

# **How to Set Healthy Boundaries About Helping Others**

Co-authored by Lauren Urban, LCSW (Last Updated: October 23, 2020)

Available at [wikihow.com](https://www.wikihow.com).

Offering friends and family a helping hand when they need it is an important part of maintaining good relationships. However, saying “yes” to every request people make of you can leave you feeling depleted and resentful. If you feel like you’re taking care of everybody’s needs except your own, it’s a sure sign that you need to set some boundaries to protect your time and energy. Learn how by defining your own needs, letting people know about your new limits, and standing up for yourself if others don’t respect your boundaries.

## **Part 1: Communicating Your Boundaries to Others**

1. Decide on a time and place to talk. Arrange to meet the other person in a private, non-distracting location. Choose a time when you and the other person are relaxed and calm.[1]
  - Avoid having this talk when you’re feeling annoyed or frustrated. You might speak more harshly than you intended to, making the situation worse.
  - When you tell someone about your new boundaries for the first time, it’s best to talk face-to-face, instead of over email or text.
2. Tell the person how you feel. Bring up any behaviors that have been bothering you. Be honest, even if you feel embarrassed about asserting yourself.[2]
  - For instance, you could say, “I want to support you, but our conversations have been wearing me down lately. It’s hard for me to focus on your problems all the time.”
3. State your needs clearly and firmly. Tell the other person what you need from them. Keep your request as simple and brief as you can.
  - Say something like, “During the week I need time alone to unwind, so I need you to stop coming by my apartment every night. It’s okay if you visit on the weekends, though.”
4. Keep a positive tone. Avoid accusing the other person of anything. Instead, take a constructive approach to the conversation. Talk to the other person as if you’re looking for a solution together.[3]
  - By putting a positive spin on the conversation, you may be able to avoid making the other person feel bad, and they will probably cooperate with you more readily.
  - Watch your body language. Avoid crossing your arms in favor of letting them hang loosely at your sides.
  - Use “I” statements rather than “you” statements to minimize them becoming defensive. For instance, say “I feel overwhelmed.” instead of “You make me overwhelmed.”
5. Listen to their feedback. Communication goes both ways. After communicating your needs, be sure to ask the other person about how they feel or think about the matter. This can help create more collaborative solutions to everyone’s needs while also reaffirming that your own needs have been heard.
  - You might ask, “What do you think?”
  - When they respond, avoid feeling defensive. Instead, keep using I-statements, and let them know that you are listening. You might say, “I hear what you are saying. Perhaps we need to work out a solution together.”

## Part 2: Enforcing Your Boundaries

1. Remind people about your new boundaries if you need to. If you always said yes to requests in the past, it may take a while for other people to get used to your boundaries. When someone asks for more help than you can give, gently remind them of the conversation you had with them, and tell them again why you can't agree to their request.[4]
  - It's fine to say something like, "I wish I could help, but like I told you last week, I'm already so busy at work that I can't commit to anything else right now."
  - Don't assume that people are intentionally disrespecting your boundaries – they may have simply forgotten.
2. Be consistent. Other people will respect your boundaries as much as you respect them yourself. By sticking to the boundaries you decided on, you'll give others the message that you're serious, and they'll stop asking for things you can't deliver.[5]
  - It's OK to be flexible about your boundaries. Relationships are fluid, and circumstances change. But if you decide to make an exception, be clear about why you're doing it, and don't let it become the norm.
3. Avoid backing down or apologizing. Some people may try to make you feel guilty because they feel entitled to your help. Recognize this for the manipulation tactic it is. Setting boundaries you're comfortable with is your right, not something you have to apologize for.[6]
  - As you practice standing up for yourself, it will become easier to maintain your boundaries without feeling guilty about it.
  - To make it easier, bite down on your lip after you have delivered your message. This is a physical reminder not to ramble on with explanations or justifications. State your case and wait for their response.
  - You do not need to justify yourself or give excuses for your decisions. If someone keeps bothering you, just repeatedly say "No" or end the conversation.
4. Know when to walk away from a relationship. If a friend or family member refuses to acknowledge your boundaries or tries to manipulate you into doing what they want, think about whether you'd be better off cutting ties with that person. Someone who doesn't care about your well-being may not deserve a place in your life.[7]
  - If you decide the relationship isn't worth keeping, you might tell the person, "I have enjoyed spending time with you, but I can't continue to be friends with someone who refuses to respect my boundaries."
  - If the person isn't someone you can distance yourself from, let them know that not respecting your boundaries will have consequences. For example, you might say to your sister, "If you cannot respect my privacy, I will stop confiding in you. I want us to be able to share, but I also do not want my business spread throughout the family."

## Part 3: Thinking About Your Needs

1. Give yourself permission to put your own needs first. Remind yourself that your physical and emotional needs are just as important as everyone else's. Taking care of yourself isn't selfish – it's your right.[8]
  - Taking good care of yourself makes you better able to help others as well.
  - If you're used to putting everybody else first, it may take some time to make this mental shift. Be patient with yourself, and remind yourself that you have nothing to feel guilty about.

2. Make a list of the things that matter most to you. Take a few minutes to think about and write down the things you value most. Defining your priorities in life will guide you towards creating good boundaries.
  - For instance, your values might include things like honesty, good communication, and spending time with family.
3. Think about what you don't want to compromise on. Look over your list of values and priorities again. Based on this list, consider whether there's anything you're not comfortable doing or any issues you refuse to budge on.[9]
  - The things you're not willing to compromise on are your personal boundaries.
  - For instance, if integrity is one of the things you value most, you might decide that you can't keep doing your friend's homework for her, even if she's afraid of failing the class without your help.
4. Identify any situations that make you feel resentful or overwhelmed. Does a friend or family member routinely ask for more than you can give? If you often feel burned out or taken for granted, think about what boundaries you can set to protect yourself.[10]
  - For instance, if you're feeling overburdened because your friend asks you to watch her kids every weekend, you could set a boundary by telling her you can't babysit any more.
5. Create a self-care strategy. Make a plan for meeting your own physical and emotional needs, and commit to it. Setting and maintaining healthy boundaries is easier when you're in the habit of taking care of yourself.[11]
  - Take care of your body by eating well, exercising, and getting enough rest.
  - Making time for hobbies and relaxation helps you stay emotionally healthy.
6. Seek support. Setting boundaries with those you love can be taxing. Although boundaries are essential in forming healthy relationships, the process may be challenging to navigate. Reach out for support from friends and family members who understand and value you during this process.[12]
  - For instance, if you have a trusted coworker who understands your need for boundary-setting with a friend, you might share your progress and ask the person to help hold you accountable.

## References

---

1. <http://www.littlethingsmatter.com/blog/2010/09/23/10-ways-to-handle-difficult-conversations/>
2. <http://www.uncommonhelp.me/articles/5-golden-keys-to-assertiveness-and-setting-boundaries/>
3. <http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/setting-boundaries-how-to-draw-the-line-when-you-have-no-idea-where-to-put-it.html>
4. <http://liveboldandbloom.com/08/life-coaching/want-to-boost-your-self-esteem-10-ways-to-establish-personal-boundaries>
5. <http://tinybuddha.com/blog/setting-emotional-boundaries-stop-taking-on-other-peoples-feelings/>
6. <http://www.positivelypositive.com/2012/06/29/how-to-create-healthy-boundaries/>
7. <http://www.mommd.com/settingboundaries.shtml>
8. ↑Lauren Urban, LCSW. Licensed Psychotherapist. Expert Interview. 3 September 2018.
9. <http://psychcentral.com/lib/keeping-good-boundaries-getting-your-needs-met/>
10. <https://mindyourmind.ca/help/self-care-while-helping-friend>
11. <https://psychcentral.com/lib/10-way-to-build-and-preserve-better-boundaries/>
12. <https://psychcentral.com/lib/10-way-to-build-and-preserve-better-boundaries/>