



8 Tips for Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

Boundaries are conscious or unconscious limits that we put in place. They may be physical, emotional, financial, time/space oriented, etc. Imagine a straight line as a boundary spectrum. On the far left are loose boundaries (everything gets in), and on the far right are rigid boundaries (nothing gets in). In the middle is a healthy, or regulated, boundary. Healthy boundaries are flexible—they allow us to let people in when it's appropriate and shut others out when it's not. *Having strong, regulated boundaries is essential to maintaining your health and longevity in the social sector.* Below are 8 tips for maintaining healthy boundaries.

- 1. Practice.** Learning new forms of communication that maintain healthy boundaries can be challenging, but the more you practice, the easier it will become. If you are someone who typically has loose boundaries, you may experience feelings of guilt as you start to assert yourself with clients and colleagues. If you're typically a bully or more dominant in your communication, you will have to work very hard to notice and honor other's feelings and be cautious with your words. It does, however, get easier! Practice makes better.
- 2. Be firm, but kind.** Project confidence and remove the wishy-washy modifiers that so many of us use ("um," "maybe," "I think," "a little bit," etc.). Practice what you are going to say ahead of time so you can sound as confident as possible, while still being calm in your tone and neutral in your diction.
- 3. Give information upfront.** Sharing your boundaries with your colleagues and clients before they have been crossed will help you feel more comfortable in a moment of stress. For example, letting the client know as part of your introductory conversation that you are only available during business hours, that you will cancel appointments if they are more than 15 minutes late, etc. will help you to be able to follow through in those instances.
- 4. Use "I" statements and take ownership.** Own your thoughts, feelings, and opinions through "I" statements. This will keep the focus on the problem at hand, and not on blaming or judging the client/colleague. Ex: "I would like to explain this to you without interruption" instead of "You need to stop interrupting me!"
- 5. Focus on facts.** Facts are universally true. Starting from facts can lay the groundwork to examine the narratives you each have and, ultimately, to a positive resolution. Ex: "I noticed that you have been late to the last 3 meetings we've scheduled," instead of "you are always late," or "why haven't you been on time?" which may sound judgmental.
- 6. Use the "BIFF" method.** This tactic is particularly useful in communicating with high conflict individuals who goad or bait you with emotional tactics (intentional or not). Instead of taking their bait, keep your comments Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm. This can sound like ignoring accusations they've made towards you, focusing on a few facts, repeating your "I" statements, and making your boundaries clear.
- 7. Broken record.** Pairs nicely with the BIFF method! Repeat your statements in a calm, neutral voice. Don't get pulled into an argument—especially when the other individual changes the subject.
- 8. Use the assertive "no."** Saying "no" is harder for most people than saying, "sure," or "okay." An assertive "no" is simple and direct. It does not need an explanation or rationalization, and it avoids aggressive comments made from a place of contempt/anger. The assertive "no" sounds like: "No, I won't be able to help with that," rather than "I can't because... (enter excuses)," or "Are you kidding me? No, I cannot help with that!" If you struggle with loose boundaries, try saying "no" assertively to one thing every day.