

Setting Healthy Boundaries

In relationships, work, and family life —
how to protect your wellbeing without guilt

Boundaries are one of the most talked-about concepts in mental health — and one of the most misunderstood. They are not about being difficult, cold, or selfish. They are the honest expression of what you need in order to feel safe, respected, and able to show up fully in your relationships and your life.

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This resource is for informational and self-help purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional support. If your situation involves abuse or coercive control, please contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 (free, 24/7).

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What Are Boundaries – Really?

Beyond the buzzword

A boundary is not a wall, a punishment, or a way of keeping people out. It is a clear communication of what you need, what you will and will not accept, and how you expect to be treated – in any area of your life.

Boundaries are the honest expression of your values, needs, and limits. They exist in every relationship and every area of life – whether we name them or not. The question is not whether you have boundaries, but whether they are clear, conscious, and communicated.

Healthy boundaries are not fixed or rigid. They are contextual – different with different people, in different situations, and at different times in your life. They evolve as you do.

What boundaries are not:

- Selfish – caring for yourself is not taking from others
- Mean – you can set a boundary with warmth and love
- Permanent – you can always revisit and renegotiate
- About controlling others – boundaries describe your behaviour, not theirs
- Only necessary in difficult relationships – the healthiest relationships have the clearest boundaries
- Something you have to justify or apologise for

"Boundaries are the distance at which I can love both you and myself simultaneously." – Prentis Hemphill

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Why Boundaries Matter

The cost of living without them

Boundaries are not a nicety. They are a fundamental requirement for mental health, physical wellbeing, and the sustainability of every relationship in your life.

Your mental health

Without boundaries, you absorb others' stress, needs, and emotions as your own responsibility. This is one of the fastest routes to anxiety, burnout, and depression.

Your energy

Every time you say yes when you mean no, you spend energy that was not freely given. Over time, this depletes the reserves needed for what genuinely matters to you.

Your relationships

Paradoxically, the clearer your boundaries, the healthier your relationships. Boundaries prevent the resentment, martyrdom, and unspoken grievances that erode connection over time.

Your sense of self

People without clear boundaries often lose track of who they are, what they want, and what they value. Boundaries are the container within which the self can exist and grow.

Your integrity

When you consistently override your own limits to meet others' expectations, you gradually lose trust in yourself. Honouring your own boundaries is a form of self-respect.

Your professional life

Without work boundaries, jobs expand to fill all available time. Burnout, resentment, and reduced performance are the inevitable result of having no protected space between work and the rest of life.

What a life without clear boundaries looks like:

- Saying yes to things and feeling resentful afterwards
- Feeling responsible for everyone else's feelings and comfort
- Chronic exhaustion from doing more than your share
- Difficulty knowing what you actually want or need
- Relationships that feel unequal or one-sided
- Saying what others want to hear rather than what is true
- Feeling used, overlooked, or taken for granted
- Fear of disappointing, upsetting, or losing people if you say no

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Why So Many People Struggle with Boundaries

It's not weakness — it's history

If setting boundaries were simple, everyone would do it. The fact that so many people find it deeply difficult reflects something important: the capacity to set boundaries is largely learned — and many people were never taught it, or were actively discouraged from it.

Early experiences

Children who grew up in households where their needs were dismissed, where saying no led to conflict or withdrawal of love, or where they were expected to manage a parent's emotions, often grow into adults with a deep difficulty asserting their own limits.

People-pleasing as survival

For many people, keeping others happy was a genuine survival strategy in childhood. When the person whose approval you needed was unpredictable or threatening, accommodating them was the safest option. This pattern continues long after it is necessary.

Cultural and social messages

Many cultures — and particularly messages directed at women, caregivers, and certain communities — explicitly equate selflessness with virtue. 'Good' people put others first. 'Difficult' people have needs. These messages go deep.

Fear of rejection or abandonment

At the root of most boundary difficulty is fear: if I say no, they will leave, be angry, withdraw love, or think badly of me. This fear is often rooted in early experiences of conditional love.

Not knowing it's allowed

Some people genuinely do not believe they are entitled to have limits. They have internalised the belief that their needs are less important, or that their worth depends on being endlessly available.

Guilt

Even people who know intellectually that boundaries are healthy often find that setting them produces intense guilt. This guilt is a feeling, not a fact. It reflects old conditioning, not present reality.

If you find boundaries hard, this is not a character flaw. It is a learned pattern, rooted in real experiences. And because it was learned, it can be unlearned — with understanding, practice, and sometimes professional support.

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The Different Types of Boundaries

Boundaries exist in every area of life

Emotional boundaries

Protecting your emotional wellbeing by limiting how much you absorb others' distress, how much emotional labour you carry for others, and what conversations or dynamics you are willing to engage with.

Physical boundaries

Your personal space, physical touch, and bodily autonomy. Who can touch you, how, and when. This includes in relationships where intimacy is present – consent is ongoing, not assumed.

Time boundaries

How you spend your time, what commitments you take on, and what you protect from encroachment. Includes work hours, response times, and the right to have time that is entirely your own.

Financial boundaries

What you are and are not willing to share, lend, or spend. How financial decisions are made. What financial requests you will and will not accommodate.

Digital & communication boundaries

When you are contactable, how quickly you are expected to respond, what is shared about you online, and how technology is used in your shared spaces.

Intellectual & values boundaries

The right to hold your own beliefs, opinions, and values without being ridiculed, overridden, or pressured to change them. Including in families where opinions differ strongly.

Energy boundaries

Recognising what depletes you and protecting against it. The right to say no to demands on your energy, attention, and capacity – even when others feel entitled to them.

Relational boundaries

What you need in terms of closeness, privacy, and the structure of your relationships. Including with in-laws, friends of partners, and the boundaries between your relationship and others.

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Signs Your Boundaries Need Attention

What to look out for

Boundary issues often announce themselves through feelings rather than through obvious events. Here are the most common signals that your boundaries may need some work.

Chronic resentment

Resentment is almost always the result of a boundary that was not set, not held, or repeatedly violated. If you feel resentful toward someone regularly, there is almost certainly a boundary issue.

Persistent exhaustion

When you consistently give more than you have, exhaustion is the natural result. Feeling perpetually drained is often a signal that your energy boundaries need attention.

Guilt at saying no

Intense guilt when declining a request — even a reasonable one — suggests that your worth has become tied to your availability and compliance.

Difficulty expressing needs

If you routinely suppress what you need in order to avoid conflict or inconvenience to others, your emotional and relational boundaries are likely too porous.

Feeling taken advantage of

The recurring sense that others take without giving, or that your generosity is assumed rather than appreciated, is a signal worth listening to.

Avoidance

Sometimes when boundaries feel impossible to set directly, people avoid the person or situation entirely. Avoidance is often boundary difficulty in disguise.

Losing yourself in relationships

Difficulty knowing what you want, think, or feel independently of others. Feeling like a different person in different relationships. Moulding yourself to others' expectations automatically.

Frequent conflict

Sometimes poor boundaries produce frequent conflict because unspoken needs and resentments eventually explode. Clear boundaries often reduce conflict significantly.

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How to Identify Your Boundaries

Getting clear on what you actually need

Before you can set a boundary, you need to know what it is. Many people who struggle with boundaries have difficulty identifying their own needs, values, and limits — because they have spent years prioritising everyone else's.

Follow the resentment

Where do you feel resentful most often? Towards whom? In what situations? Resentment is a reliable signal of a boundary that needs to be set or reinforced.

Follow the discomfort

What situations or requests leave you feeling drained, uncomfortable, or vaguely violated? These feelings point toward limits that matter to you.

Notice when you say yes and mean no

Track for one week every time you agree to something while internally wishing you hadn't. What do these yeses have in common?

Ask: what do I genuinely need?

In a given relationship or situation, what would make you feel respected, safe, and able to show up as yourself? Start there.

Connect to your values

Your deepest boundaries emerge from your values. What matters most to you? Where is your time, energy, and self-respect being spent in ways that conflict with those values?

The boundary spectrum

Porous / Too open	Healthy	Rigid / Too closed
Difficulty saying no. Taking on others' responsibilities. Overly influenced by others' opinions.	Clear about needs. Comfortable saying no. Can be close without losing self. Boundaries match values.	Rarely lets people in. Uses boundaries to avoid vulnerability. Boundaries used as walls rather than doors.

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How to Set a Boundary: Step by Step

A clear, practical process

Knowing you need a boundary is one thing. Communicating it is another. These steps make the process as clear and manageable as possible.

1 Get clear on what the boundary is

Name the specific behaviour, situation, or pattern you need to address. Be as concrete as possible: not 'I need more respect' but 'I need to not be interrupted when I'm speaking'. Ask: what do I need to feel safe, respected, and able to function here?

2 Choose the right moment

Set boundaries when you are calm — not in the middle of a conflict. Choose a private moment when neither of you is rushed or distracted. If in person feels too hard, some boundaries can be set in writing first.

3 Use I statements

Lead with your experience, not an accusation. Formula: "I feel [emotion] when [situation] because [impact]. I need [specific request]." Example: "I feel overwhelmed when I receive work messages after 7pm. I need evenings to be free from work contact."

4 Be clear, not apologetic

State the boundary once, clearly and directly. Avoid over-explaining, excessive apologising, or softening it to the point of vagueness. You can be warm and kind in your tone without undermining the content. 'No' is a complete sentence.

5 State what you will do, not what they must do

Boundaries describe your behaviour, not commands about theirs. Not: "You must stop calling me late at night". But: "I won't be answering calls after 9pm. If it's urgent, please text and I'll respond in the morning."

6 Follow through

A boundary without follow-through is a wish. If you said you would do something when the boundary is crossed, do it. Consistency is how boundaries become real and respected. The first time you hold a boundary after stating it is the most important.

In practice: before and after

Without a clear boundary:	With a clear, kind boundary:
"I'm so sorry, I know you need help but I'm a bit busy... but I suppose I could try to fit it in somehow if it's really important..."	"I'm not able to help with that right now. I hope you find what you need."

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How to Hold a Boundary

The harder part

Setting a boundary is often the easier part. Holding it — particularly when it is tested, pushed, or met with anger or guilt-tripping — is where most people struggle.

When you set a new boundary with someone who is used to having unlimited access to your time, energy, or compliance, they will often test it. Their reaction does not mean your boundary is wrong.

Guilt-tripping

"I can't believe you'd do this to me." "After everything I've done for you." The response: acknowledge the feeling without abandoning the boundary.

Anger and escalation

Raising their voice, becoming aggressive, or expressing outrage. The response: remain calm, restate the boundary once, and disengage if necessary. "I understand you're upset. I'm going to give you some space and we can talk later."

Persistent requests

Asking again and again, hoping attrition will wear you down. The response: the broken record technique — calmly repeat your boundary each time. "I understand. My answer is still no."

Silent treatment or withdrawal

Responding to a boundary by going cold or sulking. The response: allow the space without chasing or apologising for the boundary. Following up with warmth once emotions have settled is fine; reversing the boundary is not.

Reframing your boundary as the problem

"You're being oversensitive." "You've changed." The response: you do not need their agreement to have a boundary. "I hear that you see it differently. The boundary still stands."

When you set a new boundary and someone reacts badly, it does not mean you were wrong. It often means the boundary was necessary. The guilt you feel is old conditioning, not moral guidance. Sit with the discomfort. It gets easier each time.

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Boundaries in Romantic Relationships

Closeness without losing yourself

Romantic relationships are where boundaries are both most important and most often neglected. The healthiest partnerships are built on two people who remain individuals within their togetherness.

Individual space and time

The right to time alone, separate friendships, and personal interests that are not shared. Healthy relationships support rather than suppress individuality.

Technology and phones

What level of access each person has to the other's phone, messages, and social media. What phone use looks like during shared time. How quickly responses are expected.

Physical and sexual boundaries

What you are and are not comfortable with physically. These conversations need to be ongoing — comfort and consent can change and should always be checked, not assumed.

Financial independence

How money is managed, what is shared, and what remains individual. Financial transparency and autonomy are both important in healthy relationships.

Families of origin

How involved extended family is. What is shared with family members. How family visits and obligations are managed. This is one of the most common sources of relationship conflict.

Communication and conflict

How disagreements are handled. What is off-limits in arguments. Having explicit agreements here prevents escalation.

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Boundaries with Family

Often the hardest boundaries of all

Family boundaries are frequently the most difficult to set and hold. Long-established dynamics, love, guilt, loyalty, and the weight of history all combine to make saying no to family feel profoundly difficult.

Parental over-involvement

Parents who comment on your parenting, relationship, finances, or life choices without invitation. Boundary: "I love you and I need to make my own decisions about my life."

Unannounced visits or constant contact

Family members who arrive without warning or expect immediate responses at all times. Boundary: "Please check before coming over. I'll always respond within 24 hours."

Guilt and emotional pressure

Family members who use guilt, disappointment, or comparison to influence your behaviour. Boundary: "I understand you're disappointed. My decision is still the same."

Unwanted opinions and advice

Unsolicited feedback on your choices, body, relationship, or parenting. Boundary: "I'm not looking for advice on this. I'd love to talk about something else."

Financial expectations

Family members who expect financial support or loans that are not repaid. Boundary: "I'm not in a position to help financially. I hope you find another solution."

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Boundaries at Work

Protecting your professional and personal life

Work is one of the areas where boundaries are most chronically neglected — and where the consequences of poor boundaries are most severe. Burnout, resentment, and poor mental health are frequently the result of a professional life with no real limits.

Working hours

Define your working hours and protect them. This means not checking emails outside those hours, not accepting calls during personal time, and not regularly working late without genuine necessity.

Digital availability

Turn off work notifications after hours. Use an out-of-office reply when you are not working. Being contactable 24/7 is not a job requirement for most roles.

Workload and capacity

Learn to say "I don't have capacity for that right now" clearly and without excessive apology. Chronic overload is frequently the result of being unable to name limits.

Colleagues' emotional demands

Being a supportive colleague is valuable. Becoming someone's primary emotional support at the cost of your own work or wellbeing is a boundary issue. You are allowed to redirect.

Work-life separation

Create a physical or mental ritual that marks the end of the working day: a walk, a change of clothes, turning off notifications. Without a clear transition, work colonises the rest of life.

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Boundaries with Friends

Sustaining friendships without losing yourself

Friendships often suffer from things left unsaid. Honest, kind limits tend to deepen friendships rather than damage them.

Constant contact expectations

Some friendships carry an implicit expectation of rapid responses or constant availability that exceeds your capacity. "I'm not always quick at replying — it's not personal."

One-sided emotional dynamics

Friendships where you consistently listen, support, and advise without reciprocity can become draining. It is kind and honest to name this rather than quietly withdraw.

Unsolicited opinions

Friends who regularly offer advice you haven't asked for. "I'm not looking for advice on this, I just needed to talk it through."

Financial expectations

Friends who expect financial generosity or expensive social activities that don't fit your budget. "I'm keeping an eye on my spending — can we find something that works for both of us?"

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Digital & Social Media Boundaries

Protecting yourself in a connected world

The digital world has created a new category of boundary violations that did not exist a generation ago. Many people have no explicit agreements about digital boundaries — and suffer the consequences in their relationships, their sleep, and their mental health.

Phone-free time

Designate times and spaces that are phone-free: meals, bedrooms, the first hour of the morning. These boundaries protect both relationships and mental health significantly.

Notifications

Turn off non-essential notifications. The constant interruption of notifications keeps the nervous system in a state of low-level alertness. You do not owe anyone instant access.

Sharing your image or information

You are entitled to decide what is shared about you, your family, and your children online. "Please ask me before posting photos of me."

Response time expectations

You are allowed to respond in your own time. Setting this expectation clearly reduces tension.

Muting, unfollowing, and blocking

Curating your digital environment is a form of boundary-setting. Muting accounts that consistently leave you feeling worse is not rude — it is self-care.

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Boundaries and People-Pleasing

The deeper work

People-pleasing is not generosity. It is the compulsive prioritisation of others' comfort over your own needs, truth, and wellbeing — usually driven by fear rather than genuine care.

Signs of people-pleasing

- Agreeing with people even when you don't
- Apologising compulsively, often for things that are not your fault
- Changing your opinion based on who you are with
- Feeling responsible for how others feel
- Struggling to express preferences, needs, or disagreement
- Doing things out of obligation rather than genuine desire
- Feeling that your worth depends on being liked or approved of
- Finding it almost impossible to say no directly

Breaking the people-pleasing pattern

1 Notice the pattern without judgement

Begin by simply observing when people-pleasing arises: what triggers it? Who does it happen most with? What feeling does it relieve, however temporarily? Awareness precedes change — start here.

2 Create a pause before responding

When you feel the pull to say yes or agree, practise pausing first. "Let me think about that and come back to you" buys time to check in with yourself. Even 10 seconds changes the quality of your response.

3 Separate others' feelings from your responsibility

You are not responsible for how others feel about your boundaries. Their disappointment or frustration is theirs to manage. Practice: "That is their feeling. I don't have to fix it."

4 Practise small nos first

Start with low-stakes situations: a minor request, a social plan you don't want. Notice that the feared catastrophe usually doesn't happen. Each small no makes the next one slightly easier.

"You teach people how to treat you by what you allow, what you stop, and what you reinforce." — Tony Gaskins

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Self-Assessment Checklist

How are your boundaries right now?

Tick anything that feels true for you regularly.

Patterns I recognise in myself

- ☐ I often say yes when I want to say no
- ☐ I feel guilty when I put my own needs first
- ☐ I find it hard to ask for what I need directly
- ☐ I tend to apologise even when I haven't done anything wrong
- ☐ I regularly feel resentful but don't say anything
- ☐ I struggle to end conversations or situations that drain me
- ☐ I often take responsibility for other people's feelings or problems
- ☐ I feel anxious about disappointing people
- ☐ I change my opinion depending on who I am with
- ☐ I find it hard to know what I actually want, separate from what others want

In my relationships

- ☐ There are relationships where I consistently give more than I receive
- ☐ I have needs or limits in my relationships that I haven't communicated
- ☐ I allow behaviours that I know I am not comfortable with
- ☐ I have said yes to significant commitments I wished I had declined
- ☐ I feel chronically exhausted by one or more relationships

At work

- ☐ I regularly work beyond my contracted hours without choosing to
- ☐ I struggle to decline additional tasks when my plate is already full
- ☐ I check work messages outside working hours habitually
- ☐ I feel unable to push back on unreasonable requests
- ☐ My work regularly encroaches on my personal time and relationships

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Reflection Exercises

Getting to know your own boundaries

Exercise 1: The Resentment Map

Resentment almost always points to a boundary that hasn't been set or held.

Who do you feel most resentful toward, and in what situations?

What boundary were you not able to set or hold in those situations?

What would you need to say or do differently to address this?

Exercise 2: Your Values & Limits

Connect your boundaries to what matters most to you.

What are your top 5 personal values? (e.g. honesty, family, freedom, creativity, health)

Where in your life are you currently living in ways that conflict with these values?

What boundary, if set and held, would bring your life more in line with what matters most?

Exercise 3: A Boundary You Need to Set

Choose one specific boundary you have been avoiding setting.

What is the boundary, and with whom?

What are you afraid will happen if you set it?

Using the I statement formula, how would you communicate this boundary?

What will you do if the boundary is not respected?

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When to Seek Professional Support

When self-help isn't enough

Boundary difficulties are often deeply rooted in early experiences, attachment patterns, and core beliefs about worth and safety. While self-help resources are genuinely useful, some boundary issues benefit significantly from professional support.

- You consistently struggle to set or hold boundaries despite wanting to
- Boundary difficulties are significantly affecting your mental health or relationships
- You recognise a pattern of people-pleasing or self-abandonment that you cannot shift alone
- Setting boundaries produces intense guilt, panic, or fear that feels disproportionate
- You are in a relationship where your boundaries are repeatedly and deliberately violated
- You find yourself unable to leave a relationship or situation despite knowing it is harmful
- Boundary issues are connected to experiences of trauma, neglect, or difficult childhood experiences
- You feel that you do not know who you are or what you need, independent of others
- Burnout or chronic exhaustion is affecting your daily functioning
- You have tried to change these patterns and found it difficult to sustain

"The most important relationship you will ever have is the one with yourself. Boundaries are how you honour that relationship."

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How Therapy Can Help

Going deeper than self-help

Therapy for boundary difficulties does not just teach communication skills. It helps you understand why boundaries are difficult for you, address the underlying beliefs and experiences that drive the pattern, and build a genuinely different relationship with yourself and others.

Person-Centred Counselling

Provides the experience of a relationship in which your needs, feelings, and boundaries are genuinely respected – often for the first time. This corrective relational experience is itself a powerful foundation for learning to hold limits in other relationships.

CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Directly addresses the beliefs that drive poor boundaries: "My needs don't matter", "Saying no makes me selfish", "I have to earn love through compliance". CBT challenges these beliefs systematically and builds practical assertiveness skills to replace old patterns.

EMDR

Particularly useful when boundary difficulties are rooted in past trauma, attachment wounds, or early experiences of having limits violated or dismissed. EMDR helps process and reframe the underlying material that drives the pattern.

Hypnotherapy

Can access and reframe deep subconscious beliefs about worth, safety, and entitlement that drive people-pleasing and boundary avoidance. Particularly effective for people who understand intellectually that they need boundaries but cannot translate that understanding into action.

Couples and Family Therapy

When boundary issues are relational – involving a specific partner, parent, or family member – working on them together in a supported environment can be transformative. A therapist can facilitate the conversations that feel impossible to have alone.

