



Setting Boundaries Guide

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STEPWISE RECOVERY

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Protect yourself and those you love by holding firm boundaries

When someone you love is struggling with addiction, you naturally want to help. But helping can become enabling—and over time, it teaches the person that their addiction doesn't have real consequences. A boundary changes that. It's not punishment or control; it's a line you draw to protect yourself and, paradoxically, to protect them from the weight of consequences they need to face. This guide shows you how to set boundaries, hold them when tested, and look after yourself in the process.

Why Boundaries Protect Both of You

Boundaries restore your agency. Right now, you may feel as though the other person's addiction controls your life—your sleep, your mood, your money, your choices. When you set and hold a boundary, you take some of that power back. You stop waiting for permission to look after yourself.

Boundaries also protect the person you care about. They interrupt the cycle in which addiction thrives: the belief that help will always come, that consequences will be managed away, that nothing really changes. A boundary says: I love you, and I will not participate in this. That clarity can be the first crack in denial.

The Difference Between a Boundary and an Ultimatum

An ultimatum is a threat made in anger or desperation. It's something you say you'll do if they change, and often you're not prepared to follow through. Ultimatums don't work because the person has learned (usually from years of threats) that words don't have teeth.

A boundary is a line about your own behaviour, not theirs. It's something you will do to protect yourself—and you will do it, whether they change or not. It's about what you can and cannot accept in your life.

Ultimatum: 'If you don't get sober by Christmas, I'm leaving you.' Boundary: 'I won't give you money any more. If you ask, my answer is no.'

The boundary is about you, not about forcing them to change. That distinction is crucial.

How to Set a Boundary

State the boundary clearly

Be specific. Be calm. Say it once, in plain words. 'I won't bail you out of debt again.' 'I won't cover up your drinking for work or family.' Use 'I won't' or 'I can't' rather than 'You need to' or 'You have to.' You're talking about what you will and won't do.

State the consequence

What will you actually do if the boundary is crossed? It needs to be something you can live with, something you're genuinely prepared to enforce. 'If you come home intoxicated and become aggressive, I will take the children to my sister's house for the night.' The consequence doesn't have to be dramatic. It just has to be real.

Follow through

This is where most boundaries break. The person tests it. They push. They promise to change. They manipulate or weep. And you back down because it's painful to enforce. Don't back down. Following through is the only thing that teaches the boundary is real. Without it, it's just words.

Example Scripts

Money

'I can't give you money any more. I've realised it's not helping either of us. From now on, you'll need to work out how to meet your own expenses. I won't be bailing out debts, paying bills, or lending cash. I know this is hard, but it's what I need to do.' If they push: 'I understand you're frustrated. The answer is still no.'

Lying

'I need to be honest with you. I've caught you in several lies, and it's damaging my trust. From now on, if I feel you're not being straight with me, I'm going to step back from the conversation. I won't argue about whether you're lying. I'll just remove myself. That's what I need to do to protect my own peace.'

Using in the house

'I won't live with active using in this house. If I have reason to believe you're using here, I will ask you to leave for a period of time. I'm giving you this warning now so there's no surprise.'

Broken promises

'I've noticed you make promises about what you'll do and then don't follow through. I can't keep investing hope in those promises. From now on, I'm not going to react to what you say you'll do. I'm going to wait and see what actually happens. When you show me through your actions that things are changing, my trust will grow back. But words alone won't work any more.'

Holding Boundaries When Tested

The person you love will test your boundaries. When you're wavering, remember this: holding a boundary is not cruel. Enabling addiction is.

You'll feel guilty, afraid, lonely, and tempted to give in. These feelings are normal. They don't mean your boundary is wrong. They mean you care, and you're in pain. But if you soften the boundary when things get hard, you're teaching the person that persistence pays off. You're back in the cycle.

Remember: you cannot control whether they change. You can only control what you do. If they choose to spiral because you've set a boundary, that is not your responsibility. That is the consequence of their addiction, not the result of your love running out.

One other thing: boundaries sometimes need adjusting. If you set a boundary that you genuinely can't hold, that's information. It doesn't mean you're weak. It means you need a different boundary. But don't use that as an excuse to abandon it in the moment. Give yourself time before you change course.

Boundaries and Self-Forgiveness

Many people who set boundaries for the first time feel guilty. You might feel as though you're being selfish, or abandoning someone, or being punitive. You're not.

If you were previously enabling—if you lied for them, gave money that went on drugs, covered up their mistakes—you may have internalised shame about that. Setting a boundary now can feel like you're punishing them for what you both did. Separate these things: your past choices came from love and desperation. They made sense at the time. But you've learned they didn't work. Your boundary now comes from that learning. It's not retroactive punishment. It's a change in course.

If guilt comes up, notice it. Don't fight it. But don't let it drive you back into enabling. You can feel guilty and hold the boundary. You can forgive yourself for past choices and make different ones now. In fact, setting the boundary might be part of forgiving yourself.

When to Seek Support

You don't have to do this alone. In fact, you probably shouldn't.

Al-Anon is a twelve-step fellowship for families and friends of people with alcohol problems. You'll meet people in your exact situation. You'll learn that you're not alone, you're not crazy, and you're not responsible for their drinking. Meetings are free and confidential. Find one near you at al-anonuk.org.uk.

Nar-Anon is similar but for families of people struggling with drugs (nar-anon.org.uk). Counselling or therapy can help you process your own feelings and work through patterns that led you here. Your GP can refer you.

If you're in immediate danger, contact the police on 999 or the National Domestic Abuse Helpline on 0808 2000 247 (free, 24 hours). If you're having thoughts of self-harm, call Samaritans on 116 123 (free, 24 hours). Under 19? Contact Childline on 0800 1111.

The Twelve Steps talk about powerlessness—the realisation that you cannot control another person, no matter how hard you try. Setting boundaries is how you practise that powerlessness. You let go of the fiction that you can manage their recovery, and you focus on what you can do: protect yourself, stay sane, and show up as the person they might need if they ever choose to change. That's enough. It has to be.

Keep going — you're not alone

This resource is one of a full library of free tools, worksheets and reading at stepwiserecovery.com/resources — take what helps and leave the rest. These tools are designed to sit alongside fellowship programmes, meetings and sponsorship — never to replace them.

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For every ten guides sold, we donate one to someone who can't afford it — through treatment centres and prison recovery programmes.

Need help right now?

Samaritans: 116 123 (free, 24 hours) · FRANK: 0300 123 6600

Narcotics Anonymous UK: 0300 999 1212 · SHOUT: text 85258

Childline (under 19s): 0800 1111 · Nacoda: 0800 358 3456