

Setting Boundaries Around Substance Use and Recovery



Setting boundaries is a key part of most relationships, especially when someone you love is struggling with substance use. When someone is in recovery, setting and communicating about boundaries is absolutely critical to their success. Here is some advice on how to talk about boundaries.

What are **Boundaries**?

Boundaries define **how you want to be treated** in a specific situation. They differ from tough love, which can involve isolating someone as a means to get them to change their behavior. Rules and ultimatums also focus on changing someone else's behavior. Boundaries are all about you.

How to Implement Boundaries

Identify the Boundary

How are you currently being treated, and how do you want that to change?

When creating a boundary, make it about you, not someone else's behavior:

- What you want to say: "Don't call me if you're drunk."
- How you should say it: "I get very worried if you call me when you've been using. I won't take your calls if you're under the influence."

What is the consequence of breaking a boundary? Will you enforce it?

Journal the consequence or talk to someone to work through what may happen if you enforce it and how you will feel about it. Make sure you are comfortable following through. Consider:

- What will happen when you enforce your boundary? How will they react?
- How will you feel after it's enforced?

Implement the Boundary

1

Get support.

Make sure other family members will enforce the boundary.

- **Example:** If you want your daughter to stop smoking marijuana in her room, you and your spouse both need to agree to enforce the boundary you set around her use at home.

2

Communicate it.

Mean what you say:

What is the core problem? Stick to the issue and don't bring up old or unrelated drama.

Say what you mean:

Keep it simple. Write it down to help you stay focused.

Don't say it mean: Stay calm. Start a boundary conversation off by saying "I love you too much to watch you self-destruct, so..."

3

Follow through.

Your boundary will get tested. Follow through when it's violated.

It may not be easy, it might not even feel good, but it will protect you in the long run.



Examples of Boundaries

Common Boundaries to Give People in Active Addiction

One of the keys to family empowerment when a loved one is struggling with substance use is the ability to set boundaries. **Communicating boundaries is a skill**, and if you do it well, you'll be better prepared to manage relationships and situations that involved substance use.

Boundary

How to Communicate It

No drugs/alcohol in the house

I can't stand by and watch you self-destruct; it affects my physical and mental health. If you bring drugs or alcohol into the house, I will ask you to leave.

No drug-using friends in the house

I don't feel safe when the friend you use with is here. If any of the friends you use with are in the house, I will ask them to leave.

You must speak to me respectfully

It hurts my feelings when you are mean. I will end a conversation if you're rude or swear at me.

I won't give you any more money

I love you too much to watch you self-destruct. I can't give you money anymore for any reason because it just funds your habit.

I won't bail you out anymore

I cannot be responsible for your actions. If you get arrested, I won't bail you out or pay for your lawyer.

I won't cover for you anymore

I cannot be responsible for your behavior. If you don't meet your commitments, I won't make excuses or lie for you anymore.

Common Boundaries for Someone in Recovery

Setting boundaries can be beneficial to healthy coping and a **strategy to address potential triggers**. Here are some examples of boundaries you can communicate to your loved ones to help manage your recovery.

Boundary

How to Communicate It

No (or limited) drugs/
alcohol in the home

I cannot allow drugs or alcohol in my home. OR Any prescription drugs or alcohol in the house must be kept out of my sight.

Attending parties

My recovery is very important to me, I cannot go to a party where people are using drugs. OR I will come to the party early before people start drinking heavily.

Avoiding
environmental triggers

I will not go to bars, nightclubs, the drug dealer's house, etc.

No (or limited)
contact with old
friends who use

I will not contact or limit contact with friends I used to use with.

Physical/mental
health

My physical and mental health are key parts of my recovery. I will do something every day to be physically and mentally healthy.

Social media

It is not mentally healthy for me to be on social media several hours a day. I limit my use to 30 minutes a day. The best way to contact me is through text/email/phone.

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