

Needs, Boundaries & Self-Care: Support for Queer Folks

As a result of homophobia & cultural oppression, queer people often struggle with identifying our needs, setting firm boundaries and cultivating lasting self-care practices. This guide will help you clarify all of this and begin to take steps toward a healthier relationship with yourself *and* with others.

Needs: Queer people are often erased or not considered within the larger context of many groups, and as a result our needs are not attended to. The way in which **others** attend to our needs (or not), affects the way **we** attend to our **own** needs. For example, if a parent or caretaker ignores an emotional need we have as a child, our child-self may interpret that it is not okay for us to have that particular emotional need. Or, if early in puberty our sexual health needs are not considered in a sexual education context, we are being told that our needs are not important, or even exist. These experiences can then lead us to a habit of shutting down or cutting off from our own needs. So the first step is learning to **identify** your own needs.

Exploration - Identifying Your Needs

Start by filling out this short list of your needs, whether or not they are currently being met or fulfilled. Take as much time as you need, and keep coming back to it and adding to the list. Without judgement, notice which areas are easier to identify and which areas where you might be less in tune with your own needs.

Physical - touch, exercise, food...

Mental - reading, games, conversation...

Emotional - hugs, therapy, music...

Spiritual - meditation, nature walks, art...

After you get some sense of your needs, review the lists and look at what needs are NOT being met. Think about how you can meet those needs all on your own, and *then* consider getting support from others to help you meet those needs.

Boundaries:

Sometimes setting healthy boundaries can be challenging because it may seem as if we are being mean or pushing others away — especially when we want nothing more than to be loved or accepted. But having good boundaries is important for our emotional and physical health. As a queer person, you may have experienced a violation of your boundaries through acts of violence. This can lead to long lasting effects of trauma on your mind, body or spirit.

Strong, healthy boundaries take practice. It's important to be clear in your "NO" and clear in your "YES." By completing the previous exploration on *Identifying Your Needs*, this can help you to set the foundation for creating clearer boundaries. When you know what your needs are, you can more clearly say "Yes" when it is presented to you, and "No" when something is blocking or taking you further away from that need.

It is also helpful to listen to your body when it comes to your boundaries. For people who have experienced trauma, I always suggest starting with exercising your "No" (or *Stop*, or *No, Thank You*, or *Not Right Now*.) It is really important to listen to how your body (your gut, heart or intuition) is feeling and communicating with you in certain spaces or around certain people.

Exploration - *Setting Your Boundaries*

Find an enclosed space where you can be alone - perhaps your bedroom, or some other room that has a door you can close and, ideally, lock. Put away anything that might distract you, and just take 3-minutes to simply pay attention to your breathing and your body, keeping your eyes *open*. (If this on its own is challenging, do this exploration however feels right to you - maybe as a writing or drawing practice instead. Or just read through it, think about it or talk about it with a trusted friend.)

Notice how it feels to be in a space where you are in control the environment. Listen to what your body wants and do your best to accommodate it - wrap a blanket around you, change into comfortable clothes, put on soothing music, open a window for fresh air, etc. Just get as safe as you can, and notice how your body feels.

Next, imagine that a good friend is knocking at the door and would like to come in. (If you like, you can ask a trusted friend to play this out with you in real time.) Then again, checking in with your body and noticing if it feels comfortable to open the door and

invite them in. Remember, it's completely okay if you don't want to — it's all part of the exercise.

If you do invite them in, real or imagined, once again notice how it feels to be sharing your personal safe space with them. How much distance or closeness do you want with this person? Play with the space, and see what feels comfortable and safe.

Finally, ask the person to leave the room, close the door, and check in with your body and breathing again. Reflect on the whole experience.

Self-Care:

The idea of self-care sometimes gets a bad wrap. Maybe you think that self-care means you are being selfish, self-centered, or narcissistic. Or maybe you think self-care is a privilege you can't afford, or don't have the time for.

Caring for yourself can take many forms. It can include being with others, such as spending time with friends, playing a game, making art, or being with an animal. It can be calm and serene, like taking a nap or walking in nature; or it can be active and energizing, like cleaning your home, or screaming out your anger and frustration. Self-care can also mean be of service to others, like volunteering and activism, or helping out a neighbor in need. (Caring for your collective community *includes* caring for yourself.) It can be free or inexpensive, like attending a meditation group or going to your local park and reading a book.

Exploration - Caring for Yourself

Reflecting on your current needs, think about what might feel good to you right now. Consider something you've already done that has been helpful, or try out something new. Some practices don't always work, so it's okay to try a few things before you start to notice a shift in yourself. Self-care is best when done as a maintenance practice, not just when you are feeling down.

Here are a few things to try:

- **Meditation, mindfulness or simple breathing exercises**
Find a meditation group, download a mindfulness app, or look for guided videos online.
- **Bodywork or movement practice**
Get a massage, trade therapeutic touch with a friend or partner, exercise and stretch, play a sport or game.
- **Talk to someone**
Call a friend, find a therapist or counselor, contact your spiritual guide or a mentor.
- **12 step program or support group**
There are all kinds of groups you could join both in person or online
- **Journaling**
Write down your thoughts and feelings, or free-write whatever is on your mind.

- **Learning about feelings**

If you struggle to identify your own feelings, learn about other people's feelings through books or movies, listen to podcasts about psychology or healing.

- **Connecting to nature**

Go to your local park and walk among the trees and flowers, lay on the grass and read a book, look at pictures of nature you enjoy, garden, collect rocks, walk your dog or pet your cat.

- **Artistic expression**

Paint, draw, doodle, color, collage, sculpt; write a poem or story, sing your favorite song, play an instrument, find a drum circle, cook or bake, and dance!

- **Connect with others**

Socialize with friends or family, volunteer with a local organization, join a group or community, or start one yourself in person *or* online.

- **Ask for help**

If you need support with your self-care, it's OK to ask a trusted friend or family member, a colleague, a sponsor, or even call a hotline.*

See what else you can come up with. And remember, it may take a few tries to find the practices you like and work for you. Different things will work on different days, so just go with what works.

Moving Forward...

I encourage you to revisit this guide and the explorations, as your needs and boundaries are bound to change over time, as well as your self-care practices. Remember all these things take practice and are important for personal maintenance over your lifetime.

Do the best you can and keep up the good work!

*Most self-care practices borrowed from Dean Spade's forthcoming book. Learn more at www.deanspade.net