

## Boundary-Lowering Tactics to Understand

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In his groundbreaking book, *The Gift of Fear*, violence prediction expert and best-selling author Gavin de Becker describes a list of tactics that a rapist might use to persuade a potential victim to lower her boundaries so that she allows herself to get into an unsafe situation with someone she does not know. He also explains how these tactics might be used in other intrusive situations. With his permission, this article goes into more discussion about how understanding of these tactics can be important in daily life.

Use of some of these tactics does not automatically mean that someone is a bad person with bad intentions. In fact, some of these tactics can be very helpful when people are building a relationship. If we never lowered our boundaries with other people, we would have a hard time making friends, doing business, or enjoying social events. You also need to be aware of integrity in your own communications so that you don't get so caught up in being persuasive that you give people a dishonest message.

However, it is important to notice **how** and **when** these tactics are being used and not let them stop you from making your own choices. Is this person is trying to get you to do something that you also want? Or are you are being persuaded to lower your boundaries in ways that might not be in your best interests?

**Forced teaming.** Sometimes someone will say and do things to make you feel "We're in the same boat." Or, "We're on the same team." The purpose is to establish rapport and to put you at ease. Team spirit can be an excellent motivator. Sport teams, political parties, community service organizations, and neighborhoods all work best when people feel a sense of belonging with each other. It is important to notice when someone with whom you have not chosen to be connected with talks as if you are together. Be careful when people try to connect by identifying you with them as an "us" and to separate you from others who are "them". Remember what your relationship with this person truly is and is not.

**Charm and niceness.** People sometimes project warmth, kindness, sympathy, and humor as a way to get others to open up to them. People like this can be very enjoyable, but they also might be harmful. When someone is very funny, kind and sweet, think to yourself, "This person is trying to charm me. Is being with this person what I want? Am I being charmed into accepting things that are not okay with me? Am I in a safe

place if things go wrong?" Even if someone is great to be with, notice if that person's behavior seems to change. People who were betrayed by their friends might say, "I could not believe that she/he would do this to me because we have had such good times together." Many women who were attacked say afterwards, "But he was so nice to me at first!"

**Too many details.** When people want to persuade you, they sometimes give a lot more information than necessary. This can be because they really care about what they are saying, but it can also be because they are trying to distract you or confuse you into believing their story. It can be hard for honest people to remember that sometimes other people will make up convincing details to get you to trust them and that lots of details does not mean that someone is being truthful. Instead of getting too involved in what someone is saying, stay focused on your actual situation. Ask yourself questions like, "How well do I know this person? Is this person's behavior suddenly different in an uncomfortable way? Is he or she respecting my wishes?"

**Typecasting.** Understandably, most people don't like to be labeled as being uncaring, unkind, thoughtless, selfish, paranoid, unfair, misusing their power, or ignorant. Someone might deliberately use negative labels to get you to react in the opposite direction. Watch out for comments like, "You don't care, do you?" Or, "You aren't one of those women who think all men are bad, are you?" Or, "You probably think you are too good for someone like me." Or, "Someone who comes from a family as well off as yours could not possibly understand what it's like to be poor." Or, "This an unfair restriction on my freedom." Or, "Telling me to stop is abusive." Or, "You aren't being a good friend." Or, "You screwed up before and you probably will again." Trying to prove someone wrong by changing your behavior is another way of letting what someone else says have power over you. Instead, make a conscious choice about how you are going to act depending on what the specific behavior being labeled is and what is actually going on.

**Loan sharking.** A loan shark lends one amount and then collects much, much more than was loaned. People sometimes try to build relationships by giving gifts. People sometimes are kind and want to help. There is nothing wrong with this if what they want to do is something you want and if there is no pressure for you to give more than you wish in return. If someone else approaches you and tries to do you a favor, you are not obligated to accept it nor are you obligated to give a favor back. Be aware that this could be a tactic to get close to you. When someone you don't know says, "Here, let me help you," and tries to do something you did not ask for or don't really need, the safest response is to walk away and say firmly, "No thanks!"

**The unsolicited promise.** Promises are important. If you are the kind of person who keeps commitments yourself, you are likely to be reassured when someone makes a promise. However, before you trust your emotional or physical safety to someone's promise, make sure that this person has a track record of keeping promises. Watch out for comments like, "I promise I will never let you down." Or, "I promise I will never lie to you." Or, "I promise I'll leave just as soon as we get there." Or, "I haven't been drinking, I promise." Or, "I'll drive carefully, I promise." Or, "I'll pay you back, I promise." Remember that what someone has done over time is a far better indicator of what someone will do than any kind of promise.

**Discounting the word, "No."** As successful fundraisers, negotiators, and salespeople all understand, "No" can sometimes mean "Not yet." Asking for more information, listening to concerns, or offering other choices can lead to a good outcome for all concerned so it is important not to let "No" mean more than it actually does. As wise parents know, a child's "No" should always be respected as a feeling but not always accepted as a choice. At the same time, intrusive or dangerous people will test the boundaries of potential victims by not listening to their "No". If you are shy or uncertain in saying "No", even people with good

intentions might not hear you and might keep pushing your boundaries. If something is not okay with you or is potentially unsafe, it is important to be strong and clear and to have your actions match your words. "I really do not want to!" Or, "This is really not okay with me." Or, "Go away! I don't want your help!" If you need help, if possible, pick someone out yourself and tell that person firmly and loudly that you need help instead of waiting for someone not of your choosing to offer.

**Caring Questions.** This tactic was not on Gavin de Becker's list but it is one that I have found has lowered my own boundaries. People are hungry to be listened to and cared about. Questions can be useful tools in helping people to explore their thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, sometimes someone will use a caring question in the middle of a conflict or potentially dangerous situation as a tactic. A question like "Are you okay?" at an inappropriate time can be used to distract you from realizing that something someone is doing is **not** okay. Ask yourself, "What is the context for this question? What is this person's purpose in asking?"

We in Kidpower believe that most people are good and have mostly excellent intentions. Even good people sometimes try to pressure others into lowering their boundaries. In addition, sometimes people have unsafe intentions. They might not be not who you thought they were. Their intentions and behavior might change because of reasons that have nothing to do with you. An understanding of how and when boundary-lowering tactics are being used can increase both your personal safety and your communication skills. By not becoming confused, distracted or fooled by what someone else says or does, you can figure out what your best choices are and act on them.