

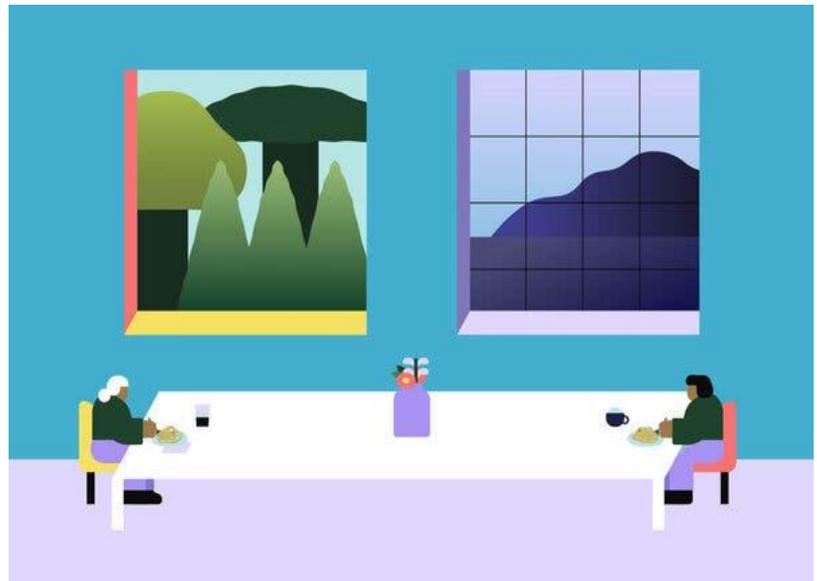
How to Set Boundaries With a Difficult Family Member

It's tricky but doable, says Nedra Glover Tawwab, a therapist and best-selling author. Here are her strategies for getting started.

The following is excerpted from the article, "Howto Set Boundaries With a Difficult Family Member," by Catherine Pearson of The New York Times, March 8, 2023.

Nedra Glover Tawwab knows deep in her bones that you cannot choose the family you are raised in.

Her background led to her career as a licensed clinical social worker focusing on relationships. She is also a best-selling author of the book "Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself" and a popular Instagram therapist whose 1.7 million followers [devour her pithy nuggets](#). (A recent example: "The silent treatment isn't teaching them a lesson; it's showing you can't handle conflict.")



Credit...Jing Wei

In Ms. Tawwab's newest book, "Drama Free: A Guide to Managing Unhealthy Family Relationships," she offers practical strategies for dealing with toxic family dynamics.

"As a child, relationships are put on you, but as an adult you get to choose who you want to be in relationships with and how," Ms. Tawwab said. "Even with family."

Setting and maintaining boundaries in relationships is difficult, enduring work, especially when it involves a parent, sibling, child or some other family member who has played a significant role in your life for as long as you can remember.

Decide what a "successful" relationship would look like to you.

Identify the issues that are affecting your dynamic with this family member. Then decide what type of relationship you can realistically have, and want to have, with that person.

Ask yourself: What can I control?

Throughout her new book, Ms. Tawwab emphasizes her belief that you cannot change your family members.

Ms. Tawwab recommends asking yourself: If this person did not change a single thing, what — if anything — could I do to make the relationship different? Write it all down in a list, she said: “These are the issues in this relationship. These are the parts of those issues that I can change, and these are the parts that are not my stuff.”

Increase your tolerance for difficult conversations.

Changing a dysfunctional relationship will invariably require you to say hard things to a family member. But that is a skill that anyone can develop, Ms. Tawwab said.

Start with a pep talk. Remind yourself that being assertive about your needs and your boundaries is not rude, she said.

“We have tricked ourselves into thinking that we’re supposed to always feel comfortable, so even as we’re saying hard things our goal is to say it without the other person feeling upset or mad or wanting a further explanation,” she said. “And that’s not realistic.”

Know that the family member will likely take it personally.

In dysfunctional families, change is almost always seen as a rejection. She writes in her book that “boundaries in unhealthy families are a threat to the system of dysfunction.”

Your call for change might be met with disapproval (“You’re wrong for changing; everything was going well until you intervened”), shame (“You’re a terrible person”), or resentment (“I’m upset because you want something different”), she writes. You could also encounter general pushback, which might involve your family member continuing to behave as though you said nothing or pressuring you to change your mind.

Anticipating those responses can help you steel yourself so you are not hurt by your family member’s reaction.

Find a healthy distance.

Ms. Tawwab said she was struck by the number of people she encounters who overlook the strategic power of distance and its importance in preserving certain bonds while still establishing a healthier dynamic.

Distancing yourself from a family member is not the same as ignoring that person, she writes. Distancing might mean putting time and space between you and your relative (for example, declining invitations or staying in a hotel during family holidays). Distancing could also mean engaging less with the person on an emotional level (for example, steering the conversation away from topics you’re not comfortable with or simply excluding that person from certain areas of your life).

“You will have to do the work to accept situations, and build patience for what is outside your control,” she writes. “Remember that dealing with certain problematic behaviors is a choice.”