



The Family Recovery Foundation
FIX YOUR FAMILY
MODULE 8

The Language of Connective Boundaries

The Power of Non-Confrontational Boundaries

Many times, we think that setting boundaries is inherently confrontational. However, confrontation often incites rebellion. This means that when we speak to others about what we **want *them* to change or how we want *them* to behave**, it can provoke a defensive posture, triggering ego-driven responses that lead to conflict.

In contrast, the language of boundaries can be very connecting. When an individual gains clarity about who they are and who they are not, and chooses to connect with someone through vulnerability and transparency, it can foster an authentic sharing of self. This process, when engaged, can help strengthen relationships rather than strain them. This is the essence of "connective boundaries."

Learning to articulate our boundaries in a way that focuses not on what we want the other person to do, but on what 'we are going to do', is key. This approach requires clarity of thought, precision in communication, and the development of specific skills and the courage to implement change.

One such skill is what we call the "umbrella technique." This technique involves being attuned to the physical (biological) and emotional indicators that signal when we are becoming upset. When these signals arise, we shift from the traditional fight or flight response, and imagine that a storm has come. At that moment, we mentally "open our umbrella" to step out of the storm. But we don't stop there—we invite our loved one under the umbrella with us. This act symbolizes seeking safety together rather than alone.

Would you prefer to set goals and have conversations that draw you closer rather than escalating into fights and anger? What if, instead of reacting, we opened our umbrella, invited others in, and created a space of mutual safety? From this place of connection, we can then shift our language to a disarming, peaceful tone, which we will explore further below.

“I am going to take time to decide what I think or feel about this.”

Stating, "I am going to take time to decide what I think or feel about this," is an important boundary to set in conversations that require deep thought or emotional processing. By articulating the need for time, you maintain control over your response, allowing yourself the necessary space to reflect and formulate your feelings and thoughts. This approach not only ensures that you are true to your own perceptions and emotions but also communicates to others that while you are considering their points, you are not ready to engage further until you have clarity. This helps manage expectations and maintains respect for the pace at which you process information.

“I know I am changing. I am sure that is difficult for you.”

Acknowledging your own changes and expressing awareness of how these might impact others, as in saying, "I know I am changing. I am sure that is difficult for you," reflects a deep level of empathy and understanding within a relationship. This statement honors the feelings of the other person while also holding firm to your personal growth and the boundaries that come with it. Sharing empathy in this way can facilitate a supportive environment, where personal transformations are respected, and relationship dynamics can adjust constructively to accommodate these changes.

“I can’t hear about me but I can hear about you. I care about you and your feelings. Please tell me all your feelings so I can help us resolve this.”

This statement sets a boundary by requesting that the other person refrain from making assumptions or judgments about you, which can often escalate tension. Instead, it encourages your loved one to share their own feelings, fostering a dialogue that is more about understanding each other's perspectives rather than casting blame. This approach not only helps de-escalate conflict but also paves the way for finding solutions together, ensuring both parties feel heard and valued.

“I need a little break. I will let you know when I can talk again. I will be back in a couple hours once I have settled down and we can talk again.”

“I know you want to continue talking about this. I am really sorry that I can't. I need to pause to calm down.”

“I care more about our relationship than this issue. Can we discuss the issue tomorrow?”

“I hear what you're saying and respect your viewpoint; I need a bit more time to find clarity for myself.”

When you express the need for a break during a conversation, saying "I need a little break. I will let you know when I can talk again," it reflects a critical understanding of your emotional and physiological state. Recognizing when your body is triggered and adrenaline is high allows you to take necessary pauses to let these intense emotions and the fight-or-flight response subside. This pause not only helps protect your well-being but also honors the relationship by ensuring that the discussion can resume in a more constructive and calm manner. This kind of boundary setting is essential for maintaining both personal health and the health of the relationship.

“Stop. I am uncomfortable with this conversation and I don't agree. I choose you and us and our relationship, and at the same time, I can not and won't continue to feel this way when we talk. I feel very different from you and will not be discussing this further.”

“I can't hear that sentence again. I am choosing to end this conversation.”

“If you do decide against following your treatment plan, I will need to limit our interactions to protect my well-being.”

“I am clear now that if my health continues to be affected, I will have to make some tough decisions about our time together and our relationship. It's not what I want but I need to get healthy, and heal, and recover despite how hard this is for both of us.”

Setting firm boundaries is essential, especially in conversations that are emotionally charged or veer into toxicity, abuse, or manipulation. By stating "Stop. I am uncomfortable in this conversation and I don't agree," you are asserting a clear boundary with a definitive 'no'. This approach is crucial when safeguarding your emotional well-being. It emphasizes that while you value the relationship ("I choose you and us"), you cannot compromise your own principles or comfort. This kind of boundary setting is direct and non-negotiable, crucial for maintaining personal integrity and mental health in challenging interactions.

“I am figuring out for myself how to feel safe in this relationship.”

When exploring personal safety and establishing boundaries, it's important to recognize that the process can be gradual and exploratory. Expressing that you are figuring out how to feel safe is a way of setting a boundary that is still in development. This openness about your feelings and needs is a critical step in boundary creation, even when a complete plan isn't yet in place. It highlights that while some boundaries result in immediate consequences, others might require time to define and navigate. Sharing your evolving needs invites dialogue and mutual understanding, allowing space for boundaries to be formed thoughtfully and collaboratively.

“I am going to need this to change. How can we strategize together so we both feel good about it?”

“What would you do to remedy this? You have heard my thoughts. Maybe you have a better idea because I know you care about my feelings. That was my best foot forward and I am also open to hearing your suggestions.”

“I am going to take time to decide what I think or feel about this.”

When discussing boundaries, it's important to recognize that they can sometimes be dynamic, fluid, and negotiable. By asking for input after sharing your perspective, you demonstrate respect for the other person's insights and feelings, inviting a collaborative approach to problem-solving. This openness not only shows that you value their contributions but also that you're willing to adapt your approach based on mutual understanding. This flexibility in boundary setting can strengthen relationships by acknowledging that while some boundaries may be firm, others can be adjusted as situations evolve and new information comes to light.

“I am most comfortable knowing what the plan is and how _____ is going to be handled and I'm confident you can manage this.”

Setting boundaries effectively often involves clear communication and assertiveness, especially when there's a *non-negotiable* bottom line. When you express your need for something to be handled and affirm your confidence in the other person's ability to manage it, you're not only setting a clear boundary but also empowering them. By stating your expectations directly, you underscore the importance of the issue at hand, while your confidence in their capabilities fosters a positive environment for compliance. This approach helps maintain respect and understanding as it underscores that while strategy may be negotiable, the end goal or boundary is not.

“I wish I could but I don’t think I can.”

When setting boundaries, it's crucial to employ communication skills that are both compassionate and clear. Clear communication ensures that your boundaries are understood, minimizing misunderstandings and setting a definite expectation. At the same time, approaching these conversations with *compassion* respects the emotional impact such discussions can have on others. This balanced approach helps maintain healthy relationships by making it clear that the boundaries are set not out of hostility or rejection, but from a need to foster a sustainable and respectful interaction. Thus, effective boundary setting with clarity and compassion leads to stronger, more understanding relationships.

“I want to honor you too, and I am struggling to do so. Can you help? I am hoping to find a middle ground if possible.”

Acknowledging each other's needs is essential in relationships, and it's important to communicate openly when you find yourself struggling to meet those needs. By expressing that you want to satisfy the other person's desires but are finding it challenging, you invite an opportunity for collaboration. Suggesting to find a middle ground is a proactive step that shows commitment to the relationship while also honoring your own limits. This approach fosters understanding and cooperation, making it easier to work together to find solutions that satisfy both parties.

"If there is another relapse, I will continue to love and support you always, but this time it will be from a distance while we both seek the help we need. I will let you know my next steps as soon as I figure out my plans."

"If relapse continues to be chronic, I am asking that I will have space at home and that you will find another place to stay. If this does not happen, I will be forced to find alternative accommodations (for me and the kids), which will significantly increase the likelihood of a more permanent separation in our relationship."

In relationships affected by addiction, setting boundaries often involves leveraging consequences that encourage the individual to make healthier, more integrous decisions. The statement, "I will continue to love and support you from a distance while we both seek the help we need," utilizes such leverage. It not only upholds the boundary-setter's wellbeing but also places responsibility on the addict to reflect on and respond to the consequences of their behavior. This approach can be pivotal in motivating the addicted individual to seek help and make decisions that align with recovery and personal integrity, facilitating a supportive yet firm environment that promotes healing for all involved.

"If aggressive behaviors continue, I will need to call for professional support during such incidents to ensure everyone's safety, including your own."

In addressing aggressive behaviors, it's critical to have a plan that ensures safety for all involved. If aggressive behaviors continue, the natural consequence outlined is to call for professional support during such incidents. This action is not only about immediate safety but also about setting a firm boundary that aggressive behavior is unacceptable and will be met with serious responses. This approach demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a safe environment, emphasizing that help can be sought to manage such situations, thereby supporting both the individual displaying aggression and those affected by their actions.

Having a safety plan is crucial in situations involving aggression or violence. One practical step is to prepare a 'safe bag' that includes essentials like important documents, clothing, and necessary personal items. This bag should be kept in an easily accessible, yet discreet, location. Additionally, it's important to establish a trusted safe place where you can go at a moment's notice. This could be a friend's house, family member's home, or a community shelter known for helping individuals in crisis. These preparations ensure that you have a quick exit strategy that maintains your safety and gives you time to consider your next steps in a secure environment.

1. Expert Insights on Boundaries

- **Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend:** Their book *"Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life"* provides deeper insights into the importance and methods of setting boundaries.
- **Dr. Gabor Maté:** His work on addiction emphasizes the importance of maintaining personal boundaries for self-care and emotional well-being.
- **Nedra Glover Tawwab:** Her book *"Set Boundaries, Find Peace"* offers practical advice on boundary-setting.

2. Support Resources

- **Al-Anon Family Groups:** Support groups focusing on families and friends of alcoholics, providing shared experiences and strategies for boundary-setting.
- **Professional Counseling:** The importance of seeking professional guidance to navigate complex family dynamics and develop personalized boundary-setting strategies.
- **Online Forums and Support Groups:** Access to online communities where families can share their experiences and gain support in setting boundaries.

