

BOUNDARY SETTING AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Lunch and Learn Series



Missouri Department of
MENTAL HEALTH



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH &
SENIOR SERVICES**

SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

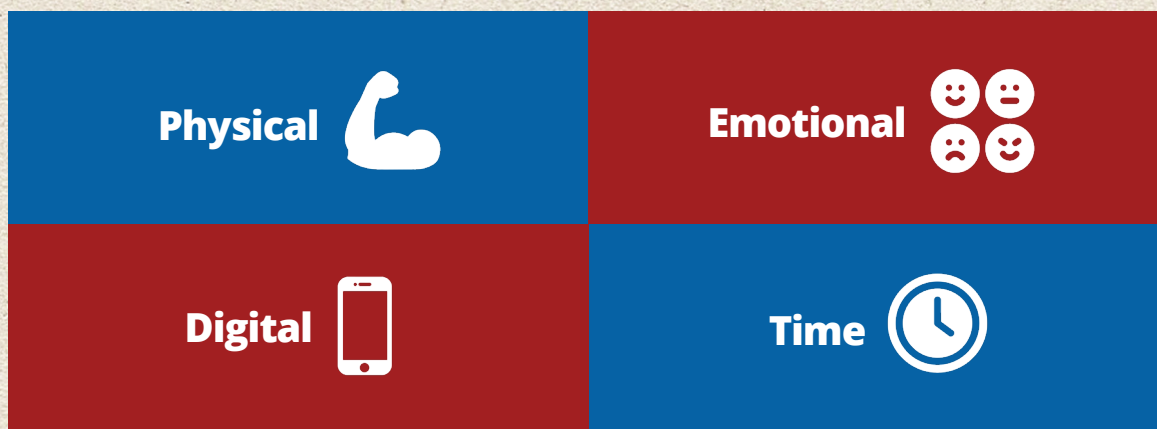
Setting boundaries is one of the most essential skills for protecting your mental health, improving relationships, and sustaining well-being. Boundaries aren't walls—they're guidelines that help you show up as your best self. They communicate what you need to feel respected, safe, and supported.

Healthy boundaries actually improve relationships. When you clearly communicate your limits, others know how to interact with you, and resentment and burnout decrease. Without boundaries, people often feel overwhelmed, drained, or taken advantage of.

Boundaries fall along a spectrum:

- **Diffused boundaries:** unclear limits, difficulty saying no, taking on others' emotions
- **Rigid boundaries:** overly strict limits, emotional distance, difficulty accepting support
- **Healthy boundaries:** clear, respectful communication of needs; empathy without self-neglect

Boundary Types:



PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES

Physical boundaries protect your personal space, comfort, and environment. Preferences vary widely—some people welcome hugs; others prefer handshakes or more distance. The important part is knowing your comfort level and expressing it respectfully.

EXAMPLES OF PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES:

- Stepping back when someone stands too close
- Offering a handshake instead of a hug
- Setting up your workspace to limit interruptions
- Using headphones or desk cues to signal focus time

If someone repeatedly ignores your cues, a simple statement like, “I’m more comfortable with handshakes at work,” helps clarify expectations.

EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

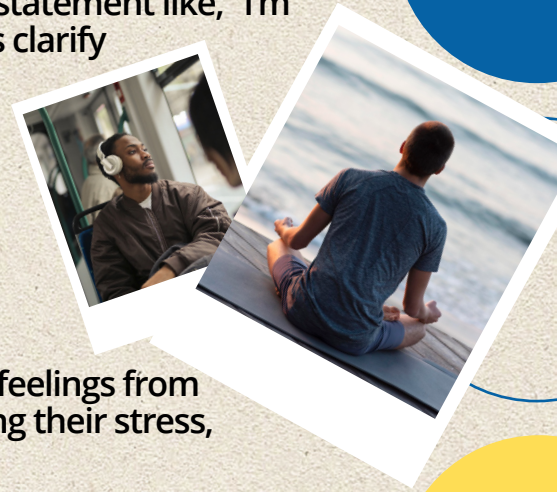
Emotional boundaries help you separate your feelings from someone else’s and prevent you from absorbing their stress, frustration, or anxiety.

Healthy emotional boundaries allow you to be caring without internalizing someone else’s emotions. You can acknowledge what someone is feeling without taking responsibility for managing their reaction.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES:

- Recognize when you’re carrying emotions that aren’t yours
- Practice values-based decision making—choose actions aligned with what matters to you
- Use mental imagery (like an “invisible shield”) to maintain empathy without emotional overload

These boundaries are vital in helping professions, leadership roles, and team environments where emotional labor is common.



DIGITAL BOUNDARIES

Constant connectivity blurs the line between work and personal life. Digital boundaries help you be present, reduce stress, and regain control over your attention.

PRACTICAL DIGITAL LIMITS MIGHT INCLUDE:

- Not checking work email after a certain time
- Turning off notifications during meals or weekends
- Setting communication hours and using auto-replies
- Creating phone-free zones (e.g. bedroom or during family time)
- Curating your social media feed to reduce negativity and overstimulation

Technology should support your well-being—not disrupt it.

TIME BOUNDARIES

Time boundaries protect your energy and ensure your schedule reflects what matters most

KEY TIME-BOUNDARY TOOLS:

- Blocking time on your calendar for priorities (focused work, family, rest)
- Creating buffer time between meetings or tasks
- Practicing the skill of saying no to nonessential commitments
- Using physical movement (a walk, stretching) to transition between roles

Saying no isn't selfish. It's a way of saying yes to what you value.

COMMUNICATING BOUNDARIES

Clear communication is essential. Boundaries work only when others understand them.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:

- Be direct and calm: “I don’t check messages after 7 PM.”
- Practice your phrases in advance
- Expect occasional pushback and use the “broken record” technique: repeat your limit without over-explaining
- Frame boundaries around mutual respect: “I want us both to be able to honor our limits.”

Cultural context matters—adjust your tone and approach as needed while still protecting your needs.

RECOGNIZING WHEN BOUNDARIES ARE BEING CROSSED

Your body and emotions often alert you before your mind does. Signs of boundary violations include:

- Feeling resentful or drained after interactions
- Chronic exhaustion despite low physical exertion
- Headaches, tension, or stomach discomfort around certain people or commitments
- Guilt or anxiety when considering saying no

A simple body-scan exercise—imagining saying yes versus saying no—can help you understand what you truly need.



MAINTAINING AND EVOLVING YOUR BOUNDARIES

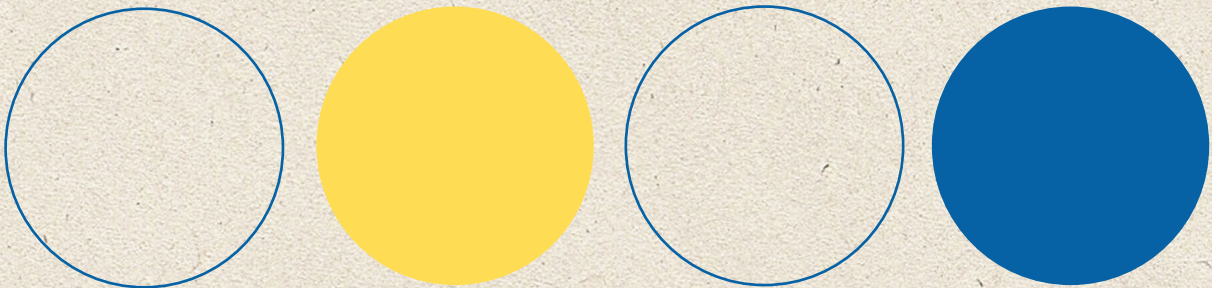
Boundaries require ongoing attention. Circumstances change, and your limits should change with them.

WAYS TO MAINTAIN BOUNDARIES:

- Be consistent—follow through on the limits you set
- Use accountability partners if helpful
- Adjust boundaries during major life transitions
- Repair slips by resetting expectations

"I've been answering emails late again. I'm returning to my 7 PM cutoff."

Boundary setting is a lifelong skill—not a one-time task.



BOUNDARY SETTING ACTIVITY PAGE

ACTIVITY: STRENGTHEN ONE BOUNDARY THIS WEEK

STEP 1: CHOOSE YOUR BOUNDARY

Pick one clear, realistic boundary you will commit to strengthening this week.

MY BOUNDARY:

STEP 2: WHY THIS BOUNDARY MATTERS

What will this boundary give you—peace, focus, time, clarity, rest?

MY BOUNDARY GIVES ME:

STEP 3: HOW I WILL PRACTICE IT THIS WEEK

Describe one small, doable action to help you follow through.

HOW I'LL SET MY BOUNDARY:

Remember

Boundary setting is a practice—progress, not perfection. Every time you honor your own limits, you reinforce your well-being and model healthy expectations for others.

More resources at: dmh.mo.gov