



What are Healthy Boundaries?

All people in healthy relationships have healthy boundaries running smoothly in the background as a basis for mutual respect between two parties. We may never think about them- UNTIL the relationship becomes unhealthy or experiences problems.

Without healthy boundaries, when facing challenging relationship issues such as those that often accompany substance use disorder, it's common to give up or change our own values in order to keep the peace and hold onto the relationship. Healthy boundaries, on the other hand, can allow us to maintain and enjoy the relationship more while at the same time staying true to our own values and our own direction. People who struggle with substances and those who are close to them are often found to have weak boundaries and can benefit from personal work to explore, define, and communicate their personal boundaries.

What do we mean by “Boundaries”?

Boundaries are:

Boundaries are guidelines, rules, or limits that we identify for ourselves about what we desire in the way of reasonable, safe, and permissible ways for other people to behave around us. E.g., “I need my sleep at night to be uninterrupted.”

Boundaries also include those decisions we make about how we will respond when someone steps outside those limits we have identified.

Boundaries are not:

Boundaries are not brick walls. Walls are meant to keep people out. Boundaries are more like fences, meant to make our personal space, rights, and preferences. It is difficult or impossible to have a relationship with someone on the other side of a brick wall. It is easier and very possible to have a healthy relationship with someone on the other side of a gated fence.

Healthy boundaries are not “about the other” person or their actions. They are “about the self”. Having healthy boundaries is how we remind ourselves and others that our trust, time, energy, and health have value and will be protected. Healthy boundaries are a sign of respect for ourselves and our desires. E.g., “I need my sleep at night to be uninterrupted. Please be in by curfew.”

What sort of person has Boundaries?

All people have a sense of how they wish to be treated, so all people do have boundaries even if they don't use that term. People who are not well practiced in communicating their boundaries frequently experience enormous frustration when others violate their rules of acceptable behavior (boundaries). Learning to effectively communicate our healthy boundaries can work to alleviate this frustration.

Material adapted from: SMART Recovery Family & Friends Handbook, 2012 p. 75