is easy to be indirect with parents, given all the emotional complexities involved. Sometimes a person will even think, “She is my mom. She should know I need this without my being blunt about it.” But if what you have said is not getting through, you have to be direct and clear, though not mean.

Apply what we said earlier about concern and dependency, and make your requests from your adult stance, not from a child position. The basic difference here is to make it more about the relationship and less about your needs. Here are some examples of both:

*Child:* “I want you to be there for me.”
*Adult:* “I want to be able to communicate openly with you.”

*Child:* “I need for you to respect me so that I can feel respected.”
*Adult:* “I want you to treat me with respect so that it doesn’t get in the way of our relationship.”

*Child:* “I want you to be able to hear me when I say no, because I feel bad about myself when you don’t.”
*Adult:* “I want you to be able to accept our different opinions so that we can have healthy conversations.”

*Child:* I want you to stop drinking so that I can have the mom I never had.”
*Adult:* “I want you to stop drinking, because none of us can connect with you, and it hurts us and you, too.”

**Decide Whether a Conversation Is Worth It**

After having done all of the things in this chapter and this book, you may discover over time that confronting your mother is just not worth the cost. Barring life-threatening or very serious issues, you may need to let some things go and accept things the way they are.

You don’t need to leave the relationship or do anything radical. However, you may need to grieve the relationship you would like to have with your mom and connect with her in whatever way you can. Find the ceiling of what your mom is willing to look at, and love the rest. Again, this is moving from dependency to love. Your mom
may never be part of your emotional support system. However, you can also find much satisfaction and enjoyment in finding ways to safely connect with your mother.

**Helping Both Mom and Yourself**

Let’s return to the scenario of the woman with a mother who called incessantly. Here is how a conversation might go concerning this situation:

*You:* “Mom, I need to talk to you about our phone calls. I like to stay in touch with you, but it is becoming difficult to keep up with the calls.”

*Mom:* “So you don’t want to talk to me anymore?”

*You:* “No, I’m not saying that at all. What I am saying is that I can’t do several calls a day anymore. My life is too busy, and the frequency keeps me from really missing you enough to look forward to the calls.”

*Mom:* “You don’t look forward to hearing from me?”

*You:* “In a way, yes. I find if we talk two to three times a week, I do want to hear from you. But more than that, and there hasn’t been enough time to actually not have you around me.”

*Mom:* “This is really upsetting.”

*You:* “I am so sorry it is upsetting you, and I want to talk to you about that, because I would hate for you to think I don’t love you. At the same time, can we try limiting the calls to a few times a week and then see how it was for each of us in a few weeks?”

As much as possible, bring truth and grace to the relationship with your mom. What a blessing to be a redemptive force for their lives, even in her later years!

**Wait, there’s more! These 10 tips are just the start to building healthy boundaries with your mom and all other important relationships in your life.**

We encourage you to go deeper by getting a copy of *Boundaries* and *How to Have That Difficult Conversation You’ve Been Avoiding*, written by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. Purchase these books at: [www.BoundariesBooks.com](http://www.BoundariesBooks.com)

**Excerpt sources:**
*Boundaries* – pages 249 – 252
*How to Have That Difficult Conversation You’ve Been Avoiding* – pages 246 – 255

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