

Setting Boundaries

how to say “no”

Personal boundaries are the rules and limits we set for ourselves in relationships. A person with healthy boundaries can say “no” to others, but they are also open to intimacy and new experiences.

Boundary basics



Setting boundaries is a way to honor and protect what matters most to you. For example, if you value spending time with family, you can set firm boundaries around working late.



Your boundaries are yours and yours alone. Many of your boundaries might align with those who are close to you, but others will be unique.



It's inevitable that you'll encounter people or situations that challenge your boundaries. To be true to your boundaries, you have to be willing to communicate them and tolerate some pushback.

What to say

You always have the right to say “no.” Express yourself clearly so there's no doubt about what you want.

“I’m uncomfortable with this.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Not at this time.”

“I can’t do that for you.”

“This doesn’t work for me.”

“I’ve decided not to.”

“This is not acceptable.”

“I’m drawing the line at ____.”

“I don’t want to do that.”

What to do

Plan ahead.

Think about what you want to say and how you'll say it before entering a difficult discussion or situation. This can help you feel more confident about your position.

Use confident body language.

Face the other person, make eye contact, and use a steady tone of voice at an appropriate volume (not too quiet and not too loud).

Be respectful.

Avoid yelling, using put-downs, or being passive-aggressive. It's okay to be firm, but your words will be more effective if you're respectful.

Compromise.

When appropriate, listen to and consider the needs of the other person. You never *have* to compromise, but give-and-take is part of any healthy relationship.

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Instructions: Respond to the following questions as if you were really in each situation. Use whatever language feels right to clearly communicate your boundary.

Examples

Situation: You notice your roommate has been eating your food in the fridge. You never discussed plans to share food and don't want them eating what you bought.

Response: *"I'd like to keep our food separate. If there's something of mine you want, please ask me before taking it."*

Situation: A friend frequently borrows books from you, but never returns them without being prompted. You're feeling frustrated and want to put a stop to this pattern.

Response: *"I'm happy for you to borrow another book, but only if you're willing to return it within a week or two without me having to ask for it. Otherwise, I'm not going to be able to keep doing it."*

Practice

- 1 You invited a friend over for the evening, but now it's getting late. You'd like to get ready for bed, so you need to tell your friend that it's time to go.

Response:

- 2 A friend asks you out on a date. You're not interested in being more than friends. You want to communicate this clearly, but gently.

Response:

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Situation: You missed several days of work due to a medical condition. When you get back, a coworker asks what happened. You feel this information is personal and do not want to share.

Response:

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Situation: Your brother asks last minute if you can watch his two young children on Saturday morning. You already have other plans.

Response:

5

Situation: Your partner vents their frustration about their job every evening. You want to be supportive, but your partner’s frequent complaints make it hard to relax. You decide to let them know your concern.

Response:

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Situation: A salesperson calls while you’re eating dinner. You try to politely show disinterest, but they keep giving their sales pitch. You want to get back to dinner.

Response: