

Boundary Setting

EHC Medical Patient Education Module

A boundary is a limit, the point at which something ends. An interpersonal boundary is the limit you set on the behavior of others and on your own behavior based on clear and sensible thinking. Boundaries control when and how others approach you or behave around you, such as, *I will not allow a hug from someone I do not like. I will not allow drugs or alcohol in my own home. I will lock the door on my bedroom when I need to be alone. I will not allow smoking in my home or in the presence of my children. I will not allow drinking in my car.*

Boundaries allow you to take care of yourself and live a value-based life. *I believe exercise is my form of meditation and I will exercise each day. I believe that my body is my most important asset and I will not abuse my body with drugs and alcohol. And, I will not allow someone to dictate the time or type of sex I have. Honesty is my basic value and I refuse to allow someone else to talk me into dishonest behavior for whatever reason.*

Boundaries allow you to maintain confidentiality about your personal information and protect yourself from the negative emotions of others. *I will only share information and feelings about my past addiction when it will advance my personal growth. I have my own ideas and I do not have to depend on others for solutions. I can defend with clear information my right to choose not to drink or to use drugs.*

Boundaries can be reinforced by words and action. *Walk away from a person who is trying to convince you to have a drink. Think and say the words: I do not drink. Both words and actions can be effective ways of communicating boundaries.* Boundaries are ways to protect you such as refusing to go rock-climbing with friends when you are not trained for this sport; refusing to go to a party where drugs will be used; or refusing to have sex without a condom. Use well thought out boundaries to protect yourself from inappropriate behavior and your self-esteem will grow.

Define in writing the behavior you will or will not carry out to maintain safety and self-respect such as: *I will not get drunk and make a fool of myself. I do not use alcohol and drugs to make friends or have better sex. I do not get caught in a lie, because I tell the truth, even when it's difficult. If I am with someone who becomes violent, I leave. I exercise, get enough sleep, and eat well. I forgive myself for my mistakes.*

Boundaries, when they are clear, specific, and reasonable are enforceable. You tell your ex-wife you will talk with her about financial problems and you will not accept your former addiction as a reason to agree to pay more support. You tell your friend you will go skiing with him, but you will not go to the bar afterwards. You tell your friend you will not go to the club where you used to buy drugs. *When people are unwilling to respect the boundaries you've established based on self-respect, self-care, and core values, you end the relationship.*

To begin to decide where you need to set boundaries, go back to your stress inventory and look at the situations where clear boundaries would have helped reduce stress and prevent relapse. Circle the ones that require a boundary. Were they boundaries for your own behavior or boundaries you needed to set on behavior of people around you?

Think about the other areas in your life where boundaries would have helped to achieve a goal: relationships, school/work, physical/ mental health, home/community, and communication.

Interpersonal boundaries reduce stress, reduce conflict, and help to keep you safe. The purpose of having interpersonal boundaries is to protect and take care of you. You need to be able to tell other people when they act in ways that are not acceptable to you. You need to be self-centered in the sense of self-care centered. The addiction lifestyle encourages a blurring and erosion of interpersonal boundaries. Intoxicated people have sex, share confidential information, experience violence, and allow people into their lives that they would never have considered before the addiction. The addiction lifestyle erodes the individual's ability to set clear boundaries for themselves and for others.

To keep a safe support network, you will need to set up interpersonal boundaries to keep yourself safe, and to reduce the risk of relapse. It is your responsibility to communicate clearly to others when they respect or ignore your choice to stop using drugs and alcohol. Learning to set boundaries is essential to keeping yourself safe and free from drug and alcohol use.

Becoming focused on caring for yourself will support you to uphold your new values and goals. Setting boundaries will help you stay healthy in all areas of your life. It is impossible to have a healthy relationship with someone who has no boundaries or with someone who cannot communicate directly and honestly. If you have family or friends who are still using drugs and alcohol or who are earning a living through some aspect of the drug economy, you will need to decide how to set boundaries to keep yourself safe.

To keep an alcohol and drug-free home, you must be able to control who enters your home and how they behave in your home. You will need to set boundaries with others on how you will or will not share information about your past addiction and on the extent you will allow others to comment on your choice to remain drug and alcohol free. You will need to set boundaries on how often you will allow others to bring up negative things you may or may not have done. Does this sound difficult? In the beginning it will be.