

Compassionate Boundary Setting to Build Compassion Resilience

Section 6



INTRODUCTION

“Without boundaries, you will act, sleep, work, groan, feel used and fulfill basic responsibilities rather than make choices to live and love fully, to work hard and nobly, to fulfill your purpose and to contribute passionately to your world.”¹



INFORMATION

Boundaries support our well-being and the well-being of those we care about and serve. Boundaries can refer to the division between our personal and professional selves, between our thoughts and those of our clients and colleagues, and between our own opinions and the mission/policies of our organization, among many other possible distinctions. Effectively managing boundaries might mean remaining mindful of our professional obligations in the midst of emotionally charged encounters, treating clients with respect at all times rather than assuming a tone of excessive intimacy, accepting organizational policy even when we feel that more might be done, or leaving our work at the office at the end of the day.

Boundaries are particularly important in work with clients who are experiencing distress and suffering, many of whom may be survivors of trauma and have histories of numerous violations and exploitations that have left them without the means to establish or maintain boundaries. As providers, we have the responsibility of setting and maintaining professional boundaries with clients. Setting clear boundaries can not only protect our relationships with clients, but it can also allow us to maintain a level of self-awareness and self-regulation, protecting us from compassion fatigue.

As we are clear about what these boundaries are, we can communicate them in a proactive manner and be open to discussion and collaborative implementation and problem solving. Discussing these boundaries with others can help clarify processes to both support consistent boundaries and consider exceptions to them.

Policies within any organization are most effective when boundary consensus is reached prior to policy setting. Policies should define boundaries and spell out the processes to communicate, implement, challenge and revise them. The culture leader of an organization, usually someone in an administrative or manager position, is most often the one best suited to guide staff when situations arise that may merit exceptions to the agreed upon boundaries.

¹ Black, J., & Enns, G. (1998). *Better boundaries: Owning and treasuring your life*. Oakland, CA: Raincoat Books

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To help identify needed boundaries, consider at least five ways that you would complete each of these three statements:

1

I have the right to ask for
(examples: privacy, information before making a decision, etc.)

2

To protect my time and energy, it is OK to
(examples: change my mind, set a time limit, etc.)

3

People may not
(humiliate me in front of others, go through my desk/wallet/purse, etc.)

Behavior and Beliefs in Relationships that Might be Signs of Ignored/Unestablished Boundaries:

Too close – total dependence, *“I need your approval and support 100% of the time.”*

Avoid conflict – *“If I ignore it, it will go away eventually.”*

Victimhood – Identify self as the victim, *“I have no power.”*

Distant – Due to past real or perceived violations, one is fiercely independent, *“I dare you to come close!”* or shies away from openness with others.

Invisibility – Not wanting to be seen or heard so that boundaries are not violated.

* [Revised from livestrong.com](https://www.livestrong.com)

Three Types of Boundaries:

Permeable – A boundary is set but there is very little reinforcement of the boundary. At times, having overly permeable boundaries will allow unwanted emotional and mental assault from others and may mean that we are letting too much of ourselves out, limiting our privacy and self-care.

Rigid – These are the boundaries that you reinforce at all costs. Too rigid boundaries can limit us to be open to new ideas or perspectives and can often keep us in the dark and unapproachable.

Flexible – Flexible boundaries are firm and clear yet open to new ideas and resources when needed. They are also sufficiently closed to protect us from harm.

It is important to also recognize that there may be times when saying “no” or setting a boundary doesn’t seem feasible in order for the needs or yourself, your family, or your team to be met. In these situations, it can be helpful to remember the concept of locus of control. Ask yourself:

- What about this situation do I have control over?
- Can I change something about this situation to ease the fatigue in this moment?
- Is this a “yes” for now and is there a way for me to be able to say “no” in the future?
- What other areas am I able to set a boundary in to support this area?

Remember, that even when needing to say yes to something, there is always room to say “no” to perfection.

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How might these different boundaries play out at work?

Consider an example: Your boss regularly asks you to take on extra tasks that might require you to work over your 40 hours a week. You...

Permeable – almost always agree to these asks despite wanting to say no. You may feel guilt and a sense that you are being ordered to do so. This may open you up to abuse or disrespect.

Rigid – never say yes to extra tasks because you have isolated your own work and are not open to new tasks or ways of working. You may be disengaged from the work or organization.

Flexible – occasionally agree to take on extra tasks when the circumstances warrant it, but without feelings of guilt or the sense that you are being ordered to do so. You are also able to accept when others say “no” to your requests.

But What About Compassion?

Our maintenance of boundaries does not override our empathic responses. We continue to make ourselves open to and respectful of students, entering into their worlds and imagining what they have been through.

We, in other words, employ both empathy and boundaries when relating to students and others. For example, if out of rage a student says something disrespectful to you, you can say, “*Oh, _____, I cannot let you talk like that to me because I would never want you to think that it would be OK for someone to talk like that to you. I want to help us both to feel respected.*”

Boundaries Between Interactions

People in the healthcare field find that, between interactions with challenging clients or colleagues, it is very helpful to do something to release tension and re-set for the next interaction. Examples include taking some slow breaths, visualizing a scene that is calming to you, stretching, humming, changing scenes (placement in the room) or having lunch with a colleague.

SELF-CARE



STRATEGIES

Self-care strategy for the SPIRIT – Core Values

[Preparing to Write Your Professional Mission Statement](#)



WHAT'S NEXT

Positive Staff Culture – how does compassionate boundary setting inform our staff culture?

And then I learned the spiritual journey
had nothing to do with being nice.
It had to do with being real and authentic.
Having boundaries.
Honoring and respecting my space first,
others second.
And in this space of self-care,
being nice just happened, it flowed...
not motivated by fear, but by LOVE.

By Michelle Olak