

THE Sunday Telegraph

Calling All Doormats. It's time to let the world know how you feel.

by Helen Hawkes

It's 8pm and you're still in the office. Yes, your boss asked you to finish that detailed report that's due tomorrow. Worse, you said yes. Still, you tell yourself, it's better than being in your apartment with your boyfriend. He's invited five of his mates to watch the football on your plasma screen. You hate sport, but your place is bigger than his and it's the big game after all. If this sounds familiar then we have one word to say to you. Congratulations. You are officially a doormat. In fact most of the people you know would be shocked if you failed to accommodate their requests. After all, you don't have needs of your own, do you?

Colleagues, employers, friends and acquaintances are constantly in your face or stepping on your feelings. Not that they'd know. The only place you show your feelings is on the inside, where you're constantly screaming 'back off'. But there's not much point in doing that now, is there?

"Lots of people don't have boundaries and the result is they don't get any respect," says human behaviour expert Shirley Smith, author of *Set Yourself Free* (www.theradiantgroup.com.au) "People know they can be rude to you, or just ask you for extra. They pick up on it at an unconscious level. You're an open target who will either feel angry, ashamed and resentful, or you'll wall yourself off from other people and end up feeling very, very lonely."

We learn boundaries from our parents, says Smith, so we need good role models when we grow up. Hopefully, we see our parents practicing both internal and external boundaries.

"The internal boundaries are emotional and intellectual," she says. "Protecting your thinking and feeling realities, or internal boundaries allows you to jettison things that are not true for you. For example, if someone accused you of hurting them, you would be able to decide if it was true or not without being defensive."

Emotional Rescue

Doormat lesson number one – you can disagree with things you don't believe in. Now, on to external boundaries.

"The external boundaries are physical and sexual," says Smith. "They function outside the body and control distance and touch with others and ourselves."

So, how do you know if you have no boundaries?

Firstly, you need to question whether you take what other people say about you to heart, or take on other people's feelings. Ask yourself if you feel sexually harassed at work or not in charge of your body in your relationship. See if you can fully answer this question. 'who am I?' (also see box, next page.)

Is there anybody in there?

These are all questions that Sarah, a 32 year-old marketing executive, had to ask herself after she found herself involved in one disastrous relationship after another.

"Depending on who I was going out with and what their interests or profession was, I would have a whole different life which revolved around them," she says.

"For example, when I went out with a guy who was in the services, we were always hanging out with his adventure sport mad friends, even though mountain climbing or parachuting are hardly top of my list of things to do. When I went out with a Jewish guy, I was actually thinking of converting to the faith, even though I have always been Anglican. And I was also very passive sexually and found it difficult to say no to sex."

"I guess my problem was I couldn't see where they ended and I began," she says.

Not surprisingly, Sarah began to feel the pressure. "I ended up feeling angry and used because I was little more than an accessory to someone else's life." Through therapy, Sarah eventually came to see that she was suffering a total lack of self.

Her mother had also had poor boundaries, living her life through her dominating husband, and Sarah also felt bullied by her father. Even in adulthood she found it difficult to stand up to his opinions about how she should live her life. But therapy combined with a will to turn her life around saw Sarah coming

out of the cold.

Changing Rooms

“It took practice, but I eventually learned to say no when I meant no,” she says “I won’t lie and say it was easy because it wasn’t. I was changing years of being an emotional and sexual doormat.”

Smith agrees, saying that changing is one of the most difficult human experiences. “Confronting people is not always pleasant,” she says. “But if you’re not going to, you leave yourself open to all kinds of abuse, at home and at work. Boundaries are about self-protection and without them, you’ll get hurt emotionally, intellectually, physically and spiritually.”

This comes as no surprise to Nicole, a 40 year-old lecturer, who met ‘the man of her dreams’ when she was 27.

“I came from a background where I had a lot of self-esteem issues including an eating disorder,” she says. “He was very dynamic, an entrepreneurial type, and I dropped my job in teaching and went off to help him with his dreams of creating a publishing business.”

Needless to say it wasn’t long before Nicole’s dream relationship began to crumble.

“I had never learnt what my limits were and so I ended up taking on more responsibility than I felt comfortable with and had a lot of fear,” she says.

Back Off

In the end, the relationship fell apart and Nicole was left to deal with the anxiety, pain, doubt and shame. Once she got over the relationship she realised she had been suffering for years. “It was only after some time that I was able to see examples in my life of where my boundaries, or lack of, had let me down,” she says.

Do You Have an Esteem Issue?

You do if you answer yes to any of these questions.

1. I am unable to set realistic limits for myself
2. I think the embarrassing behaviour of someone close to me reflects on me
3. I tend to lose my own identity in intimate relationships
4. I often isolate myself socially and emotionally
5. I am often attracted to people who hurt me

How to set boundaries

Not sure where you end and the next person begins? Shirley Smith has some tricks up her sleeve. Why not give them a try?

- Physical boundaries: Visualise yourself as being protected, perhaps in a white light. Tell yourself: *“I have the right to determine when, where, how and with whom I want to be touched and how close I’ll allow anyone to get to me.”*
- Emotional and intellectual boundaries: When you visualise internal boundaries, picture something that acts like a filter. Then say to yourself: *“I create what I think and feel and I am in control of what I do or don’t do.”*
- Strengthen your boundaries: Write your own declaration of Independence. It should include what you will and won’t allow in your career, your partner, your finances, and so on.
- Open up to each person who you feel psychologically dependent on and let them know you want to change this. Try saying, *“No, I don’t want to”* to dominant people in your life.
- When you feel shoved around, stop and say how you feel.
- Remind yourself that your parents, spouse, friends, bosses will sometimes disapprove of your behaviour, but that has nothing to do with who you are.
- Recognise your desire and need for privacy and stop feeling as though you need to share everything you feel and experience with someone.

“Even with my girlfriends, I’d always be the one who spent hours on the phone, sorting out their problems.” Nicole needed some solid boundaries so she could decide what she wanted out of life and how she was prepared to get it.

“Boundaries not only protect us from abuse, but they let us have the good things too,” says Smith. “How can you have a great relationship with others if you don’t know what your values or limits are?” she says. “The same goes for a job. How do you expect people to respect you if you don’t respect yourself? Boundaries are like flyscreens. They let the air in, but keep the bugs out.”

Shirley Smith is holding seminars about relationships and how to improve them during February and March. The seminars, called Relationships and You, will take place in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne. They’re packed with plenty of eye-opening advice and are free. To find out more, call (02) 9953 7000.