

How to set boundaries with loved ones, colleagues or strangers.

Establishing healthy boundaries allows us to feel stable and safe so no justifications are required.



Boundaries are essential to healthy connections with others, whether they are loved ones, colleagues or those we don't know so well.

Boundaries allow us to be clear about our own needs and to be clear about what feels comfortable for us so we can connect with others in ways that feel safe and respectful.

If we are supporting others in our life, boundaries are particularly important. Poor boundaries can cause co-dependency in a relationship. Strong boundaries can prevent resentment and exhaustion. If we're giving selflessly without meeting our own needs the end result is burnout.

Creating boundaries sounds simple but it tends to be easier for some more than others. If our parents, guardians or other adults didn't expose us to healthy boundaries as children it won't be second nature to set them for ourselves. It is, however, possible to learn how to create and hold boundaries and to benefit from them.

Clarify what you need

During flight briefings, we're instructed by the cabin crew to fasten our own oxygen mask before helping others with theirs. Making sure we're supported first means we're then better able to assist others. What another person wants might not be something we are comfortable with. It might actually impinge on our own needs. This is where boundaries become important. They ensure we feel safe, comfortable and that our needs are not lost in the mix — that we're not reflexively responding to another before we've checked in with ourselves.

Press pause

If you're unsure of what your limitations and boundaries are in any given situation, it's okay to pause a conversation to reflect. It's okay to say, 'I'm going to hit pause on this conversation right now and I'll get back to you once I've considered what feels right for me.'

What Boundaries Sound Like

"I can hear that's important to you but I can't help you with that right now."

"This isn't something I feel comfortable with discussing."

"I won't be able to engage with you when you use language I find hurtful."

"I'm not feeling comfortable with the conversation. I'm happy to come back to this when things feel calmer."

Learning to say no

Saying 'no' may feel frightening. As humans, we naturally tend to avoid confrontation. Saying no or implementing a boundary can bring up feelings of fear and anxiety. This is normal. It takes practice to get comfortable with installing boundaries and this means sitting with discomfort. It's important not to over-explain or apologise for being clear about your boundaries.

Implementing boundaries, in fact, models what self-respect and self-care and look like. When communicating a boundary, you may need to be clear then step away or turn off your phone to enforce it.

Taking action

Boundaries can feel challenging because they involve follow up action. Not only do we have to do something different but we also have to avoid the urge to rationalise, apologise or over-explain our choices to another. We need to commit to our decided action (or inaction, depending on the situation) and avoid the tendency to talk our way out of doing so. Sometimes this means communicating non-verbally through our actions.

Managing feelings of guilt

Guilt is a very normal response when starting to use boundaries in relationships. Often, we can let guilt guide our responses to situations where we might feel we're letting someone down if we don't agree to what's been asked. Yet, if we are not respecting our own needs we're not modelling respect to those around us — we might even be enabling unhealthy behaviours such as manipulation or hostility.

Important to remember is that others might not be able to create healthy boundaries for themselves so it's vital then for us to set healthy boundaries for ourselves, to model them and to maintain them.

What Boundaries Sound Like

"It's okay for you to express yourself but it's not okay for you to yell and slam things. I'll need to leave now."

"I'm looking forward to spending time but I'll only have a couple of hours."

"I won't be able to make that event. I need some time for myself."

"I appreciate that this is important to you, but I'm feeling pressured and I need some time to consider it. "

"I won't be able to do dinner on Fridays any more."

Allowing others to choose their responses

When we start to instil boundaries, others might not like it. It's natural to feel uncomfortable when someone reacts poorly to your boundaries. Guilt might show up time and time again when you maintain your boundaries but you are not responsible for another's reaction. If the person reacts poorly it's okay to hit pause on the conversation (another boundary), leave, and be clear that you can resume the conversation when you both feel calm and safe to do so.

Putting it into perspective

It's important to understand that having and maintaining boundaries is a skill. Any new skill takes a lot of practice to feel comfortable with, but the reward is that one day it will be second nature. If you feel frustrated or overwhelmed, you should do! You're making an adjustment to the way you function. Stick with it and commit. Clear boundaries are essential to creating healthy connections and a sense of self-love and respect.