



Setting Healthy Boundaries: A Practical Guide

What are Boundaries?

Boundaries are the personal limits and guidelines you set to protect your time, energy, and emotional well-being. They define what's okay and what's not okay for you in relationships – whether that's with friends, family, coworkers, or partners.

Healthy boundaries allow connection without losing yourself. They help you stay open to others while still honoring your own needs.

Boundary Styles

Everyone has a mix of boundary styles depending on the situation or relationship. Picture them on a spectrum: from porous to rigid, with healthy boundaries in the balanced middle.

Style	Description	Common Behaviors
Porous	Overly open; has trouble saying “no.” May prioritize others so much that personal needs get ignored.	Oversharing, people-pleasing, avoiding conflict, taking on others’ emotions.
Healthy	Balanced openness and protection. Can say “no” when needed but still builds closeness and trust.	Honest communication, selective sharing, mutual respect, assertiveness.
Rigid	Overly closed off; keeps people at a distance to stay safe.	Distrustful, detached, avoids vulnerability, inflexible values or routines.

Examples:

- A person with **porous** boundaries might lend money they can't afford to lose.
- A person with **healthy** boundaries might help when they can, but say “no” if it hurts their own stability.
- A person with **rigid** boundaries might refuse to help anyone, even friends.



Types of Boundaries

Boundaries can show up in many areas of life:

Type	Porous Example	Healthy Example	Rigid Example
Physical	Letting people invade your personal space	Allowing appropriate touch and distance	Avoiding all physical closeness
Emotional	Taking on others' feelings as your own	Sharing emotions safely and listening without overabsorbing	Shutting down emotionally
Intellectual	Adopting others' opinions easily	Respecting different views while holding your own	Dismissing all opposing ideas
Sexual	Saying "yes" to unwanted advances	Being honest about what feels right or wrong	Avoiding all sexual or intimate experiences
Material	Constantly lending money or possessions	Being generous within reason	Refusing to share or help at all
Time	Letting others control your schedule	Balancing priorities and commitments	Being so rigid that you can't adapt or relax

Remember: Your boundaries may change depending on the setting, the relationship, and your energy level that day and that's okay.

How Values Shape Boundaries

Your values, what matters most to you, determine where your limits should be.

- If family is a top priority, you might say no to extra work hours.
- If health is key, you might set limits around late nights or alcohol.

Use your values as a compass when deciding what boundaries to set.



Boundary Reflection Exercise

Think of a person or group where your boundaries feel off: too open, too closed, or inconsistent.

1. **Who is it?** (e.g., “my boss,” “my sister,” “my partner”)
2. **For each boundary type below, mark whether yours tends to be Porous, Healthy, or Rigid with this person:**

Type	Porous Example	Healthy Example	Rigid Example
Physical	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intellectual	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Material	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Imagine what it would feel like to have healthier boundaries with them.

- o What would you say or do differently?
- o How might the other person respond?
- o How would your life improve?

Example: *“If I tell my mom I can’t answer calls during work hours, I’ll feel less stressed and more productive.”*

Reflection Prompt: What is one boundary you want to strengthen this month, and how will you start doing it?



Building Healthier Boundaries

Here are simple, actionable strategies for creating and maintaining strong boundaries:

1. Give Yourself Permission to Say “No.”

Saying “no” doesn’t make you mean, it makes you honest.

Try saying:

- “I can’t commit to that right now.”
- “Thanks for asking, but that doesn’t work for me.”

2. Communicate Clearly and Calmly

State your needs directly. Avoid long justifications or apologies.

- “I’d rather not talk about that topic.”
- “Please text before coming over.”

3. Notice Your Feelings

If you feel resentful, drained, or anxious, a boundary might have been crossed. Listen to that feeling, it’s information.

4. Be Flexible, Not Flimsy

Boundaries aren’t walls; they’re gates that you can open and close based on trust and safety. It’s okay to adjust them as relationships evolve.

5. Use Your Values as a Filter

Ask: “Does this choice align with what matters most to me?”

If not, it’s probably time to set (or reinforce) a boundary.

Quick Reminders for Healthy Boundaries

- You’re responsible for communicating your limits clearly.
- You don’t need to explain or defend every “no.”
- Others may test your boundaries; stay consistent.
- It’s okay to change your mind as you grow.
- Boundaries aren’t about control; they’re about self-respect.



Saying “No” in Real Life: Practice Setting Boundaries

It’s normal to feel nervous about asserting yourself. Here are some respectful, confident responses you can adapt:

Situation	Example Response
A coworker asks for help when you’re overloaded	“I’d like to help, but I don’t have the capacity right now.”
A friend pressures you to go out when you need rest	“I’m staying in tonight to recharge, but let’s plan something next week.”
A relative makes critical comments	“I don’t appreciate being spoken to that way. Let’s change the subject.”
A partner keeps venting about work for hours	“I care about you, but I need some quiet time after my day too.”
A family member asks for money again	“I can’t lend money, but I’m happy to help brainstorm other options.”

Use these prompts to practice assertive communication. Write what you would say.

- 1. A friend stays long after you’ve said you’re tired and ready for bed.**
 - o Your response: _____
- 2. A coworker asks personal questions about your relationship, and you’re uncomfortable.**
 - o Your response: _____
- 3. Your sibling assumes you’ll babysit every weekend, but you want some personal time.**
 - o Your response: _____
- 4. A friend frequently cancels last minute, leaving you frustrated.**
 - o Your response: _____
- 5. Someone makes jokes that cross the line for you.**
 - o Your response: _____