



Setting Healthy Boundaries

Emotional Affair Journey

Setting Healthy Boundaries Course

Introduction

Navigating the aftermath of infidelity can be a daunting journey, but it is also an opportunity for profound personal growth and relationship transformation. Understanding and respecting personal boundaries is an essential aspect of this healing process.

We all strive for genuine connections, where we can be our true selves and honor our values. However, societal pressures and personal experiences often blur the lines, leading us to lose sight of our own needs and values. In the wake of infidelity, rediscovering and reaffirming these boundaries is crucial for healing and rebuilding trust.

Authenticity is defined as a consistency between who you are on the inside and how you behave (Lehman et al., 2019). It is also conceptualized as a commitment to yourself and your values (Erickson, 1995). It's about honoring the commitment to yourself and your relationship, fostering an environment of transparency and trust. Establishing clear boundaries is a key step in this process. So if our goal is for our authentic self to thrive, we need to get clear on who we truly are, what we want, and how to defend our true self from outside influences.

What Are Boundaries?

You are likely already familiar with the term *boundary*. A boundary in physical space is a line (real or imagined) that defines the space by demarcating its limits. For example, when you look at a map of the United States, each state is defined by the line that separates it from other states.

Just as boundaries define a physical space by identifying its limits, they help define us by identifying our limits. In other words, when the outside world is trying to weave itself into our personhood and manipulate our behavior to serve its interest, boundaries help us see the difference between what is ours and what is not ours. They help us show up more authentically because we are certain about who we are. This clarity allows us to commit to our values, behave in ways that are consistent with how we define ourselves, and protect ourselves.

Personal boundaries can be understood as the limits and expectations we set with ourselves and others that make us feel safe and whole. Setting boundaries can look different depending on the boundary and the context.

Think of boundaries in affair recovery as the emotional and behavioral limits that you set to protect your relationship and personal well-being. They are the framework within which trust can be rebuilt and intimacy can be deepened. Healthy boundaries in the aftermath of infidelity help both partners understand what is needed for healing and prevent further harm.

Below are a few common examples of what it means to set a boundary. We will discuss all of these in more depth later on in the course.

Saying No

No is a word many of us are taught is unkind or unfair so we are reluctant to use it. Rather than enduring the discomfort and perceived potential consequences of setting a boundary, we compromise our authenticity and say “*sure*”.

Defining the limits of acceptable behavior

The limits of acceptable behavior are specific to every individual. Something that is hurtful for one person may not even be noteworthy for another. Limits serve a protective function by minimizing the amount of harm or disruption another

person can cause. An example many of us are likely familiar with might be: *“When you message me late at night it wakes me up. I’d like it if you would wait until the morning to send funny memes.”*

Articulating expectations

Clearly articulating expectations helps define the role of each person in the relationship and helps both parties meet each other’s needs. An expectation can be something as simple as expecting your friend to return your shirt in the same condition it was in when they borrowed it.

Setting Boundaries After Infidelity

Boundaries in this context might involve:

- **Open Communication:** Establishing a norm where both partners can express their feelings and needs without fear of judgment or retaliation.
- **Transparency:** Agreeing on the level of transparency needed to rebuild trust, such as access to personal devices or information about daily schedules.
- **Personal Space:** Recognizing the need for individual healing and personal space while maintaining a connection.
- **Shared Expectations:** Clearly defining what fidelity and commitment mean in your renewed relationship.

Why Are Boundaries Important?

Personal boundaries are an essential part of living an authentic life. We require boundaries to know who we are, to make decisions that will help us thrive and keep us safe, and to meet our needs.

When examined closely, we might find that boundaries could improve our lives in nearly every way. Let's briefly discuss a few more reasons setting boundaries is important before moving on to the rest of the course.

Honor who we are

Setting boundaries is an acknowledgment that our needs are valid, and we are worthy of having them met. When we move through the world without boundaries, we may disregard our needs so that we can meet the needs of others. We also often dismiss our needs as unimportant or identify as someone who isn't worth all the trouble. When we set boundaries, we are honoring the fact that each of us is precious and worthy of care and safety.

Protect ourselves

Boundaries help protect us from outside influence and manipulation. In other words, when we set strong boundaries, we are less likely to be coerced into behaving in ways that conflict with our authentic self. They also help protect us by ensuring that our needs are met and that we are not overextending ourselves in a way that only serves others.

Help us avoid burnout and bitterness

When we overextend ourselves or allow someone to repeatedly violate a boundary, we will start to feel burned out and bitter. Unfortunately, we don't always notice this is happening until it is too late. By setting and upholding boundaries, we protect ourselves from these undesirable states of mind.

Improve our relationships

One of the main reasons we are reluctant to set boundaries is fear of damaging our relationships (de Azevedo Hanks, 2016). However, when we are in a healthy relationship, setting boundaries improves the relationship. Being clear and direct about what our needs are provides a greater sense of trust and connection.

Additionally, the person we are in a relationship with can feel more comfortable knowing that they aren't going to accidentally trample a boundary they didn't know we had.

Self-care

Boundaries are a critical piece of self-care. Setting boundaries honors the fact that we are human beings with needs that are worthy of being met. When we are able to fully recognize our humanity in this way, and fully engage with our authentic selves, we are better able to care for and nourish ourselves.

Boundaries after infidelity are vital for several reasons:

- **Self-Respect:** They affirm that your feelings and needs are valid and important.
- **Safety:** They create a safe space for both partners to express vulnerabilities and work through the pain.
- **Avoiding Resentment:** By setting clear limits, you prevent feelings of being overwhelmed or taken for granted, which can lead to resentment.
- **Enhancing the Relationship:** Clear boundaries lead to more honest and open communication, strengthening the relationship's foundation.

As mentioned previously, these are only a few of the many ways boundaries are important for a life well-lived. Throughout this course, we will touch on many more of the ways in which boundaries can improve our lives. We will also learn what boundaries are, where they come from, how to identify where we need boundaries, and how to set and keep our boundaries.

Module 1: Exploring the Boundaries of Our Lives

Our lives are defined by the boundaries we set. In this module, we will talk more about what boundaries are, why they are important, and the different types of boundaries we might need to set.

[1] Boundaries and Personal Identity

The boundaries we set are an important part of our identity. Our identity is comprised of who we think we are (Schwartz et al., 2011). The way we define ourselves usually includes our values, goals, beliefs, and behaviors. Our boundaries are a reflection of our values, goals, and beliefs, and govern our behaviors.

When we lack boundaries, we allow others into a space where they are not welcome and where they can start to substitute pieces of our selves with whatever serves them best. This isn't to suggest that everyone you lack boundaries with is out to harm you. Often the people that take advantage of our boundarylessness don't realize they are doing it. However, whether nefarious or not, the end result is that we behave in ways that are conflicting with what we truly want and who we truly are.

[2] How Boundaries Protect Us

Boundaries serve a protective function in our lives (Volkova et al., 2022). They help us ensure that our needs are met, that we are safe in our relationships and that we aren't extending ourselves beyond our capacity. When we lack boundaries - or lack healthy boundaries at least - we don't have the protections that allow us to live our best, fullest lives.

Unfortunately, many of us move through the world without these protections and totally unaware of our vulnerability. What exactly our boundaries are and where we are lacking them isn't always apparent.

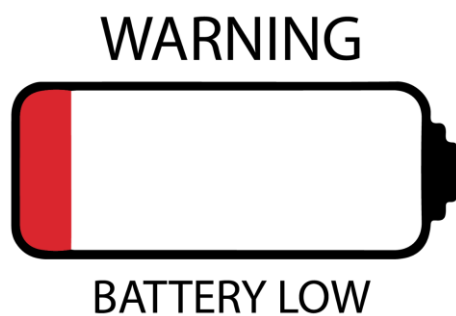
To determine where we need to set boundaries or adjust the boundaries we hold currently, we need to pay attention to our patterns of behavior and the feelings that accompany them. This kind of mindful observation of ourselves can help us start to notice the areas in which we don't feel protected. There are several warning signs we can look out for that may indicate a space in which we could create healthier boundaries:

- **Neglecting self-care** – One of the boundaries most of us struggle with is boundaries around how we spend our time and who we spend it on. If we struggle to say “no” or prioritize others over ourselves, we lose the time we need to spend on self-care. If you are too busy serving others to tend to your own needs, it is important to reexamine your boundaries.
- **Your relationships are difficult, dramatic, and/or draining** – Healthy boundaries are essential for relationships based in respect and reciprocity. When we lack boundaries, we open ourselves up to being controlled and manipulated. When we demonstrate that we don't know how to stand up for ourselves, we sometimes attract the kind of people who will seek to take advantage of us. Relationships with people like this are, unsurprisingly, typically tumultuous and exhausting. If you have friends or partners that consistently make you feel depleted, this may be a sign that you need better boundaries with that person.
- **Hypersensitive to the opinions of others** – it isn't wrong to care about how others perceive you, but when you let the opinions of other people define you or dictate your self-esteem, it's probably time to check out your boundaries.
- **Loss of self** – as mentioned previously, boundaries help inform our identities. When we lack healthy boundaries, we can end up behaving in ways that conflict with who we really are. If you find that you are having trouble recognizing yourself or making sense of your actions, it is likely time to consider where you might be lacking some boundaries.

- **Resentment** – resentment comes from the inability to react to an injustice (Villalobos, 2022). If you are feeling resentful toward someone, it may be a sign that there is something unjust about your relationship with them resulting from a lack of boundaries.
- **Bitterness** – One of the quickest ways to identify where you are lacking boundaries is to consider when and toward whom you feel bitter. Bitterness arises when we are consistently denying our own needs in the service of others.
- **Burnout** – Burnout is a common consequence of overextending ourselves. If we are feeling burned out, that may be a sign that we need healthier boundaries around how we spend our time.

EXERCISE: I Saw the Sign

Reflect on the list of signs we just covered and note which ones you recognize in your own life. This isn't an exhaustive list, so if you notice any signs that we didn't discuss feel free to add them. Pick one or two of the signs you see in your life and design a warning sign that represents each. For example, if you recognize symptoms of burnout in your life, you might create a sign like the one below:



Remember to recharge and protect your time

[3] Types of Boundaries

Boundaries can be categorized in many ways according to the life domain in which they exist and the aspect of yourself that they protect. Some of the different types of boundaries include spiritual, emotional, internal, physical, material, social, mental, sexual, and conversational.

Many of these categories overlap, so in this module, we will focus on the following 5 categories of boundaries described by therapist and author, Nedra Glover Tawwab (2021): **physical, intellectual, emotional, material, and temporal.**

Physical

Physical boundaries include personal space, physical touch, and privacy. Personal space refers to the perimeter around your body at which you are comfortable with the presence of another person. Your personal space preference will likely be different for different people and different contexts. For example, if a stranger on an empty elevator stands immediately behind you, you might feel uncomfortable, but feel perfectly fine when your spouse or partner stands behind you in the same proximity.

Boundaries surrounding physical touch include any action in which one person's body comes in contact with another's. This might be things like hugging, kissing, or holding hands, as well as less intimate actions like shaking hands or a pat on the back.

Privacy boundaries include everything you deem personal and prefer to keep to yourself. For example, if your partner reads your text messages without permission, they have violated a privacy boundary.

Intellectual

Intellectual boundaries refer to your freedom to hold and express your own thoughts, ideas, and opinions without being dismissed or belittled. Essentially, intellectual boundaries protect your individuality and guard against being influenced by people who have not earned your trust. For example, if someone

calls you hurtful names or yells at you about the opinions you express during a conversation in an attempt to get you to agree with them, they are violating your intellectual boundaries.

Emotional

Emotional boundaries are all about interpersonal expressions of feelings. In part, emotional boundaries refer to the expectation that when you share your feelings, they will be respected. That is, when you express your feelings, you expect that you will not be belittled and that your feelings will not be invalidated.

Emotional boundaries also safeguard you against unwillingly sharing the burden of someone else's feelings or performing emotional labor you did not consent to. For example, when a friend calls you up to vent about their ex or their terrible boss without asking first, they have violated an emotional boundary.

Other examples of emotional boundary violations include gossiping about another person, sharing a friend's secret, minimizing feelings or telling people how they should feel, and oversharing or sharing inappropriate information.

Material

Material boundaries refer to expectations surrounding how others treat your material possessions. For example, when you loan something to a friend you expect it to be returned in a reasonable amount of time in the same condition in which it was lent. If someone takes something without your permission or damages something that belongs to you and refuses to fix it, they have violated your material boundaries.

Temporal

Temporal boundaries essentially refer to how you spend your time. Unhealthy time boundaries lead to struggles with work-life balance, neglecting self-care, and prioritizing others' needs over your own. These are the kind of boundaries that most of us struggle with.

All too commonly we agree to do things we don't want to do, take on extra work we know we don't have time for, and prioritize our partners, children, and friends, leaving no time for ourselves. Time boundaries can also include making requests at a bad time, such as late at night when someone might be sleeping, and expecting someone to be available and responsive at all times.

In the digital age when we are all theoretically accessible at nearly every hour of the day, the expectation to immediately text or call back is common. However, having healthy time boundaries can help us prioritize the activities that are important to us and proceed with them uninterrupted.

EXERCISE: What Do Your Boundaries Look Like?

For each boundary category, write out an example of a boundary you have (or would like to have). For instance, if you are an artist, a temporal boundary might be that you will not do commissions for free. Try to think of at least one boundary for every category, but the more you can think of the better. Write these down so you can refer back to them later.

[4] Boundaries in Different Life Domains

Different life domains each entail their own set of challenges and requirements when it comes to boundaries. The different types of boundaries described above may also manifest differently in each life domain. For example, your physical space boundary might be very different at home than it is at work. Let's talk a bit about setting boundaries in each of the 4 life domains: Family, friends, work, and intimate relationships.

Family

Boundaries are essential for a healthy, well-functioning family. They help define the roles, rules, and responsibilities of each family member and serve to create a safe space where we know what to expect and what is expected of us. Adults in a

family need boundaries with each other and with their children, but it is also important to allow children to set their own boundaries. When a child's boundaries are respected, it shows them that their needs are valuable and saves them from having to learn that as an adult.

Family may be one of the most difficult life domains in which to set and maintain boundaries. There are many reasons for this. For example, if you grew up without boundaries, then your family is accustomed to expecting that you'll agree to all of their requests, brush off the snide "jokes" they may make about you, and ignore their invasions of your privacy. So, when we set boundaries as an adult, we are suddenly and drastically changing the rules of the game in the eyes of our family.

Your parent may feel insulted when you turn down their invitation to dinner because that never happens, you always say yes. Similarly, your sibling may react negatively when you ask them to stop making jokes about your body because you've permitted that kind of behavior for your whole life. This could make standing up for yourself can feel shocking or antagonistic to them (Newman, 2019).

There are many other challenges to setting boundaries with family. Let's take a look at a few more so we know what we are up against and can be prepared.

- **Physical proximity** – The physical space that exists between you and your family can be a deterrent to setting boundaries. If we live with, or close to, our family, we are less able to distance ourselves if a family member reacts negatively to our boundaries or refuses to honor them.
- **We have a long history** – Our reasons for not wanting to disappoint our family have developed over the course of our whole lives and can therefore be quite complicated. For example, we may desperately want the approval of our parents, which can make the prospect of upsetting them horrifying.
- **They know us too well** – Family members are often aware of all of our weaknesses. Knowing what we are sensitive about or reactive to makes it easier to manipulate us into dismissing our own needs and neglecting our boundaries.

- **We aren't the only ones affected by a feud** – Because families are a system, discord between two parts of that system can disrupt the whole thing (Sharaievska & Stoldolska, 2015). In other words, if a feud erupts over the boundaries we have set, the animosity can affect other members of the family. Knowing that we aren't the only ones that may have to deal with the consequences of our boundaries can feel like a huge barrier.

Though there are many additional challenges that we need to overcome when setting boundaries with our families, it is worth the effort to do so. As Dr. Susan Newman suggests, *“If you truly are to be your own person, you have to practice self-protection, and that means sometimes you have to say no to those you love.”* (Newman, 2019).

Friends

An important consideration to make when you are setting boundaries with friends is whether they reciprocate your love and generosity or if they tend to take advantage of your good nature. Unhealthy friendships tend to be caused by unhealthy boundaries (Tawwab, 2021). However, there are some friends worth the trouble of setting boundaries with and other friends we might be better off without. If your friendship is characterized by love, support, trust, mutual respect, and acceptance, boundaries can strengthen and deepen the relationship. If this isn't the case, it may be beneficial to reconsider the relationship altogether.

Friendships, like families, are also a tricky space for setting boundaries. Our friends are special to us and we don't want to lose them, so the idea of saying *no* and setting boundaries can feel like a big risk. And, unlike families, we do not have ties that bind us to our friends, thus they dissolve more easily than ties to a family member would (Allan, 2005). However, if you have a friend that would rather end the relationship than respect your boundary, this is likely not the kind of friendship that will enrich your life in a meaningful way.

Though many of the boundaries we may wish to set in our friendships will be the same as or similar to those we set in our other life domains, there are some

boundary issues that are more specific to friendships. Let's take a look at a couple of common boundary issues that arise in friendships (Tawwab, 2021).

Acting as an advisor

Our treasured ability to be open and honest with our friends can sometimes set us up for frustration and burnout. That is, there is commonly an expectation that part of the responsibility in a friendship is constantly being open to listening to our friends' more intimate thoughts, feelings, and issues. This, however, is not a realistic expectation, and trying to consistently fulfill this perceived responsibility can lead us to feel frustrated and compel us to engage less with our friends.

Loaning money and possessions

We may be quick to loan our friends money or let them borrow something they need because we love them. However, we don't always consider whether or not we want to be a lending source before we offer our resources. Loaning money or other possessions to our friends when we don't really want to can make us feel resentful and ultimately be damaging to the friendship.

Unsolicited advice and feedback

Both offering and receiving unsolicited advice and feedback can strain an otherwise healthy friendship. Typically, the motivation for offering unsolicited advice is good. Most of the time our friend is just trying to help. However, this can make us feel unheard or like our friend thinks they know better than we do, which can create fertile ground for conflict.

The "needy" friend

Having needs, no matter how many, is never wrong. Expecting that our friends will always be available to meet them, however, demonstrates the lack of healthy boundaries around time and emotional availability.

Work

Though there are more barriers to setting boundaries in some life domains than there are in others, setting boundaries in any domain comes with its fair share of

challenges. Setting boundaries at work differs from setting boundaries with family, friends, and intimate partners in part because our roles are more clearly defined.

Often, we even have a written, agreed-upon description of what our roles and responsibilities are, which should unambiguously inform us about some of the boundaries we should set. This, however, is not always the case. It is a common experience to find yourself taking on more than you have previously agreed to out of concern for the consequences that “no” might have.

Many of us have a hard time setting boundaries at work because we fear that saying no will make us look like we aren’t a team player or that we will earn the boss’s disapproval. However, setting boundaries can actually earn the respect of our colleagues and superiors. Good work boundaries can help us perform better and put us in a position to do more of the work we want to do and that would be of benefit to us and less of the work that drains the life out of us.

Intimate Relationships

Intimacy refers to a particular kind of closeness characterized by familiarity, privileged knowledge, strong positive emotional attachments, and trust (Jamieson, 2005). Boundaries in an intimate relationship can perform several functions. They may help define the roles of each partner in the relationship, especially in the context of cohabitation. Theorists describe an intimate relationship in terms of a private, exclusive exchange that generates a foundation of trust (Simmel, 1950). In other words, a relationship is only intimate so long as there is something that the people in the relationship only give to each other. Thus, boundaries are important for delineating what that special something is and how it is to be shared.

EXERCISE: Where Are Your Boundaries?

Look back at your list of boundaries you made earlier and consider the domain in which each might fall. If one boundary applies to multiple domains, consider how it might manifest differently in each. Next to each boundary on your list, write out

the domains it fits in. This will help you start to see patterns in what boundaries you need and where you need them.

[5] How Healthy Are Your Boundaries?

Boundaries are not a binary phenomenon. That is, it isn't the case that you either have boundaries or you don't. There are different degrees to which we enforce our boundaries. For example, we may have boundaries around how we use our time, but those boundaries might be too flexible to actually protect us. Similarly, we may hold boundaries that are so rigid that we shut out the opportunity for the kind of closeness and intimacy healthy boundaries can offer us. Let's take a look at some of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy boundaries.

Healthy Boundaries

Healthy boundaries depend on an awareness of your emotional, mental, and physical capacities in addition to the ability to clearly communicate your needs. Here are some of the characteristics of healthy boundaries:

- Your boundaries are flexible depending on the context
- You are clear about your values
- You can listen to your own opinion
- You can be vulnerable with those who you trust
- You are comfortable saying "no"
- You are comfortable being told "no"

Unhealthy Boundaries

Boundaries that are unhealthy are typically either too porous or too rigid. Below are some characteristics of each:

Porous Boundaries

- Weak
- Poorly expressed
- Create damaging relationship dynamics
- Codependency
- Accepting mistreatment
- Fear of being rejected

Rigid Boundaries

- Healthy exceptions to the rules are never allowed
- Fear of vulnerability
- Building walls
- Never share
- Unrealistic expectations of others
- Cutting people out

Summary

Boundaries are an important part of who we are. They help define us and protect us from the unwanted influence of others. There are many different types of boundaries and many different life domains in which we might need to set them. When we are setting or reevaluating our boundaries, it is important to determine if they are healthy boundaries or unhealthy boundaries.

Module 2. Where Your Boundaries Come From

Exploring where our boundaries came from is an important part of creating healthy ones. Our boundaries begin their development in childhood (Volkova et al., 2022) and are heavily influenced by our experiences in the first years of our lives. These experiences may be directly responsible for our current boundaries or they may have affected other pillars of our humanity including how we relate to others and how we relate to ourselves. Let's take a tour through a few places that may have given rise to the boundaries you know and don't love today.

[1] Childhood: Learning From Experience

Childhood is a time of immense learning. Much of our personality and behavioral tendencies begin in childhood as we learn to navigate through our environment. A few critical aspects of boundary development include exploration, observation, and messaging.

Exploration

As toddlers, when we are mobile and have at least a little autonomy, we start to develop our identity and differentiate ourselves from our parents. In other words, we start to learn where they end, and we begin.

In this stage of our development, it is critical that we are allowed to explore our surroundings independently of our parents in order to develop a healthy sense of self. If we are not given opportunities to explore and learn about our environments for ourselves, we are not able to begin building our identities at this critical stage.

Whitfield (1993) suggests that this often happens when parents have been wounded in their own childhood. Specifically, he states when parents have not healed their own wounds, their children will be wounded "in approximate proportion to the extent that the parents are wounded." This process is not necessarily intentional and is often not something they are aware of, rather it is

the product of parents projecting their own experiences onto their children (Miller, 1981).

Developing our identities early on is an important part of developing healthy boundaries. Without a sense of self, we are more likely to become codependent and have low self-esteem (Whitfield, 1993). We will talk more about codependence and self-esteem later on, but for now, it is sufficient to know that both low self-esteem and codependent tendencies prohibit our development of healthy boundaries.

Observation

In addition to our early experiences of exploration and of ourselves as independent agents, the boundaries we develop are also influenced by what we observe in our parents or primary caregivers.

As children, much of our behaviors and beliefs are shaped by what we see others doing. For example, in a landmark study led by legendary psychologist Albert Bandura, 3 groups of children observed an adult playing with a giant inflatable doll (called a Bobo doll). 1 group observed the adult playing aggressively with the doll, another observed the adult playing gently with the doll, and the 3rd group did not watch the adult play with the doll (Bandura et al., 1961). What Bandura and his research team discovered was that children who watched an aggressive interaction between the adult and the Bobo doll were significantly more aggressive with it when it was their turn to play than the other 2 groups, demonstrating the affect that simple observation can have on behavior.

The extent to which we learn to imitate the behaviors of those around us as children is an important part of developing boundaries. In other words, if our parents/caregivers have poor boundaries, we will likely imitate their behavior and develop poor boundaries ourselves.

Messaging

As children, when the world is still brand new to us, we are compelled to look for patterns that will help us make sense of our experiences. Growing up in a family with poor boundaries can send us negative messages which we then internalize and learn to expect from everyone else as we grow older. For example, parents who are more interested in control than in individuality may violate private spaces at will by barging through closed doors or reading diaries. This behavior teaches us that it is normal for people to infringe on us and in response we either learn that we do not deserve safe spaces leading to an inability to say no or that we need to defend ourselves leading to rigid boundaries and the exclusion of intimacy.

Similarly, parents with unhealthy boundaries may have the tendency to encourage their children to suppress their emotions. “Stop crying”, for example, or an “Oh, please” accompanied by some dismissive gesture like an eye roll. This teaches us that some emotions are not okay to feel and that we should ignore them, which leads to an inner world that feels obscured or confused in adulthood. And when we are unable to suppress them, we should feel shame.

There are many categories of childhood experiences that influence our boundary development, exploration, observation, and messaging are just a few. Reflecting on impactful events or the behavioral patterns of your caregivers during your childhood may be helpful in determining where your boundaries come from and what wounds you may need to heal to develop healthy boundaries.

EXERCISE: Childhood Experiences

Consider (in as much depth as you are comfortable with) the behaviors you observed in early childhood. Did your parents or caregivers have healthy boundaries? Were there particular events that you feel were important in shaping your boundaries in adulthood? When you have thought of a few experiences, consider how they have influenced your behavior throughout your life. Then answer the following question:

What messages would you want to share with your younger self if you could?

[2] Attachment Style

When we are infants, we are completely dependent on our parents for our survival. We need food, water, and a clean diaper, of course, but we also need love and connection. When these needs are met, we are taught that we are safe and loved. However, when they are not met, or they are met unreliably, we learn that we are unsafe and develop coping mechanisms to try to compensate. These early experiences are what give rise to what is known as our attachment style.

Attachment style is a concept that has been gaining in popularity since it was first described by John and later explored by Mary Ainsworth (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). A quick internet search will reveal a wealth of information about how different attachment styles manifest and how to identify which style you have.

The prevalence of this concept is largely due to the fact that it explains quite a bit about human behavior and interpersonal relationships. In fact, some research suggests that your attachment style can even affect the limits of your personal space (von Mohr et al., 2023). Understanding your attachment style and how it developed can help you understand where your boundaries come from and how you might go about making adjustments.

Attachment style is essentially the way in which you relate to others. It is a template that shapes our self-concept, our ability to trust others, the strategies we use to manage our emotions, and how much of our True Selves we are willing to share with others. Similar to many other facets of who we are today, we formed our attachment style based on our interactions with our primary caregivers throughout our early development.

There are generally thought to be 3 categories of attachment style: *Secure*, *Anxious*, and *Avoidant*. Let's take a brief look at each one.

Secure

A secure attachment style comes from having your needs consistently met as a child. Loving and generous parents or caregivers teach children that they are loveable, their needs are important, and relationships are safe and dependable. This general sense of security with themselves and others makes setting and maintaining boundaries easier.

Anxious

An anxious attachment style is characterized by insecurity, fear of rejection or abandonment, and codependent tendencies. This type of attachment style develops when your needs were met inconsistently as a child. For example, if your parents fluctuated between being crushingly attentive and detached, prioritized their needs at the expense of yours, pushed you away as punishment, or made you feel responsible for their volatile feelings, you would likely develop an anxious attachment style.

Avoidant

An avoidant attachment style generally manifests as difficulty in building and maintaining long-term relationships due to the fear of letting others get too close. This attachment style usually develops when caregivers are absent or emotionally indifferent. People with an avoidant attachment style often experienced being left to fend for themselves, being criticized for their dependence on their caregiver, and being rejected when expressing their needs or feelings.

Because our attachment styles influence our ability and willingness to communicate with others, they have a substantial impact on our boundaries. For example, people with an anxious or avoidant attachment style will have a harder time setting boundaries due to their fear of conflict and rejection or a general inability to recognize what their needs and desires are.

EXERCISE: How Do You Relate?

Below are three lists of statements that correspond to each attachment style. Mark each statement you feel describes you. When you are done, count how many statements you agree with in each category. Whichever category has the most checks is the attachment style you are most likely aligned with.

| Anxious | | Avoidant | | Secure | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| I think a lot about my relationships. | | I can easily put people out of my mind. | | I find it easy to be affectionate. | |
| I am very sensitive to my partner's moods. | | I find it difficult to provide emotional support. | | I feel comfortable depending on others. | |
| I worry that I won't measure up to other people. | | I value my independence more than relationships. | | I find it easy to express my wants and needs. | |
| I tend to get attached to romantic partners very quickly. | | I find it difficult to depend on others. | | I am generally satisfied with my romantic relationships. | |
| When I'm not involved in a relationship, I feel incomplete. | | It makes me uncomfortable when people want to get close to me. | | I believe most people are essentially honest and dependable. | |
| Total: | | Total: | | Total: | |

[3] Core Beliefs

We all have an internal picture of ourselves, a sense of the fundamental reality of who we are. This foundational picture of ourselves is comprised of our core beliefs. Our core beliefs might be that we are special and lovable, or we might believe that we are unimportant or deficient in some manner. Either way, our core beliefs are an instrumental part of setting boundaries because they dictate our self-esteem and whether or not we feel we are worthy of boundaries.

Like attachment style, the development of our core beliefs begins in childhood and is based on how we are treated by those around us. For example, if our friends and family were supportive and encouraging when we were children, we may have the core belief that we are a capable and competent person. Alternatively, if we were bullied at school, we may have the core belief that we are an outcast or that we are unlikeable.

The effect of victimization by peers, family, or other authority figures has been shown scientifically to influence our core beliefs (Young et al., 2003). The beliefs we develop early in our lives have also been shown to stick around into adulthood (Riso et al., 2006). For example, feelings of shame, defectiveness, vulnerability, incompetence, and self-sacrifice have been shown to relate to negative core beliefs in a large sample of adults (Esmailian et al., 2022). Core beliefs that bring about these feelings are particularly damaging because they diminish our self-esteem and our ability to set boundaries.

Boundaries depend on a positive self-image and the conviction that our needs are valuable. When we set boundaries, we will likely get pushback or another kind of negative response. To hold our ground and maintain our boundaries when we are challenged, we need to truly believe in ourselves. If we don't hold a core belief that our feelings and needs are valid, others will have a much easier time persuading us to abandon our boundaries and keep acting in a way that prioritizes them over us.

EXERCISE: What Are Your Core Beliefs?

In this exercise, we will examine some of the core beliefs we currently hold. Take a moment to reflect on your self-image and consider what your fundamental beliefs are about yourself. When you're done, write them down on a piece of paper. Selecting one core belief at a time, try to think of where it came from, why you have held onto it, and if it's something you would like to keep or work toward discarding.

Getting familiar with what your core beliefs are and how they came to be will be helpful as you move forward with your journey toward building healthy boundaries.

[4] Identity

Identity is at the core of the boundaries we set. We have to know who we are to know what boundaries are needed. Identity is a somewhat vague term, but it can be described as the feeling that you are a coherent, continuous, and distinct person who is physically and mentally capable of running your own life (Camia et al., 2022). In other words, identity is our definition of ourselves, the "me" in "I am me."

Our identity is entirely our own to create. We decide what our morals and values are, who we want to connect with, what goals we want to pursue, and, more generally, what we want from our experience as a human. Having a strong sense of identity is associated with higher self-esteem and a greater sense of control over your life, which makes setting boundaries easier (Camia et al., 2022).

Our identities change over time and with experience. For example, there are likely many aspects of your identity 10 years ago that are not part of your current identity. Trauma and grief can also disrupt our identities, leaving us uncertain of who we are. Lacking a clear sense of self can damage our self-esteem, our sense

of autonomy, and our emotional stability. All of these consequences in turn make setting boundaries much more challenging.

Codependence is another context in which our sense of self is disrupted (Cowan et al., 1995). In fact, codependence has been described as “a disease of lost self-hood” (Whitfield, 1993). More specifically, codependence refers to a dysfunctional way of relating to others in which you deprioritize yourself and abandon healthy boundaries to prevent conflict. For example, a codependent person might make excuses for their partner’s mistreatment of them rather than address the issue. Even though they are hurt by their partner’s behavior, they would rather manage internal conflict than external conflict, and thus find a way to excuse it.

When we choose to deal with the hurt over dealing with the problem, we are, in a sense, betraying ourselves. When we dismiss our own needs in favor of the needs of others we are telling ourselves that we can’t be trusted to have our own back. This kind of betrayal requires that we fracture our identity to some extent so that we can tuck it away someplace where it won’t cause problems. This continues the cycle of unhealthy boundaries leading to loss of self, leading to unhealthy boundaries, and so on. Fortunately, this cycle can be broken by regaining contact with our True Self and setting some protective boundaries. One way to begin to reconnect with yourself and identify your needs is through the practice of self-awareness.

[5] Self-Awareness

One of the first conditions that must be met before you can start setting boundaries is an awareness of what your needs are. Self-awareness involves an awareness of your own internal state of mind and resources as well as an awareness of how your behaviors impact those around you (Carden et al., 2022).

Self-Awareness is an important part of setting boundaries for several reasons. First (and perhaps most important) we require self-awareness to identify what we

are feeling and why. For example, we may not be aware that our friend's constant barrage of text messages is violating a boundary of ours until we recognize that receiving messages from them makes us feel overwhelmed or resentful. By identifying these feelings and their source, we can build a clear picture of the specific boundary we need to set in this situation. Additionally, the more aware you are of your internal cues, the better able you will be to identify and communicate your needs to others (de Azevado Hanks, 2016).

Self-awareness is not necessarily simple to attain. In fact, we are often not fully conscious of our internal experiences because we've learned to numb or ignore them. This is especially true if we were raised to believe that some feelings are inappropriate and we shouldn't acknowledge them (as described earlier).

Furthermore, our general state of constant stimulation and information overload can distract us and impede our ability to tune into what we are feeling. However, with practice and intention, we can learn to reconnect with ourselves and better understand the messages our bodies are sending us.

EXERCISE: Body Scan

Self-awareness, at its most basic level, begins with awareness of our bodily sensations (Huggins et al., 2020). For this exercise, we will do a simple practice that can help us improve our self-awareness over time.

Close your eyes and take a few deep, relaxing breaths.

Once you feel settled, direct your attention to your toes and try to explore any sensation that is arising. One good way to explore sensations in appendages like feet and hands is to try to imagine what the inside feels like. Spend as long as you like here.

Then move your attention to your ankles and repeat the exercise.

Slowly move your attention up your legs and into your hips, then your torso, your arms, your neck, and your head. Spend at least a few seconds, but as long as you'd like, focusing on each part of your body.

Summary

The boundaries we hold today are a product of our childhood experiences, attachment style, core beliefs, identity, and the extent of our self-awareness. As children, the development of our boundaries is primarily the product of our relationship with our caregivers and the ways in which we see others behave.

These experiences then influence how we relate to others, what we believe about ourselves, and who we are. As adults, we entrench these influences and their consequences by diminishing our self-awareness. By knowing where our boundaries came from and increasing our self-awareness, we have a clearer idea of where we need to begin healing in order to start setting healthy boundaries.

Module 3. Getting Clear on Your Boundaries

As mentioned previously, in order to set healthy boundaries, we first need to identify what they are. There are several ways we can go about identifying in what parts of our lives we are missing boundaries and what we want those boundaries to be. In this chapter, we will take a look at 5 ways to improve clarity surrounding our boundaries including accessing our feelings, self-reflection, consulting others, knowing our values, and understanding what is holding us back.

[1] Tune into Your Feelings

Getting in touch with our feelings is an essential step in setting boundaries. For example, noticing when we feel resentful, overwhelmed, or compelled to dissociate are all important indicators that a boundary is missing. As mentioned previously, we are commonly conditioned throughout our lives to ignore feelings that are unwanted or inconvenient. This conditioning makes it challenging to recognize when our bodies are trying to tell us we are unsafe. There are a couple of strategies that we can employ to help us recognize when our internal selves are speaking and identify what they are saying.

Mindfulness

The first strategy is a practice called mindful awareness. Mindful awareness, or mindfulness, is essentially the practice of paying attention to your thoughts and feelings in an openhearted, non-judgmental, and non-reactive way (Kabat-Zinn, 2015).

Since the 1970s, a wealth of research on mindfulness has accumulated and the evidence overwhelmingly supports the efficacy of mindfulness to improve emotional regulation and well-being along with many other clinical and psychological features.

Practicing mindful awareness can help us learn to recognize the bodily sensations associated with our emotions without trying to escape or suppress them. For example, when taking time to mindfully connect with yourself, you might notice that your muscles are often tense or that you have the sickly, fluttering feeling of anxiety in your stomach after spending time with a particular person or when talking about your spouse's affair. These bodily sensations, which may otherwise be easily overlooked or ignored, are informative that a boundary is needed with this person.

Name It

Talking about our feelings has long been observed to help us understand and manage them. In recent years, neuroscience research has revealed that putting your feelings into words (called 'affect labeling' in the research world) produces a calming effect. Using brain scan technology, this calming effect has been observed as changes in activity in a brain region known to be involved in feelings of fear and anxiety (Lieberman et al., 2007). The stress reduction brought about by naming our emotions can help us process and respond to them, rather than becoming overwhelmed by them and reacting in ways that are counterproductive (Pond et al., 2012).

Dr. Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist, author, and professor at UCLA has created a technique based on the power of naming emotions. He refers to this technique as Name It to Tame It. Essentially, this technique involves noticing and labeling your feelings as you are experiencing them. The Name it to Tame it technique is similar to mindful awareness in so far as both practices require awareness of your inner thoughts and feelings. However, the naming practice involves describing or labeling your emotions in addition to observing them, whereas mindful awareness involves passive observation of emotions.

Learning to recognize and label our emotions will be helpful for sorting out what boundaries are needed and will facilitate our ability to clearly communicate them to others.

EXERCISE: What's That Feeling?

- Below is a list of common emotions. Look through them and then answer the following questions:
- **Which of these emotions do you experience most frequently?**
- **Which of these feelings are you most inclined to suppress or reject?**
- Pick 3 emotions you commonly experience. What do these emotions feel like in your body? For example, love might feel like a fluttering in your heart or rage might feel like heat in your chest.

| Joy | Anger | Sadness | Fear | Surprise | Disgust |
|------------|------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| Alive | Vengeful | Lonely | Anxious | Curious | Ashamed |
| Excited | Bitter | Hopeless | Helpless | Delighted | Embarrassed |
| Grateful | Defensive | Neglected | Lost | Impressed | Unaccepted |
| Hopeful | Frustrated | Remorseful | Insecure | Playful | Inferior |
| Loved | Furious | Resentful | Cautious | Startled | Guilty |
| Optimistic | Hostile | Grief-stricken | Haunted | Amazed | Ignored |
| Tender | Impatient | Devastated | Frightened | Astonished | Inadequate |
| Uplifted | Insulted | Disappointed | Horrified | Shocked | Exposed |
| Happy | Jaded | Discouraged | Uncomfortable | Awe-stricken | Repulsed |

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|-----------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Satisfied | Violated | Miserable | Nervous | Stunned | Nauseated |
|-----------|----------|-----------|---------|---------|-----------|

[2] Reflect on Your Thoughts

Just as being aware of how we are feeling is an important component to identifying and setting healthy boundaries, so is being aware of our thoughts. For instance, you may notice that your inner critic gets particularly loud and mean after spending time with a friend. Reflecting on the relationship between time with your friend and lower self-esteem might inform you that your friend has too much control over what you think about yourself and help you decide to set some emotional or temporal boundaries with them.

Self-reflection can also help reveal other patterns of thought that influence our willingness and ability to set boundaries. Gaslighting and cognitive distortions are two of the most common and nefarious patterns of thought.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a recently popularized term that is defined as “a conscious or unconscious form of psychological abuse that occurs when a perpetrator distorts information and confuses a victim, triggering the victim to doubt their memory and sanity” (Tormoen, 2019).

In the context of setting boundaries, gaslighting might manifest as someone making you feel like you are doing something wrong by setting boundaries with them or that your boundaries are unfair in some way. We see gaslighting surface quite frequently when the unfaithful spouse, uses phrases like “*You’re crazy!*” “*You’re being paranoid!*” or “*It’s all your fault!*”

Gaslighting can occur both interpersonally, between individuals, and intrapersonally, within yourself. When you gaslight yourself, you are both victim and perpetrator. For example, you might be gaslighting yourself when you tell yourself things like *“you’re overreacting”*, *“it wasn’t that bad”*, or *“I’m probably just crazy.”* This evil internal voice that manipulates your perception of reality might also tell you that setting boundaries means you are selfish or that no one will like you anymore if you set boundaries with them. Reflecting on our thoughts can help us recognize when this voice is present and allow us to amplify the voice that says *“your needs are valid and you deserve to feel safe.”*

Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions can be thought of as exaggerated patterns of thought that aren’t based in reality and lead you to believe negative things about yourself (Dozois & Beck, 2008). They are essentially the funhouse mirror of your mind, exaggerating and minimizing different parts of the experience it’s reflecting resulting in something extremely unflattering and incommensurate with reality.

In addition to being detrimental to healthy self-esteem, cognitive distortions cloud the truth about who we are and how we interact with our environment. Without a solid understanding of our reality, our boundaries will be unstable and may crumble more easily under pressure. Let’s talk about a few of the 15 common cognitive distortions (Morrison et al., 2015) that might set us back in our boundary-setting expedition.

Mind Reading

Mind reading refers to the assumption that you know what someone else is thinking. This cognitive distortion can be especially dangerous when it comes to boundaries because you may assume another person knows what your boundaries are when in reality they are in the dark.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is when you assume the worst-case scenario is what will happen. Catastrophizing can make setting boundaries challenging because you may be inclined to believe that the person you are setting boundaries with will respond in the worst possible way. Assuming that someone will be mad at you or otherwise behave negatively toward you if you set a boundary can be a substantial deterrent.

Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization involves the automatic belief that a single event is an invariable rule. It is often identifiable by the words “always” and “never.” For example, you misplace your keys one evening and say, “I always lose things.” Overgeneralization can lead to boundaries that are unrealistically strict or rigid. In other words, if you overgeneralize you may build walls rather than set boundaries. Remember, healthy boundaries are flexible and context-dependent.

Jumping to conclusions

Jumping to conclusions refers to interpreting an event in a negative light without evidence to support your conclusion. For example, when a friend doesn't text you back right away and you assume that means they are mad at you. Jumping to conclusions is a dangerous distortion when it comes to boundaries for a couple of reasons.

One reason is that it can lead to an unjustly negative and inaccurate picture of reality, adding further challenge to identifying where you need to work on your boundaries. Another reason it is important to watch out for this pattern of thinking is that it can create the sense that people are intentionally crossing your boundaries and disrespecting you when this isn't at all the case.

As we are beginning to identify and set boundaries, there will be a learning period for the people around us. If we want to keep our boundaries and our relationships, it is important to assume ignorance before we assume malice. In other words, we should give people the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, reflecting on our thoughts can help us get to know ourselves better and improve the accuracy of our self-perception. The self-knowledge we can gain from reflection will give us a clearer picture of our preferences, needs, goals, and abilities (Morin & Racy, 2021). An accurate and unambiguous perspective of who we are will not only help us set healthy boundaries but will help us maintain them in the face of pushback from others. As humans often have difficulty recognizing and accepting thoughts that are unpleasant, anxiety-provoking, or contradict our existing self-image (Wilson & Dunn, 2004), it is important that we reflect on our thoughts with openness and kindness.

[3] Phone a Friend

When we are in the early stages of exploring our boundaries and identifying where we might need them, talking about boundaries with our trusted friends can be immensely valuable. Let's explore a few of the questions we can ask our friends that will help us with our boundaries.

Where do you think I lack boundaries?

Though we have privileged insight into how we think and feel, what we want, and what we care about, there are aspects of ourselves that others are in a better position to notice. The blind spots we have when it comes to seeing our full selves can be both intentional and unintentional (Wilson & Dunn, 2004). That is, we may purposefully ignore or reject aspects of our behaviors, or we may simply not be able to see them. Asking the people that know us well and want the best for us can help illuminate these blind spots and improve our self-knowledge.

What kind of boundaries do you have?

If we are new to boundaries and are not sure where to start, asking others about the boundaries that they keep can be a great first step. When we listen to our friends talk about their boundaries, we have the opportunity to investigate what comes up for us internally. For example, we can question into areas where we

identify with them or experiences we've had that are similar to the ones they are describing. The point is not necessarily to just pick boundaries that we think we should have too but to listen to what their needs and expectations were in the situations they describe and consider how we can best meet similar needs.

What has your experience with setting boundaries been like?

There's no way around it, setting boundaries is uncomfortable. This is especially true if we're new to the practice. Talking to our friends about their experiences may give us some valuable strategies for managing the discomfort or responding to resisters, but at the very least will let us know that we are not alone and that the discomfort is normal and not a sign that we are doing something wrong.

[4] What's Important to You?

Considering what our priorities are is essential for identifying where we need to set boundaries. That is, when we know what is most important to us, we can set boundaries that facilitate those things. For example, if traveling is important to you, you will likely need to set boundaries around how you spend your money. Similarly, if time with your family is important, you will probably need to set some boundaries around how you spend your time in other areas of your life to ensure there is enough left for the people that matter the most.

All too often the important things get lost and de-prioritized without us realizing it. We can better identify where we want to set boundaries and how we want them to shape our lives when we reconnect with our priorities. Let's walk through a few questions we can ask ourselves as we reconnect with and reaffirm our priorities.

What are the meaningful areas of your life (in order of importance)?

We often want to do it all; we want to be superhuman, to excel in every role in every area of our lives, and still maintain our health and sanity. Though it is a noble pursuit, the truth is that we are human, and we have to live with the same constraints on our time and energy as other humans.

To guard against spreading ourselves too thin and setting ourselves up for disappointment, it is helpful to focus on the meaningful areas of our lives that we rank towards the top of our importance list. This isn't to suggest that you have to neglect all the other areas, but rather that the majority of your energy goes towards the most important areas and the other areas get what's left. Below are a few examples that you might include in your list:

- Family
- Friends
- Partnership
- Health
- Physical strength
- Skill
- Spirituality
- Sexuality
- Home
- Leisure
- Autonomy
- Travel
- Wealth

- Profession
- Fun
- Identity

Who are the most important people in your life?

It's helpful to identify which relationships mean the most to you so that you know which relationships should be prioritized as you are working on your boundaries. That is, these are the people for which you might want to invest the most time and energy in clearly communicating your boundaries because clear boundaries strengthen healthy relationships.

What do you enjoy doing the most?

Though it might be commonly devalued in American culture, doing things that are fun or bring you joy is an important part of maintaining our sense of self. Setting boundaries such that you can prioritize these activities can help you stay connected to yourself and can increase your ability to do other things (Whitebread et al., 2012).

How do you want to describe yourself?

Articulating how you would describe your ideal self can be a great way to reconnect with your values and priorities. Determining whether or not this description is currently accurate will also help reveal where you might want to work on your boundaries. For example, if you want to describe yourself as self-possessed and confident, but find it challenging to say "no" to requests from your parents, setting healthier boundaries with your parents would be of benefit.

EXERCISE: Assessing Priorities

Take a moment to reflect on the previous questions and attempt to answer them to the best of your ability. These are not necessarily easy questions to answer, so don't worry if you need to leave one for later. When you feel like you've thought through these questions sufficiently, write them down and save them for later.

[5] What's The Hold Up?

As we gain clarity about what our boundaries are (or what we want them to be) it is helpful to also gain clarity about why we haven't implemented them already. In other words, what is it that is keeping us from saying "no" and meaning it or standing behind the expectations we set?

Everyone will likely have barriers that are specific to them and their situation, but some barriers are common among most of us who are struggling to set boundaries. Let's talk about a few of the typical obstacles we might need to overcome.

Awareness

For many of us, one of the main reasons we haven't set boundaries yet is that we weren't aware we needed them. As we've talked about previously, it isn't always obvious that we are lacking boundaries in the spaces we need them.

Similarly, we might be unaware that *WE* are the ones who need to make the changes. That is, often when we encounter a space where we need to set a boundary, it feels like it is the other person who needs to change (Tawwab, 2021). It might not be clear that the remedy to a strained relationship is within our control.

Checking in with ourselves and our feelings so that we can notice the tell-tale signs of a needed boundary can help us overcome this barrier.

Fear of Discomfort

Setting boundaries is uncomfortable. There is no way around it. And it is the fear of this discomfort that compels many of us to just forgo setting boundaries. The idea of upsetting someone we care about can feel so overwhelmingly icky that we choose internal conflict over potential external conflict. We will talk more about

dealing with discomfort later on, but the take-home message is that we will just have to face it and it will be okay.

Fear of Disconnection

Just as we fear the discomfort that comes from setting a boundary, we also commonly fear potential damage that could result from our boundaries (de Azevedo Hanks, 2016). The idea that someone might get mad and cut us out of their life is awful and more than enough to make us not want to do it. However, it is important that we remember that setting boundaries actually improves healthy relationships. If someone wants to end their relationship with us because we have decided not to stand for poor treatment anymore, do we really want that person in our lives?

EXERCISE: What is Holding You Back?

Reflect on one or two areas where you have decided you need to set a boundary. When you have selected a couple of real-world examples, consider what might be keeping you from setting them. Are you worried you will damage a relationship or make someone angry? Do you get that ick in the pit of your stomach that makes you want to just keep your mouth shut? Remember, there are many other reasons we may be reluctant to set boundaries besides the 3 described above. Deeply consider what barrier you will need to overcome to set those boundaries and write out what it is. Writing out our fears on paper can remove a lot of their power and help us see what we need to do to face them.

Summary

In this chapter we've learned how to gain clarity on our boundaries. We've learned that tuning into our feelings and reflecting on our thoughts are great ways to identify where it is that we are lacking a healthy boundary and what that boundary needs to be. We've also learned that our friends can be valuable resources if we are unsure of where we need boundaries. Finally, we've learned

that getting clear on our priorities and our barriers are important steps in getting clear on our boundaries.

Module 4. Setting Your Boundaries

Now that we have clarity about the boundaries that we would like to set, let's talk about how we actually set them. Setting boundaries can be a scary prospect. However, if we have a thorough understanding of what the process entails, we might find it a little easier.

[1] The Two Parts of Boundary Setting

There are two main steps to setting boundaries: communication and action.

Step 1: Communication

Communication is defined as the exchange of information-laden messages between a sender and a receiver (Krauss, 2002). For humans, this is commonly done through language. However, words carry more than just their literal meaning. Context, tone, and body language all combine to express the true meaning of what we are saying. This means that the person we are talking to has to interpret what we are saying and we have to interpret what they say in response. This series of interpretations leaves open many opportunities for miscommunication.

Therefore, if our goal is mutual understanding, it is important that we enter the conversation with kindness and an openness to different perspectives. This is especially true when we are setting boundaries. We want to be sure our boundaries and the needs they reflect are understood, so it is vital that we speak clearly, honestly, and kindly.

Boundary statements begin with I need, I want, or I expect.

- I need you to call before you come over...

- I want you to stop asking questions about my private life...
- I expect that you will return this without me having to ask you repeatedly...

Action

Step two is sticking to the boundaries you've set with action. This is the only way to show others that you are serious about your boundaries (Tawwab, 2021). Boundaries are about you, not the other person, so the action should always be something that you will do.

Example actions in response to boundary violations:

Boundary: Call before you come over.

Response to boundary violation: Stop answering the door.

Boundary: Stop asking questions about my private life when we are in public.

Response to boundary violation: Stop going to public places with them.

Boundary: Return this by the time that we agreed on.

Response to boundary violation: Stop loaning things.

[2] What to Avoid

There are many ways for us to set our boundaries appropriately and a few ways we can get it wrong. Let's go through some of the things we want to avoid when setting boundaries.

Making Excuses

When saying *no*, it is best not to make excuses for your *no*, especially if those excuses are not entirely true. This can leave you feeling guilty, ashamed, or otherwise negatively about yourself (Wheelcock, 2006).

Additionally, excuses give the other person the opportunity to argue with you or try to resolve the barrier your excuses present. For example, imagine an acquaintance asks you out to dinner this weekend. You aren't a big fan of this person and would rather not spend more time with them than is necessary. If you say, *"No, I can't. I have a lot of work to catch up on this weekend."*, you present them with the opportunity to counter with *"Well, what about next weekend?"*, thus rendering your excuse invalid. Now imagine the same situation, but instead of offering an excuse, you politely say, *"No. Thank you."* By keeping it simple and straightforward, you have set a clear, effective, and continuous boundary.

Being Passive, Aggressive, or Passive-Aggressive

Finding the right balance of assertiveness and grace is something that comes with time and practice. Though it is best to avoid it, many of us will likely set a boundary from one of these three stances at some point. Let's talk about what each of these stances is and how they influence boundary setting.

Passive

Being passive is essentially denying our needs. When we are being passive, we ignore our needs and allow others to dictate what we do or what happens to us without speaking up for ourselves (Tawwab, 2021). We often take a passive stance when we are trying to avoid vulnerability, conflict, or rejection (de Azevedo Hanks, 2016). Passivity might look like not saying anything when we have an issue, letting people do or say hurtful things, or ignoring things that trigger us; all of which are antithetical to setting clear boundaries (Tawwab, 2021).

Aggressive

Aggressive communication typically involves trying to hurt someone or verbally attacking them. It is loud, harsh, and inconsiderate. Communicating from this stance can sometimes feel powerful. We feel that if we get big and scary enough, others will acquiesce to our demands. However, underneath the aggression are fear and vulnerability. When we approach boundary setting from an aggressive

stance, we can damage our relationship with the other person, lose their respect, or provoke unnecessary and counter-productive conflict.

Passive-Aggressive

Passive-aggressive communication is acting out of our feelings while denying how we feel. For example, being snippy or cold to someone while insisting that 'nothing is wrong.' Passive aggression is said to be the number one way we communicate our feelings and needs (Tawwab, 2021). It allows us to avoid confrontation and vulnerability by indirectly communicating our needs with our actions rather than our words. That is, we assume that the other person will understand what feelings we are expressing through our actions, figure out what they have done wrong, and behave differently next time. We might feel that it is obvious we are mad at our friend for bailing on the party because we are acting mad or that our partner should be able to infer that we need more time with them by the way we react when they tell us about their plans with other people. The trouble is: it isn't obvious, they can't. Though we are certainly entitled to feeling our feelings, we can't allow our boundary-setting to stop there. Setting clear boundaries and giving the other person the opportunity to respect them requires that we use our words.

Manipulation

Manipulation can be an effective way to get others to do what you want them to do but manipulating someone is not the same as setting boundaries.

Manipulation is a common strategy that we might not even be aware that we are using. For example, when we respond with puppy-dog eyes and a desperate 'pleeeeeease!' to the no we just heard, we are using guilt to manipulate the other person into doing what we asked of them. Making someone feel bad until they give in may be an effective form of manipulation, but it isn't the only one to look out for. Here are a few other examples of manipulation:

- Gaslighting
- Withholding affection

- Making a situation seem urgent when it isn't
- Withholding part (or all) of the truth
- Trying to evoke pity

[3] Being Assertive

Assertiveness can sometimes feel like being mean or bossy. Women in particular are subject to this perspective as they are commonly labeled aggressive, pushy, or cold when they are being assertive (Humphry, 2014). However, being assertive is not the same as being overbearing, it is honestly and unapologetically communicating your needs.

Communicating assertively is the healthiest way to set boundaries (Tawwab, 2021). Unfortunately, this style of communication can be exceptionally challenging. For many of us, the equivalence between being assertive and being mean is deeply ingrained and is something we will have to unlearn over time. To be assertive, we have to remember that we are entitled to advocate for ourselves. As we work on communicating assertively, there are 4 tips we can keep in mind to help us. Let's explore each one.

Know yourself

In many ways, being assertive is being true to yourself. But in order to be true to yourself, you have to know who you are. Confidence in what our needs and expectations are is essential to assertively setting and keeping our boundaries. If we are setting boundaries when we aren't quite sure about ourselves, we may project the sense that our boundaries are flimsy or negotiable.

Research suggests that confidence comes from an accurate perception of ourselves (McKay & Fanning, 2016). Many of us hold an image of ourselves that focuses on our weaknesses and flaws rather than seeing the whole picture as it really is. This inaccurate perception of ourselves limits our ability to communicate

confidently and assertively. As we discussed in Chapter 3, we can gain self-knowledge through mindfulness, and reflecting on our thoughts, feelings, and priorities.

Be empathetic

The ability to feel and express empathy is essential for communicating assertively. Theresa Wiseman (1996) identified four components of empathy. These components include:

1. Being able to see the world as others see it.
2. Being nonjudgmental.
3. Understanding the feelings of another person.
4. Communicating your understanding of another person's feelings.

Being empathetic and holding space for another person's perspective allows us to communicate in a way that is compassionate yet firm. Additionally, by expressing our understanding of the other person's feelings, we demonstrate that we believe that their feelings and perspective are valid even if we disagree.

Start soft

According to Gottman and Nelson (2015), a soft start is one in which we begin a conversation with gratitude or a compliment and without judgment or criticism. By entering into a difficult conversation in a calm, respectful, and open manner, we reduce the need to feel defensive and increase the probability that the conversation will be productive and empathetic. Beginning a hard conversation with softness and openness also improves our chances of reaching a mutual understanding.

No apologies

Most of us make this mistake. We feel bad communicating our boundaries assertively. We worry that we will come across as selfish, so we say, *"I'm so sorry,*

but I don't have the time to help with that." Cushioning what we say with an apology implies that we think we are doing something wrong or that we don't really need that boundary we are trying to set. However, despite what we may have been taught, having wants and needs is not bad or selfish. Feeling guilty after assertively setting a boundary may be unavoidable, but if we want to be taken seriously, we need to drop the apology.

EXERCISE: Be Assertive

In groups of 2 or more, read through the following scenarios and practice addressing each one assertively. Take turns playing each role (Person A and Person B). Give each other feedback on how you feel the conversation went and what could be done differently to improve the outcome of the conversation.

1. Person A is having a party and hears Person B gossiping about the private life of another person at the party.
2. Person A and Person B are good friends. However, Person B tends to try to control the relationship. They decide where they are going, what they are doing, and when they are doing it and rarely consider input from Person A. Person A would like to stay friends with Person B, but they want to feel like they are equals.
3. Person A and Person B are coworkers. They generally get along well, but Person B has recently started to pawn off the work they don't want to do onto Person A without asking if they have the time or the desire to take on the additional work.
4. Person A and Person B are family members. Person A is usually very happy to spend time with Person B, but lately, Person B has been asking Person A intrusive questions in front of other people. Person B's behavior has made Person A start to dread family functions.
5. Person A and Person B are long-time friends. They have grown up together and know basically everything about each other. Person B has the tendency to use their intimate knowledge of Person A to embarrass them in

front of other people just for a laugh. When Person A gets upset about the behavior of Person B, Person B usually just writes them off saying that they were only joking.

6. Person A is the leader of their organization. They are new to the leadership position and have so far been very open to feedback and suggestions from the other people in their organization. Person B has been a member of this organization for longer than Person A but is not in a leadership position. Person B has been taking advantage of Person A's openness and has been essentially issuing commands rather than offering opinions.

[4] Dealing with Discomfort

Setting boundaries (especially when we're new to it) is going to be uncomfortable. However, we can learn to manage the way we respond to discomfort and to deal with those emotional responses appropriately.

Managing how intensely we feel our emotions and how we respond to those emotions is called emotional regulation. We can engage in emotional regulation before, during, and after an emotionally charged experience. There are several effective strategies for regulating our emotions, such as mindfulness (Hill & Updegraff, 2012), reappraisal (Brockman et al., 2016), and physical exercise (Bernstein & McNally, 2018). Let's take a look at each of these three.

Mindfulness

As discussed in chapter 3, mindfulness is the non-judgmental, non-reactive, and openhearted observation of our thoughts and feelings. This practice can help us to notice and identify our bodily sensations which have been shown to facilitate emotional regulation (Kever et al., 2015).

Reappraisal

Reappraisal refers to changing how you view the situation and the meaning you derive from it. It is generally thought that reappraisal is a strategy that occurs prior to the experience of emotion (Golden et al., 2008). For example, starting your day with gratitude when you know you have an unpleasant meeting later in the day. Focusing on gratitude shifts your attention away from the negative aspects of the day and onto the positive aspects, which makes the dreaded meeting feel much less unpleasant.

Physical Exercise

There is now a wealth of research demonstrating the benefits of physical exercise for our mental health and well-being. One of the many reasons for this relationship is the effect of exercise on emotional regulation.

Research has shown that regular exercise is associated with a decrease in symptoms of depression and anxiety (Harvey et al., 2010) and an increase in emotional resilience or the ability to decrease the severity of negative emotions (Bernstein & McNally, 2018). While it's still a dismissive turn of phrase, the idea that you can "walk it off" may have some merit. Whether you are anticipating an uncomfortable conversation or dealing with the emotional aftermath, exercise can be a helpful salve.

While there are certainly more than three strategies for regulating our emotions, these are some of the most studied, most effective, and most accessible. Ideally, we could utilize all three at once, but even if we are only able to manage one at a time we will be much better able to manage the discomfort that comes from setting boundaries.

EXERCISE: How To Deal

- Think of ways in which you might apply these strategies to your life.
 - Do you have or do you want to start a mindfulness meditation practice?

- Can you think of ways in which you might reappraise a negative situation?
- Do you have an exercise routine?
- As you think through each strategy, consider in detail how you might incorporate them. In other words, instead of just thinking “I want to start a mindfulness practice” imagine how you would actually implement that. What time of the day would you set as your meditation time? How long do you plan to meditate? Do you prefer guided meditation? The more specific you get about how you will use these strategies, the more likely you are to succeed.

[5] Cultivating Self-Acceptance

Self-esteem is commonly considered to be an important part of setting boundaries. The logic behind this connection is essentially this: if you don't feel that you are valuable or worthy of boundaries, it becomes impossible to set them. While this may be true, self-esteem might not be the factor we need to improve in order to set and maintain healthy boundaries.

Having low self-esteem can almost certainly make boundary setting more challenging, but there are risks to having high self-esteem as well. Namely, high self-esteem creates more vulnerability to criticism and rejection, which may also dissuade you from setting boundaries.

You can think of self-esteem as a balloon: the more inflated it is, the easier it is to pop. That's why some researchers suggest that self-esteem in itself is a dangerous concept that reflects a dysfunctional and illogical evaluation of global worth (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001). As there is no objective measure of the value of a human being, trying to assign ourselves value is inherently nonsensical.

Given the unhelpful nature of self-esteem, some researchers and clinicians prefer to focus on a concept referred to as unconditional self-acceptance. Unconditional

self-acceptance is the total acceptance of yourself regardless of whether or not you behave intelligently, competently, or correctly and whether or not you are approved of or loved by others (Ellis, 1977).

When we accept ourselves unconditionally, we are less likely to be swayed by the opinions of others or influenced by fear of rejection (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001). Thus, self-acceptance creates a condition in which we can approach boundary setting without fear or hesitation because we are neither so disapproving of ourselves that we feel we don't deserve boundaries nor do we think so highly of ourselves that we fear being knocked from our pedestal.

Much of American culture centers around assigning ourselves value based on comparisons to other people and to arbitrary societal standards. This and decades of being taught to concern ourselves with self-esteem can make abandoning the concept entirely quite challenging. However, current research suggests that we can replace our interest in self-esteem with unconditional self-acceptance through mindfulness (Carson & Langer, 2006). Mindfulness in this context refers less to meditation and more to a cognitive state.

A cognitive state of mindfulness is characterized by being able to hold multiple perspectives and being able to shift between them depending on the context. For example, imagine you had an important meeting that you had forgotten about and had to attend entirely unprepared. For many, this might trigger a negative self-evaluation. You might tell yourself you are deficient in some way or that everyone thinks poorly of you now. A mindful approach, however, would be to identify what lessons you've learned and consider how you can guard against similar mistakes in the future. It might also include recognizing that this was a particularly challenging week for you and that you were not able to operate at your fullest capacity. Thus, the mindful approach holds both your recognition and ownership of the mistake you made and an understanding of your limitations and the ways in which this could be a useful learning experience.

EXERCISE: Mindful Acceptance

- Working with a partner or independently, think of a few example scenarios in which you failed to set or allowed a violation of your boundaries. These can be real examples, or you can make a few up if you'd prefer.
- For each example, consider how you initially responded to the event.
- **How did you feel? What did you say to yourself? How do you feel about it now?**
- When you are done, write out or discuss with your partner how you could view this situation from a perspective of mindfulness and self-acceptance.
 - How would this perspective have changed the way you interacted or the way you felt about yourself? If you were to encounter this same situation again, how might unconditional self-acceptance and mindfulness change the outcome?

Summary

In this chapter we've learned the basics of setting boundaries. We've learned that setting boundaries consists of both communication and action and we've walked through some of the strategies for setting boundaries that are likely to be unsuccessful. We also discussed how to be assertive when setting boundaries and how to manage the uncomfortable feelings that inevitably arise as a result. Finally, we learned that cultivating self-acceptance is a critical component of setting and maintaining boundaries.

Module 5. Maintaining Your Boundaries

Setting boundaries is great but doesn't mean much if we don't keep them. Maintaining our boundaries can be challenging and sometimes exhausting, but it is worth the effort and is something we are absolutely capable of (even if we need to start over a couple of times). Let's talk more about what we might expect after we have set our boundaries and how to uphold them in difficult situations.

[1] The Acclimation Period

Chances are that many of the boundaries you will set are going to involve people with whom you did not formerly have boundaries. You might finally be setting a boundary with your nosy aunt or your friend who always flakes on you. When this is the case, it may take some time for them to adjust. In many ways, you've just changed the rules of the game and they may unintentionally violate your boundaries out of habit. It can be really hard to change a behavior, especially one that you have engaged in for a long time.

Offering others grace as they learn to adjust will be helpful, but it is critical that you firmly and consistently uphold your boundaries. If you brush it off because you don't want to argue or because it wasn't an egregious violation of your boundary, you will quickly find yourself back at square one and this time it will be even harder to set and maintain the boundary.

EXERCISE: Role Play

In groups of 2 or more, talk through the following scenarios and take turns acting out how you would reinforce your boundary. Ideally, your response would be firm but still hold space for the fact that we are all human and prone to err sometimes.

1. You have an aunt that always asks you invasive questions about having children. You've told her these questions are a violation of your privacy and you need her to stop before the end of the next family gathering she opens with a very uncomfortable and very public "When are you making babies?!"
2. Your friend has the habit of bailing on your plans at the last minute. They agreed to stop doing this when you asked, but they just sent you a text with a lousy excuse for why they are no longer coming over tonight.
3. A coworker likes to look over your shoulder while you are working. You've explained that this makes you uncomfortable and you need them to stop but they've just done it again.
4. Your parent still tries to take care of everything for you. You've told them that you are an adult and need to make your own decisions without their input. They agreed to stop but just called to tell you they booked your flight to the family reunion.
5. You have a friend who regularly smokes around you. They said they would stop when you told them what you need from them but just lit up right next to you.
6. Your sibling often borrows your things without asking you first. You've told them that you expect them to ask first and they agreed but you just noticed that a pair of your shoes is missing and you know your sibling took them.

[2] Responses to Boundaries

People may react to our new boundaries in a variety of ways. Let's talk through a few common responses so we know what we might expect as we begin moving forward with our healthy boundaries.

Acceptance

In an ideal situation the person we are setting a boundary with accepts our boundaries and respects them to the best of their ability.

Pushback

Pushback comes from fear of change (Tawwab, 2021). As we've talked about previously, change is inherently anxiety-producing for most people. When you set a boundary, you are changing the structure of the relationship in some way. If you are setting a boundary, chances are this person had a privilege they shouldn't have had in the first place and setting boundaries takes this privilege away from them (Doyle, 2022).

Response: Acknowledge any concerns they have brought up and restate your boundary.

For example, *"I know that you are concerned about finding someone else to watch your cat, but I cannot always be available to do it."*

Limit Testing

Limit testing is basically seeing how flexible your boundaries are and how close someone can come to violating them before you react. For example, imagine you have a friend who assumes you will agree to watch her cat whenever she leaves town. This is much more of a burden than your friend acknowledges, and you do not want to be their default cat-sitter, so you set a boundary. In response, your friend says, *"will you watch the cat for just one day?"* In this example, your friend

is testing the limits of the boundary you have set. If you respond with, *“Okay, I can do one day.”*, you are sending the message that you aren’t serious about your boundaries.

The best way to respond to limit testing is to call it out (Tawwab, 2021). Explicitly state that you recognize they are testing the limits of your boundary and how that response makes you feel. For example, *“I see that you are testing the limits of the boundary I have set and that makes me feel unheard.”*

Ignoring

Pretending like your boundary was misunderstood or altogether unheard is a passive-aggressive technique some people will use to see if you will also just ignore the boundary you have set. In keeping with the cat example, pretending to misunderstand a boundary might look like your friend saying, *“Oh, I didn’t realize you meant you couldn’t watch the cat this weekend.”* And ignoring your boundary entirely they might say, *“The key is under the mat and the food is where it always is. Give kitty cuddles for me!”*

It is important to react to ignoring immediately, otherwise, it sends the message that this is an effective strategy. One way to respond to this tactic is to restate your boundary and have them repeat it back to you so it is clear that they heard and understood it. You might also emphasize that this boundary is important to you and you need it to be taken seriously.

Questioning

People may feel confused or offended that a behavior that they thought was acceptable in the past is now unacceptable. Questioning is usually an attempt to get you to give them an explanation, which they can then argue about.

This response to boundary setting is why it is important to not give too much of an explanation or apologize for your boundary. If you try to explain yourself, you have given the other person the opportunity to argue with you about your needs. It may be tempting to answer their questions or apologize for the inconvenience

but remember you do not have to apologize for having needs and you do not need excuses for those needs that other people find acceptable. Simply articulate that you have changed your mind and you now have a boundary that needs to be respected.

This conversation with your cat friend might look something like

Friend: *“Why are you suddenly unable to watch the cat? You’ve always been able to watch him.”*

You: *“I know in the past I have always agreed to watch him, but that doesn’t work for me anymore.”*

Getting Defensive

People may sometimes feel attacked when you set boundaries. This may in part be a response to their fear of change but could also be the personalization of the boundary you have set. In other words, when you set your boundary, they might make it about them. So instead of, *“This doesn’t work for me anymore.”*, they hear, *“I don’t care about you or your cat.”* Being clear and kind when you set your boundary is one way to avoid a defensive response, but some people will feel defensive no matter what you say or how you say it. They may say things like, *“Well, I would help YOU, if you needed a cat-sitter.”*, or *“If you were really my friend you wouldn’t have a problem with watching the cat.”*

When dealing with a defensive response to your boundary setting, it is important to address it as soon as possible, otherwise, the issue could fester, and the relationship could become more strained than it has to be.

When responding to a defensive backlash, it might be helpful to make it about yourself and take the focus off of them. After all, it was never about them in the first place. Use “I” statements and “feeling” words. For example, *“I feel misunderstood.”* It will also be helpful not to engage them in discussions of old issues (Tawwab, 2021). Do your best to only address one issue at a time and keep the conversation on the topic. If the conversation gets heated and you feel ready

to cave, it is always okay to say you need to step back from it and revisit it when you feel more capable of a rational discussion.

Ghosting

Ghosting is ending a relationship by disappearing without explanation. Many of us are likely already familiar with this concept having been ghosted or having been the ghost. Though it may sometimes be the safest way to end a relationship, ghosting in response to boundaries is a passive-aggressive and unhealthy way for someone to state their objection to your boundary or to punish you for setting it.

Given the absence of any communication, ghosting is a difficult response to handle. One strategy may be to wait until they have calmed down and resumed communication to talk about it. It can also be helpful to send a message stating that you've noticed their reaction to your boundary and articulating how you feel and your concerns for the relationship. For example, your message might say something like, *"I recognize that you are ghosting me because of the boundary I set around taking care of your cat. Your absence has been painful and I am concerned that our relationship could be irreparably damaged if we don't address this."*

[3] Creating Consequences for Boundary Violations

As previously discussed, boundaries consist of both communication and action. The actions associated with the boundaries you have set are always actions that *you* will take. Remember, setting boundaries is about you addressing your needs, not telling others what to do. These actions are also not a punishment. Rather, they are the alternative option for getting your needs met.

For example, let's say you have a friend who drinks to excess when they come over, which usually leads to them being mean and insulting your other guests and your fun gathering immediately becomes uncomfortable. For this reason, you

have told this friend that you need them to not drink when they come to your next get-together.

In this situation, your need is not for your friend to do what you say, but to maintain a safe and enjoyable environment for yourself and your other guests. The action associated with this boundary (don't drink if you come over) might then be that this friend is no longer invited to your parties if they violate the boundary you have set.

The consequences you set for boundary violations need to be something you will actually uphold if needed, otherwise, they will likely show the boundary violator that they don't need to take your boundaries seriously.

[4] Maintaining Boundaries with Difficult People

Ideally, everyone you set a boundary with will accept and respect your boundary. Unfortunately, however, you are likely to encounter some difficult people who will continue to push your limits and ignore your boundaries long after you have set them.

As we discussed earlier, it is important to not over-explain yourself when confronted with pushback. If you provide too many details or go into a background story, you give them more opportunities to argue and more ways for them to try to change your mind.

When dealing with difficult people do your best to remember that your needs are valid and they are important. This is where self-knowledge and unconditional self-acceptance will come in handy. Difficult people will likely try to make you feel bad for setting a boundary in the hopes that you will cave, but when you know what your needs are and can accept yourself - flaws and all - you won't be easily swayed by their manipulative rhetoric.

Let's talk a bit more about other strategies that might help you maintain your boundaries with difficult people.

Saying “Stop”

Difficult people may push you repeatedly to drop your boundaries, expecting that you will give in eventually. Sadly, they are often correct. It becomes easier to just give in to what they want from us rather than hold our ground. One strategy for dealing with this offered by therapist and author, Nedra Glover Tawwab, is to just say “stop.” For example, we might say, *“I have already said ‘no’, and that answer won’t change so you can stop asking.”*

Ultimatums

An ultimatum is essentially repeating your boundary and explicitly outlining the consequences. When we are first setting a boundary, we don’t necessarily articulate the action we plan to take if our boundary is not respected. Immediately stating the “or else” part of the boundary can come across as aggressive and doesn’t give the other person the opportunity to choose to respect your boundary because they want to rather than change their behavior in order to avoid an undesirable outcome.

Issuing an ultimatum is essentially offering one last opportunity for the other person to respect your boundary. For example, let’s say your mother-in-law likes to come over to your house unannounced. You’ve asked her to call first so that you can let her know if it is a good time for her to come over or not. She has repeatedly ignored your boundary despite your best attempts to make it clear that this is a problem for you. This is when it would be time for the ultimatum. You might say something like, *“If you don’t start calling before you come over I am going to stop answering the door.”* It is important that the actions you choose are something you will follow through on, otherwise, they are empty threats and will teach people to not take you seriously.

As mentioned previously, the consequences you set are not punishments, they are what you need to do to get your needs met when the other person refuses to respect your boundary. Below are a few examples of unhealthy ultimatums and healthy ultimatums.

Unhealthy Ultimatums

- “If you don’t start cleaning more often, I’m going to move out.”
- “If you go to that party, I’m not going to be your friend anymore.”
- “If you don’t call me back right now, I’m breaking up with you.”

Healthy Ultimatums

- “If you aren’t back before 7, I’m going to start dinner without you.”
- “If you keep gambling, I’m not going to loan you money anymore.”
- “If you keep canceling our plans at the last minute, I’m going to stop trying to make plans with you.”

Letting Go

When dealing with someone who repeatedly violates your boundaries despite your best efforts, it is unlikely that they are going to change that behavior. If this is the case, the best option may be to let go of that relationship.

Ending a relationship can be painful. If this is the path you choose to take, be sure to take care of yourself through the process. It may also bring up feelings of guilt and shame. If you start to feel like you have done something bad or wrong by ending the relationship, remind yourself that letting this person go was an act of self-love and self-care. You made a decision that honors your needs and limits. It might also be helpful to recognize that boundaries make healthy relationships better, so this may have been a relationship that already needed re-evaluating.

EXERCISE: Practice Saying No

Think through some times that you encountered a difficult person who seemed committed to not hearing your “no” or times in which a pushy person got you to give up your “no.” We will be talking through these with a group, so focus on the times that you will be comfortable sharing with others.

In groups of at least 2, take turns talking through the scenario each of you has thought of and considering ways in which you might have handled the situation

differently. When you identify a good way to give a final “NO”, try acting it out with each other to see how it feels.

[5] Honoring Your Own Boundaries

We have now talked in depth about setting and keeping boundaries with other people. This skill will surely improve our lives in ways we might not even recognize yet. But the benefits of this skill are incomplete if we don't honor our own boundaries. Let's talk through a few ways to honor our boundaries.

Leading by example is one way we can honor our own boundaries. We show others how we want to be treated by how we treat them. If we ask inappropriate questions, we show them that we think that is acceptable behavior and that they may do the same. Upholding the same standard of behavior that we expect of other people is a robust way of saying both “this boundary is an important part of my life,” and “If I am able to respect this boundary, so are you.”

Honoring our boundaries with ourselves. The boundaries we set with ourselves may manifest in several ways. It could be saying “no” to ourselves when we want to buy things we can't afford, changing the way we speak to ourselves, or allowing ourselves to shine. These boundaries are promises we make to ourselves. When we buy that shirt or say unkind things to ourselves, we are breaking these promises.

Self-care is also a way to honor the boundaries set by our biology and psychology. In other words, it is upholding the most fundamental expectation of all: to treat ourselves like human beings. Dedicating time to caring for ourselves accepts our humanity and our limits. Just as boundaries improve our relationships with others, honoring our own boundaries improves our relationship with ourselves.

How we allow others to treat us. We have talked a lot about setting boundaries with people close to us or who are consistently in our lives, but boundaries extend to everyone. For example, if a stranger is being rude to you, you can still

set a boundary with them even though you will never interact with them again. It is easy to let people that are only briefly in our lives violate some of our boundaries. This is often because it feels easier to just suck it up for the 5 more minutes we have to be around them than to stand up for ourselves. After all, it isn't like they could ever be a repeat offender. However, it is important that we uphold our boundaries, even in insignificant moments like this one. Doing so honors the promises we have made to ourselves and makes keeping boundaries part of our everyday routines.

EXERCISE: Pinky Swear

You should be the most important person in your world. A good relationship with yourself is an important part of being able to uphold boundaries in the face of pushback and bullying. Like any other relationship, making promises improves the relationship, and breaking them damages it. For this exercise, pick one promise you will make with yourself or one boundary you will set and keep with yourself. Write it out on a notecard in large print so you can read it when you put it up on a wall or your bathroom mirror and decorate it in a way that will make you want to look at it later. This serves as both the promise you have made and a reminder to keep it.

Summary

This chapter focused on keeping the boundaries that we have just learned to set. We learned that it may take people some time to get used to the new expectation. During this time, we can offer some grace and understanding and simply remind them of the boundary we have set. We also learned about some of the many ways people may react to our boundaries and how we can try to manage their reactions. This chapter also focused on how to decide what we will do when someone violates our boundaries, how to manage difficult people, and, critically, how we can honor our own boundaries.

Potential Infidelity Related Boundaries

In this course, we've delved into the multifaceted nature of boundaries, emphasizing their role in shaping and safeguarding our identities. We discovered that boundaries are influenced by early childhood experiences and our attachment styles—secure, anxious, or avoidant—which affect our ease in setting boundaries. We covered five key strategies to gain clarity on our boundaries: tapping into our emotions, introspection, seeking others' perspectives, recognizing our values, and confronting our hesitations.

The boundary-setting process we discussed involves clear, honest communication, coupled with actions that uphold these boundaries rather than punish. Assertiveness in communication, comfort in discomfort, and self-acceptance were highlighted as vital skills. Finally, we explored how to maintain boundaries, including managing various reactions from others and the importance of respecting our own boundaries.

Creating and enforcing boundaries after the discovery of an affair is a crucial step in the healing process for the betrayed spouse. It's about regaining a sense of control, self-respect, and safety in the relationship. Here's a list of potential boundaries you might consider:

1. **Full Transparency:** Require complete honesty and openness from your partner. This includes access to phone, email, and social media accounts if necessary.
2. **No Contact with the Affair Partner:** Insist that your spouse ceases all forms of communication with the person they had the affair with.
3. **Open Communication:** Establish regular check-ins and open dialogue about feelings, progress, and concerns in the relationship.
4. **Individual and Couples Therapy:** Both partners should engage in individual therapy for personal issues and couples therapy for relationship healing.

5. **Sexual Health Safety:** Insist on medical check-ups for sexually transmitted infections for both partners.
6. **Space and Time Alone:** Allow yourself the space and time alone when needed, without guilt or pressure from your spouse.
7. **Social Boundaries:** Decide on how and when to share the affair with friends, family, or public spaces, like social media.
8. **Financial Transparency:** If the affair involved financial betrayal, require full disclosure of financial activities and joint decision-making on future expenditures.
9. **Personal Growth Activities:** Both partners should engage in individual activities that promote personal growth, such as hobbies, exercise, or educational pursuits.
10. **Shared Responsibility in Rebuilding Trust:** Your spouse should actively participate in rebuilding trust, including being patient with your healing process and consistently demonstrating trustworthiness.
11. **Emotional Support:** Your spouse should understand the emotional impact of the affair and offer support, empathy, and patience as you process these feelings.
12. **Limitations on Alcohol/Substance Use:** If substance use contributed to the infidelity, establish boundaries around future use.
13. **Respect for Healing Timeline:** Acknowledge that healing is not linear and the betrayed spouse controls their own timeline for forgiveness and trust rebuilding.
14. **Setting Physical Boundaries:** If needed, sleep in separate bedrooms until you feel comfortable sharing a bed again.
15. **Decision-Making in Rebuilding the Relationship:** Be clear that staying in the marriage and how the marriage progresses is a decision you both need to make together.

16. Boundaries Around Personal Privacy: Respect for each other's personal space and privacy, even as you work on transparency.

Examples of Enforcing Boundaries:

1. **Full Transparency:** "I need to have access to your phone and email for a while. This is not about me controlling you but about rebuilding trust."
2. **No Contact with the Affair Partner:** "If I find out there has been any form of contact with them, we will need to reevaluate the future of our relationship."
3. **Open Communication:** "Let's set aside time each evening to talk about how we are feeling. No distractions, just us."
4. **Individual and Couples Therapy:** "It's important that we both see therapists to work through this. Let's find therapists this week and schedule appointments."
5. **Sexual Health Safety:** "I need us both to get tested for STIs before we consider becoming intimate again."
6. **Space and Time Alone:** "I need some time alone to process my feelings. Let's agree on times when I can have the house to myself."
7. **Social Boundaries:** "Let's agree on who we tell about the affair and how we address it publicly."
8. **Financial Transparency:** "We need to review our bank statements together monthly and discuss any major purchases."
9. **Personal Growth Activities:** "I would like us to each find an activity that helps us grow individually. Let's share what we find interesting."

10. **Shared Responsibility in Rebuilding Trust:** "I need you to understand that trust takes time to rebuild. Please be patient with me as I work through this."
11. **Emotional Support:** "I need you to recognize when I am having a difficult time with this and offer your support."
12. **Limitations on Alcohol/Substance Use:** "We need to limit alcohol in the house for the time being, as it's a trigger for me."
13. **Respect for Healing Timeline:** "I'm not sure how long it will take me to heal. I need you to understand and respect that."
14. **Setting Physical Boundaries:** "I'm not comfortable sharing a bed right now. Let's sleep in separate rooms until I feel ready."
15. **Decision-Making in Rebuilding the Relationship:** "We both need to actively decide and work towards what kind of relationship we want moving forward."
16. **Boundaries Around Personal Privacy:** "Even though we are working on transparency, I still need my personal space and time, and I'll respect yours."

Remember, enforcing boundaries is not about punishment but about protecting your emotional well-being and creating a framework for healing and rebuilding the relationship. Congratulations on completing the course. You're ready to start setting some healthy boundaries!

Example Boundary Stories

Mary and Ted

Mary and Ted had been the quintessential high school sweethearts, their love story unfolding in a small, close-knit community. Over the years, their relationship seemed to embody stability and mutual respect. They built a life filled with shared dreams, two beautiful children, and a comfortable home. But beneath this serene surface, subtle cracks began to appear.

Ted, once attentive and engaged, became distant and preoccupied. His career in finance demanded more of him, and slowly, his work became his refuge, a place where he felt more in control and valued. Meanwhile, Mary juggled her career as a teacher with the demands of motherhood, often feeling overwhelmed yet striving to keep the family's rhythm smooth.

The revelation of Ted's affair came like a storm on a clear day. He had become involved with a colleague, a connection that started as a shared grievance over work pressures and evolved into something more. Ted ended the affair abruptly, professing his love for Mary and his desire to mend their marriage. But his commitment to recovery was lackluster. He avoided deep conversations, shrugged off counseling, and hoped time would heal their wounds.

Mary, initially paralyzed by shock and grief, slowly found her footing. She realized that waiting for Ted to lead their recovery was futile. She decided to take charge of her own healing and, in doing so, set the course for their relationship.

She started by seeking individual therapy, a space where she could process her pain without judgment. Her therapist guided her in understanding the importance of boundaries, not just for her well-being but as a crucial step in their marital healing.

Mary then sat down with Ted. In a calm yet firm tone, she expressed her needs clearly. She needed honesty, transparency, and active participation in rebuilding their marriage. She outlined specific actions she expected from Ted: attending couples counseling, being open about his feelings and struggles, and creating a plan to rebuild trust. Mary emphasized that these were not requests but necessities for any chance at reconciliation.

She also set boundaries for herself. If Ted chose not to engage in the healing process, Mary was prepared to consider more significant changes, including the possibility of separation. It was a boundary she hoped never to enforce, but she understood its importance.

Ted's reaction was mixed. Initially taken aback, he soon recognized the weight of Mary's words. Her firm stance was a wake-up call. He had been complacent, taking her presence and forgiveness for granted. Seeing her assert her needs and outline consequences jolted him into action.

The path forward wasn't smooth. There were setbacks, moments of doubt, and intense emotional upheaval. But Mary's resolve in setting and maintaining boundaries slowly transformed their dynamic. Ted began to engage more genuinely in therapy, understanding that the road to healing required active participation. Their communication improved, gradually bridging the chasm that the affair had created.

As they navigated this challenging journey, Mary and Ted learned that boundaries are not just about setting limits; they're about defining the values and conditions under which a relationship can grow and heal. For Mary, it was about self-respect and demanding the effort their marriage deserved. For Ted, it was a lesson in accountability and the realization that healing required more than just words.

Their story didn't have a fairy-tale ending, but it evolved into something real and grounded. They learned to face their vulnerabilities, to communicate honestly,

and to respect each other's needs. The affair was a scar in their history, but with Mary's courage in setting boundaries, it also became a catalyst for profound personal and relational growth.

Paul and Sally

Paul and Sally's love story had been a whirlwind romance, marked by passion and an intense connection from the moment they met. They married young, their lives intertwining seamlessly as they built a future together, supported by a strong circle of friends and a shared love for adventure.

However, over the years, the excitement of their early days gave way to the routines of daily life. Paul, a graphic designer, found himself consumed by his work, while Sally, a restaurant manager, was often exhausted by her demanding job. Communication dwindled, and they slowly drifted apart, losing the intimacy that once defined their relationship.

In this emotional void, Paul found solace in a colleague. What began as casual conversations over coffee evolved into an affair. The guilt was overwhelming, and soon, Paul ended the affair, confessing to Sally in a turmoil of remorse. Determined to repair the damage, Paul began therapy, earnestly working to understand the underlying reasons for his infidelity and committed to making personal changes.

Sally, devastated by the betrayal, was consumed by a need to understand why and how the affair happened. Her pain manifested in long, intense discussions about the affair, often spiraling into hours of emotionally charged interrogation. Paul, initially patient, found himself increasingly on the defensive as these conversations frequently ended in Sally's furious outbursts and name-calling.

Caught in this vicious cycle, Paul realized they were stuck. His therapist suggested that setting boundaries could be a crucial step in breaking this pattern. It was a difficult notion for Paul, who felt that he had no right to set boundaries given his

betrayal. However, he understood that for their healing process to progress, they needed a healthier framework for communication.

Paul decided to approach Sally with a proposal. He acknowledged her pain and her right to seek answers. He expressed his commitment to rebuilding trust and being transparent. However, he also conveyed how the current manner of their discussions was not only unproductive but was also harming their chances of healing.

He suggested setting specific times for these conversations, limiting them to an hour, during which they would both commit to staying as calm as possible. He proposed the idea of having some of these discussions in the presence of a couples' therapist, providing a neutral ground where both could feel heard and guided.

Sally was initially resistant, interpreting Paul's suggestion as an attempt to avoid talking about the affair. However, Paul reassured her that his intention was not to escape the difficult conversations but to make them more constructive. He emphasized that this boundary was not just for his benefit but for both of them and the future of their relationship.

Gradually, Sally came to see the merit in Paul's proposal. Structured discussions allowed her to express her feelings without the conversations escalating into conflict. The presence of a therapist in some of these discussions provided the couple with insights and tools to communicate more effectively.

This new approach was not a magic solution. There were still moments of pain and anger, but the cycle of endless, unproductive conversations was broken. Paul's initiative to set boundaries, far from being an act of evasion, was an act of taking responsibility for the healing process.

For Paul and Sally, this was a turning point. It marked a shift from a focus on the past and its pain to a focus on the future and the possibility of rebuilding their

relationship. It was a slow and challenging journey, but with this newfound approach, they began to see a path forward, one step at a time.

Example Scripts for Infidelity Related Boundary Discussions

When a couple is navigating the difficult terrain of infidelity, communication becomes crucial yet incredibly challenging. The scripts provided here are designed to assist couples like Paul and Sally in having more productive, respectful conversations about sensitive issues related to infidelity. These example scripts offer guidance on how to set and enforce boundaries effectively during these discussions.

Directions for Use

1. **Read Through Together:** Both partners should read the scripts together to understand the intent and tone behind each proposed conversation.
2. **Personalize:** Feel free to modify the language to fit your personal style and the specific dynamics of your relationship.
3. **Practice:** Before having the actual conversation, it might be helpful to practice or role-play using the scripts to become more comfortable with expressing your thoughts and feelings.
4. **Safe Space:** Choose a quiet, private time and place where both of you feel safe and are unlikely to be interrupted.
5. **Stay Calm:** Try to maintain a calm and composed demeanor. If emotions escalate, it's okay to take a break and revisit the conversation later.
6. **Listen Actively:** Make an effort to really listen to your partner's concerns and feelings. This isn't just about speaking your part but also understanding theirs.

7. **Mutual Respect:** Keep the conversation respectful. Avoid name-calling, yelling, or interrupting each other.

Best Practices

- **Empathy and Validation:** Acknowledge each other's feelings. Understanding and validating emotions can pave the way for more productive dialogue.
- **Clarity in Communication:** Be clear and specific about what you need and why. Avoid vague statements.
- **Focus on the Present and Future:** While it's necessary to address the affair, try to steer the conversation towards healing and rebuilding rather than only dwelling on the past.
- **Seek Professional Help:** Consider involving a professional therapist if you find it challenging to have these conversations on your own.
- **Consistency:** Continuously work on respecting the boundaries set during these conversations. It's a process that requires ongoing effort.

Remember, these scripts are a starting point. Every couple is unique, and the journey of healing and rebuilding trust is deeply personal. The goal is to foster open, honest, and respectful communication as you navigate this challenging path together. (Note: We've included 2 -3 example scripts for each topic.)

Scripts for Boundaries Set by the Betrayed Spouse

1. Topic: To be open when talking about the affair and to not get defensive when questioned about the affair details.

Betrayed: I understand this is a difficult situation. We need to talk openly and honestly about your affair, but without getting defensive or blaming each other.

I want you to know that it is okay to feel whatever emotion you are feeling with this, and I am here to listen.

At the same time, I need to be clear about what boundaries we will set for continuing the conversation about the affair. There may be some facts that are painful for me to hear, but those have to be shared in order for us to move past this.

I want us both to feel safe during our conversations. This means you cannot shut down when I ask questions or get angry when I express my feelings. Similarly, I will not be judgmental of any details you share with me and will refrain from saying things that might make you feel guilty or ashamed.

We can create an atmosphere where we can talk freely without being defensive or making accusations. But at the same time, we must respect each other's feelings and also respect our relationship by staying honest and open about everything that happened during this time in our lives.

Betrayed: I know this is a difficult conversation for us both, and before we start talking, I'd like to set up some boundaries.

First, I want to make sure that this stays a respectful discussion with no name-calling or insults. Second, I would like you to be honest and open with me about your affair. Third, I need you to keep our discussion focused on the current situation instead of bringing up past arguments or problems.

Lastly, please remember that if either of us gets too emotional during this conversation, we can take a break and come back to it when we're ready.

Betrayed: First of all, I want you to know that I love you and that we both have a responsibility to make this relationship work. That being said, I need to establish some boundaries around the subject of your affair.

I need you to understand that it's okay for us to talk about what happened, but it's important that we do so without getting defensive or attacking each other. I don't want either of us to feel judged or blamed for what happened. We both need to take ownership of our part in this situation and understand why it happened and how we can avoid it in the future.

I want you to be open with me about the details of your affair - who was involved, how long it lasted, why it started, etc. But as much as possible, I want us both to stay focused on looking ahead rather than looking back on what has already been done.

I'm committed to doing whatever is necessary to rebuild our trust together and move forward in a positive way - but only if we both agree to these boundaries and keep them going forward. Are you willing?

2. Topic: **For unfaithful person to end all contact forever with the affair partner**

Betrayed: Please listen carefully. This is the last time I am going to allow you to speak to her. You must end all contact with your affair partner immediately and for good. It's time for this relationship to come to an end, for both of our sakes.

I have put up with enough and can no longer stand by while you continue this affair. It hurts too much, not just me but our entire family. It's tearing us apart and I will no longer tolerate it.

You must sever all communication, including face-to-face meetings, phone calls, text messages, emails or any other forms of communication that you two may be using. No more secret rendezvous or late night calls - it must all stop right now!

I need peace of mind knowing that the two of you are not in contact anymore. This is a boundary that I expect you to adhere to if we are going to move forward as a couple in our marriage and ensure a healthier relationship between us.

Betrayed: You need to end all contact with your affair partner for good. Not only have you betrayed me and our marriage, but you have put yourself at risk of a number of personal and legal consequences. I will not stand for this behavior any longer.

This means that all communication between the two of you must immediately stop. No more texting, emails, or social media messages. And I absolutely do not want to hear about any future in-person contact either.

You should also delete any records of your conversations with this person. Delete all messages, photos, and videos exchanged between the two of you – including those stored on your computers and phones.

Furthermore, I want you to end all financial support to this person immediately. This means no money transfers or gifts; no paying for anything they need or want; and severing ties to any business investments you may have made together as well.

Finally, if there are any items that were exchanged between the two of you – such as jewelry or clothing – then I expect those things to be returned back to where they came from as quickly as possible.

The bottom line is that I am serious about this boundary: There can be no contact whatsoever between you and your affair partner from here on out.

3. **Topic: To go to individual and couples counseling**

Betrayed: Hey, I've been thinking a lot about us and where we go from here. It's clear to me that we both need some help to navigate through this, and I've been considering the idea of counseling. I really believe that for us to heal and move forward, it's essential that we both commit to individual and couples counseling.

I'm not suggesting this because I think everything is broken beyond repair. On the contrary, I believe it's because there's so much worth saving between us. For me, individual counseling is a space to process my feelings about the affair and figure out how to rebuild my trust in you and in us. It's also a way for me to understand my own emotions and reactions better.

And then there's couples counseling. This is where we can come together, guided by a professional, to address the issues that led to the affair and work on rebuilding our relationship. It's a safe space for both of us to be honest and open, to learn how to communicate better, and to start laying down a new foundation for our future.

I need to know that you're willing to take these steps with me. It's not just about showing up for the sessions, but also about being actively engaged in the process. This is something I need from you, not just for the sake of our relationship, but for my own peace of mind and healing. Are you open to this?

Betrayed: I've been doing a lot of thinking about everything that's happened. I know we've talked about going to counseling before, but I want to revisit that conversation because I really feel it's crucial for both of us. I believe that for us to

truly move past the affair and rebuild what we've had, we both need the guidance and support that counseling can offer.

For me, individual counseling is non-negotiable. It's my space to work through the hurt and confusion I'm feeling, to understand my emotions, and to learn how to cope with them in a healthy way. It's important for me to have that support from someone neutral and professional.

As for couples counseling, I see it as our joint effort to repair our relationship. It's a place where we can both be heard, where we can understand what went wrong, and most importantly, how we can fix it. It's about learning new ways to communicate and reconnecting with each other.

I need to know that you're not just agreeing to this, but that you're truly committed to it. It's vital for me to see that you're taking active steps towards healing and making amends. This is about us both putting in the work to heal, grow, and hopefully, come out stronger on the other side. Can we agree to make this a priority?

4. **Topic: To stop being dishonest and secretive**

Betrayed: Can we sit down and talk for a moment? There's something important that I need to address. Since the affair, one of the hardest things for me has been dealing with the dishonesty and secretiveness. I understand that rebuilding trust is going to take time, but for that to happen, I need complete honesty from you going forward.

I'm not asking you to be perfect, but I am asking for transparency. If there are things you're struggling with or feelings you're trying to sort out, I need you to share them with me. Keeping things hidden or being secretive, even about small stuff, makes it harder for me to trust you and for us to move forward.

From now on, let's make a commitment to each other: no more secrets and no more lies. If there's something you feel you can't tell me, I'd prefer you to say you're not ready to talk about it yet, rather than hide it or be untruthful. This openness is a crucial step in healing our relationship. Can we agree to this and work together on being transparent with each other?

Betrayed: I've been doing a lot of thinking about what it means for us to rebuild our relationship and one thing keeps coming to mind - the need for honesty. The secrecy that's been part of our lives needs to end if we're going to move forward. I understand this might be challenging, but it's essential for me to feel secure in our relationship.

Going forward, I need us to have a policy of complete openness. This means being honest about where we are, who we're with, and what we're doing. If you receive a text or a call that you feel you need to hide, then it's probably something we need to talk about.

I also want to say that I'm here to listen and support you, not to judge. But I can only do that if you're honest with me. Let's try to create an environment where we can share openly without fear. Can we make this commitment to each other? It's really important to me that we build a foundation of trust again.

5. **Topic: To respect the betrayed person's feelings and decisions as they relate to having physical intimacy with his/her spouse.**

Betrayed: I need you to respect my feelings and decisions when it comes to having physical intimacy with you. I know that we have been through a difficult time since I found out about your infidelity, but I am still trying to work through it.

First of all, it's important for me to understand why you chose to engage in behavior outside of our marriage. I want both of us to be honest and open with each other so that we can move forward in a healthy way.

Secondly, I need a commitment from you that there will not be any further contact or communication with anyone else outside of our relationship. This means no texting, calling, or visiting anyone else for any reason related to physical intimacy.

Thirdly, I need for us to make sure that we have time for us as a couple; this means going on dates, taking time away from the kids and committing ourselves to rebuilding our marriage. We both need to invest the time and energy into making this relationship stronger and healthier than before.

Finally, if we do choose to have physical intimacy again at some point in the future then we should take things slow and make sure it is something we both feel comfortable with. It is important for me that everything is done within the boundaries of our marriage agreement and out of love and respect for each other first and foremost.

Betrayed: I wanted to talk about something that's been on my mind, something important. It's about us and our physical relationship. Since learning about the affair, I've been feeling a lot of mixed emotions, and it's affected the way I feel about being intimate. I need you to understand and respect how I'm feeling.

I'm not saying I've lost all desire for you, but I need time to process my emotions and heal. Right now, I'm not always going to be comfortable with physical intimacy, and I need you to respect that. It's not a punishment or rejection, but a reflection of what I'm going through.

I hope we can work towards rebuilding the trust and connection that make physical intimacy something special between us. But for that to happen, I need you to be patient and understanding. Can we agree to take this part of our relationship slowly and check in with each other, so we're both comfortable with how things are progressing?

Betrayed: I've been thinking about how we move forward, and there's something I need to talk to you about. It's about our physical relationship. After the affair, my feelings about being intimate have changed. I need to set some boundaries, and I hope you can understand and respect them.

Right now, I'm not in a place where I can be physically intimate in the way we used to be. It's hard for me, and I need some space to heal emotionally. This means that I might not always be up for physical affection, and I want you to know it's not about you – it's about me needing time to sort through my feelings.

I want to get back to a place where I feel comfortable and safe being intimate again, but it's going to take some time. I would really appreciate your patience and understanding as I work through this. Can we agree to be open and communicative about our physical relationship, respecting each other's feelings and boundaries as we navigate this together?"

Scripts for Boundaries Set by the Unfaithful Spouse

1. **Topic:** For the affair partner, that they cannot have any type of contact and any attempts to do so will be ignored.

Unfaithful: Hello [Affair Partner's Name], I need to have a frank conversation with you. It's clear to me now that our relationship was a mistake, one that has caused a lot of harm. To begin repairing the damage I've done and to stay true to my commitment to my family, I have to end all contact with you.

From this point forward, I cannot and will not respond to any calls, messages, or any other attempts at contact you might make. This decision is final and non-negotiable. It's important for both of us to move on and focus on healing independently.

I understand this may be hard, but it's necessary for the wellbeing of everyone involved, including ourselves. Please respect this boundary and do not attempt to reach out to me. Thank you for understanding."

Unfaithful: "[Affair Partner's Name], I've taken a hard look at my actions and their consequences, and it's become clear that our relationship cannot continue in any form. I am committed to making things right in my marriage, and a key part of that is completely cutting off our connection.

So, I'm letting you know that from now on, I won't be in contact with you. This means no messages, calls, or meetings. If you try to contact me, I won't respond. This is not up for discussion or negotiation.

I'm doing this to focus on healing and rebuilding trust where I've caused damage. It's important for both of us to move forward separately. I appreciate your understanding and cooperation with this decision."

2. Topic: For the betrayed spouse to create a safe environment to communicate so that effective discussions can happen.

Unfaithful: Hey, I've been doing a lot of thinking about how we communicate, especially since everything that's happened. I know I've caused a lot of pain and distrust, and for us to have any chance of getting through this, I feel we need to create a safe space for our conversations. A space where we can talk openly, without fear or judgment.

I understand that you have every right to be angry and hurt, and I want you to express those feelings. But I also think it's important for us to try and communicate in a way that doesn't lead to more hurt. It's not about avoiding the tough topics – it's about how we handle them.

Can we agree to set some guidelines? Like, if one of us starts to feel overwhelmed, we take a short break and come back to the conversation later. And we avoid name-calling or accusations, focusing instead on expressing our own feelings and listening to each other.

I'm committed to working through this, and I know it's going to be hard. But I believe that if we can create a respectful and safe environment for our discussions, we stand a better chance of healing and understanding each other. What do you think?

Unfaithful: Can we talk about how we've been communicating? I know I'm the last person who has the right to set rules, but I think it's crucial for us to have

constructive discussions if we're ever going to get past this. I've hurt you deeply, and my actions have thrown us into a very painful place. For us to work through this, we need to find a way to talk about it that doesn't make things worse.

I've been thinking, maybe we could try to set some ground rules for our discussions. Rules like, no interrupting each other, and trying to stay calm, even when it's really hard. And if either of us starts to feel attacked or defensive, we take a break and cool down before continuing.

I know it's a lot to ask, especially from me. But I believe that by creating a safe space for our conversations, we can start to tackle the big issues in a more constructive way. I want to understand your pain and I want to help heal the wounds I've caused. Are you willing to try this approach with me?"

3. Topic: To maintain some privacy and not tell the kids, parents and other family members

Unfaithful: Hey, I've been thinking about how we handle the situation with our families and kids. I know we're in a really tough spot right now, and I'm committed to repairing what I've broken. Part of that process, I believe, involves how we manage our privacy.

I think it's crucial that we keep the details of my affair between us and not share them with the kids, your parents, or other family members. It's not about hiding the truth or avoiding accountability; it's about protecting our children and our families from pain and complexity they don't need to bear.

I also worry that involving them might make our journey to healing more difficult. Our focus should be on us, on repairing and rebuilding what I've damaged. I'm not asking for secrecy, but for discretion and privacy. Can we agree to keep this within our immediate circle while we work through it?

Unfaithful: Can we talk about something important? It's about how we navigate this situation with our wider family. I've been doing a lot of soul-searching, and one thing that stands out to me is the need for some level of privacy. I feel it's essential that we don't involve the kids, your parents, or other family members in the details of my affair.

It's already so hard for us, and I think involving them would add an extra layer of complexity and pain – not just for us but for them too. The kids, especially, don't need the weight of this on their shoulders. And while I'm all for transparency and honesty, I believe this is something we need to manage within our own relationship.

I'm not suggesting we lie or pretend everything is fine. If questions are asked, we can find a way to address them without going into details that could cause harm. I'm asking for us to protect our private journey of healing and rebuilding. Do you think we can manage it this way?

4. Topic: Asking the betrayed to consider going to individual therapy.

Unfaithful: I've been thinking a lot about our journey to healing and something important came to mind. I know I'm the one who screwed up, and I'm fully committed to my own therapy to fix what led me to make those choices. But, I also think it might be beneficial for you to consider individual therapy. Hear me out on this.

I understand you feel that you're not the one who needs to be 'fixed' – and you're absolutely right. This isn't about fixing you. It's about giving you a space to process your feelings, to heal, and to have someone to talk to who can provide unbiased support. What we're going through is incredibly tough, and it's normal to need extra support.

Therapy could offer you a place to vent, to understand your emotions, and to learn how to cope with this betrayal in a way that's healthy for you. It's not about assigning blame, but about caring for your emotional well-being. I really think it could be helpful, not because there's anything wrong with you, but because you deserve that support. What do you think?

Unfaithful: I wanted to talk about something that I think could help us both. I know I'm the one who made terrible choices, and I'm dealing with that in therapy. But, it's also been on my mind that therapy might be a good support for you too. I get that you might feel like 'Why should I go to therapy when I'm not the one who cheated?' But this isn't about who's at fault – we already know that's on me.

I see therapy as a tool for support and healing, a place where you can express all the anger, hurt, and confusion you're feeling right now in a safe space. It's not about fixing you – you're not broken. It's about helping you navigate these incredibly painful emotions and the impact this situation has had on you.

I just want the best for you, and I feel like having a professional to talk to could be really beneficial. It's a place for you to be heard and to get the guidance you might need to process everything that's happened. It's important to me that you're okay, and I believe this could be a step towards healing. Would you consider it?"

5. Topic: To refrain from physical and verbal outbursts and violence

Unfaithful: I've been doing some thinking about how we've been communicating, and I feel we need to address something important. First off, I completely acknowledge the pain and betrayal you're feeling because of my actions. I know I've caused this, and I'm truly sorry. As we're trying to navigate through this,

though, I feel it's crucial for our communication to be free from physical aggression and hurtful language.

I understand that emotions are running high, and you have every right to express your anger and disappointment. But I think for us to really make any progress in understanding each other and healing, our conversations need to be respectful and safe. When we resort to yelling or harsh words, it feels like we're causing more harm, and it's hard to move forward from there.

Could we possibly agree that even in the toughest moments of our discussions, we try to maintain a level of respect and refrain from physical and verbal outbursts? I promise to do my part in staying calm and present, and to listen to you without getting defensive. This way, I believe we can have more meaningful and healing conversations.

Unfaithful: I understand that you are feeling hurt and angry about my infidelity. I want to create a boundary that will help protect both of us from further harm. I need you to remain physically calm and refrain from any form of physical outbursts - this includes screaming, hitting, throwing objects, or any other physical aggression. This boundary is for your safety as well as mine.

I understand that it is difficult to control your emotions in situations like these, and I am willing to do what I can to help you manage them. We can talk through your feelings calmly, or if needed we can take a break from the conversation until you have had some time to process everything.

I want us both to be able to move forward in the healthiest way possible. We can work together on finding ways for me to make things right again, but before we can do that we need to set boundaries so that neither of us gets hurt further in the process.

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