



HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

A gentle, trauma-informed guide to protecting your wellbeing while staying connected to others

Boundaries are not about pushing people away. They help us stay connected without abandoning ourselves.

Client Workbook

For reflection, discussion and therapeutic work

1. What are healthy boundaries?

A boundary helps us recognise where we end and another person begins. Healthy boundaries allow us to care about other people without becoming responsible for their feelings, choices or behaviour. They help us remain connected without repeatedly abandoning our own needs to preserve the relationship.

A boundary can communicate:

- What I am comfortable with - and what I am not.
- What I am responsible for - and what belongs to somebody else.
- What I am willing to give.
- What I need in order to remain in a situation or relationship.
- What I will do if a situation continues.

Different kinds of boundaries

Emotional: “I care about how you feel, but I cannot take responsibility for making you feel better.”

Time: “I can't do that today.”

Physical: “I don't want to be touched at the moment.”

Family: “I understand that you disagree with my decision, but it is still my decision.”

Communication: “If the conversation becomes insulting, I will end it and we can speak another time.”

Privacy: “I'd rather not discuss that.”

A healthy boundary protects connection; it does not require the other person to agree with you.

2. Why can boundaries feel so difficult?

Difficulty with boundaries is rarely simply a failure to be assertive. Sometimes there is older emotional learning underneath it.

If you learned that safety, love or acceptance depended on being helpful, agreeable, undemanding or highly attuned to other people's needs, saying no may trigger a surprisingly strong emotional response.

Do any of these old rules feel familiar?

- ☐ Keeping other people happy keeps me safe.
- ☐ Conflict means something bad will happen.
- ☐ Saying no is selfish.
- ☐ Other people's needs matter more than mine.
- ☐ I am responsible for how other people feel.
- ☐ If someone is disappointed with me, I have done something wrong.
- ☐ I need to explain myself until the other person agrees.
- ☐ People might reject or leave me if I disappoint them.
- ☐ Being useful is how I earn love or approval.

These responses may once have helped you navigate important relationships. Rather than criticising them, we can become curious about them.

Ask yourself: “Is this something I still need to do now?”

3. Notice your warning signs

We often recognise a boundary problem in our body or emotions before we recognise it consciously.

- ☐ Irritation or resentment
- ☐ Feeling trapped
- ☐ Anxiety when somebody asks something of me
- ☐ Automatically saying yes
- ☐ Feeling responsible for fixing somebody else's problem
- ☐ Exhaustion after spending time with someone
- ☐ Replaying conversations afterwards
- ☐ Guilt when I say no
- ☐ Agreeing and regretting it later
- ☐ Avoiding someone because saying no feels too difficult
- ☐ Feeling that other people's needs always come first

My own early warning signs

Resentment can be information: “Something here may need to change.”

4. My boundary circle

Separating what belongs to you, what belongs to the other person, and what is genuinely shared can reduce guilt and confusion.

MY RESPONSIBILITY	THEIR RESPONSIBILITY	SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
My behaviour	Their feelings	Respectful communication
My decisions	Their opinions	Negotiating shared
My values	Their disappointment	responsibilities
My time	Their decisions	Listening
My emotional regulation	Their behaviour	Repair where possible
What I agree to	Whether they agree	Compromise when appropriate
What I tolerate	How they respond	

Am I taking responsibility for something that actually belongs to somebody else?

A situation I am thinking about

5. Finding the boundary

What is happening?

What am I feeling?

What am I needing?

What am I currently doing that I no longer want to do?

What would a reasonable boundary look like?

6. Communicating boundaries

Boundaries usually work best when they are clear, calm and relatively brief. You do not necessarily need to persuade the other person that your boundary is reasonable.

- “I’m not able to do that.”
- “That doesn’t work for me.”
- “I need some time to think before I answer.”
- “I’m happy to discuss this, but not while we’re shouting at one another.”
- “I understand that you’re disappointed, but I’m not going to change my decision.”
- “I’d rather not discuss that.”
- “I can help with X, but I can’t take responsibility for Y.”
- “I understand that we see this differently.”

A useful pause: “Let me think about it and get back to you.”

Beware of over-explaining

When boundaries make us anxious, we may give increasingly long explanations. This can accidentally turn a boundary into a negotiation.

Instead of: “I can’t come because I’ve had such a busy week and I know you’ll be disappointed and perhaps I could come later...”

Try: “Thanks for asking me. I can’t make Saturday, but I hope you have a lovely time.”

7. The hardest part: guilt after saying no

You have said no - and now you feel terrible. You may start wondering whether you were selfish, whether you have upset somebody, or whether you should change your mind.

This is often the point at which a reasonable boundary collapses.

Guilt does not necessarily mean I have done something wrong. Sometimes guilt means I am doing something differently.

Your nervous system may be responding to an old rule such as “Keeping other people happy keeps relationships safe.” You do not have to immediately remove the discomfort.

- Notice it.
- Name it.
- Allow it.
- Wait before acting on it.

The 24-hour pause

If you feel a powerful urge to reverse a reasonable boundary because somebody is unhappy, consider waiting before responding.

Ask: Has something genuinely changed - or am I trying to get rid of my guilt or anxiety?

What does guilt make me want to do?

What might I do instead?

8. When somebody pushes back

People who benefited from you having fewer boundaries may not immediately welcome new ones. Their reaction does not automatically mean your boundary is unreasonable.

- “But you've always done it before.”
- “You're being selfish.”
- “You've changed.”
- “Why are you making such a big deal about this?”
- “You obviously don't care.”

You can acknowledge somebody's feelings without taking responsibility for removing them.

“I understand that you're disappointed.” You do not have to add: “...so I'll change my mind.”

The broken-record technique

When somebody repeatedly challenges your boundary, avoid producing new explanations. Calmly repeat essentially the same message.

- “I understand, but I'm still not able to do that.”
- “I appreciate that you see it differently. My decision hasn't changed.”
- “We've discussed this, and my answer is still the same.”

9. Compassion and boundaries can coexist

- “I love you, and I can't do this.”
- “I understand why you're upset, and my answer is still no.”
- “I want a relationship with you, and I need this behaviour to stop.”
- “Your feelings matter to me, but they cannot be the only thing determining my decisions.”

Two things can be true: I care about you AND I need to take care of myself.

When the other person does not respect the boundary

A boundary is not primarily an instruction controlling somebody else's behaviour. “You must stop shouting at me” depends on the other person cooperating.

A stronger boundary identifies what you will do: “If you shout at me, I will end the conversation and we can try again later.”

You cannot always control whether somebody crosses a boundary. You can decide what you will do when they do.

10. Start small

If you have spent many years accommodating other people, suddenly becoming very assertive may feel overwhelming. Practise with small, low-risk boundaries.

- ☐ Say “I’ll get back to you” instead of automatically agreeing.
- ☐ Decline a minor request.
- ☐ Express a preference.
- ☐ Ask somebody to change something that inconveniences you.
- ☐ Allow somebody to be mildly disappointed without fixing it.
- ☐ Stop giving lengthy explanations for reasonable decisions.

Every small experience teaches your nervous system: “I can express a need and survive the discomfort.”

One small boundary I will practise this week

11. My boundary practice

A situation where I need a clearer boundary:

What am I afraid might happen if I set it?

What am I actually responsible for?

What belongs to the other person?

My boundary:

The words I could use:

What might they say or do in response?

What feelings might this trigger in me?

What will help me hold the boundary?

12. A compassionate reminder

Learning boundaries is not about becoming less generous. It is about making generosity a choice rather than an obligation.

- You are allowed to have needs.
- You are allowed to have preferences.
- You are allowed to change your mind.
- You are allowed to say no without producing a courtroom-quality defence.
- You are allowed to disappoint somebody.
- You are allowed to protect your time and energy.
- You can care deeply about another person's feelings without becoming responsible for them.

A healthy relationship needs enough room for two people to exist within it.

Use this workbook gently. You do not have to change every relationship at once. Boundary work is often a gradual process of noticing, experimenting and learning that your needs can matter too.