

Boundaries

Boundaries are the limits you set on what you will allow. They are “invisible lines” that separate the participants in a relationship and allow them to take responsibility for their lives and to meet their obligations. Your boundaries are how you keep yourself physically and emotionally safe.

You indicate your boundaries in a variety of ways:

With your body language – looking uneasy when someone is standing too close to you for comfort.

By your words – saying “no” when your boss asks you to work in your personal time.

By your actions – closing the door when you want to get changed.

Informal relationships such as counselling relationships, boundaries are often deliberately made explicit, or even stipulated by contract. For example, as a trainee on a counselling course:

Time boundaries: you would be expected to start and end at specific times and to arrive back from break on time.

Space boundaries: your group will meet and work in a specific room. You do not wander off to the café during those times.

Financial: you can't pass the course unless you pay for the training.

Confidentiality: what's disclosed in the group isn't talked about outside.

Interpersonal behaviour: when one person talks in the group, the others listen.

Ethical: on a counselling course, as practitioners of helping skills, you are expected to work to an ethical code or framework, usually that of a recognised organisation like BACP or IACP.

In healthy relationships boundaries tend to be well-defined and well-managed, not “spongy” or “elastic”. , and when someone's “invisible line” is crossed they will defend their boundary. The participants recognise each other's boundaries and respect them – for example by saying “no” to peer pressure to take drugs, by shutting the door on a salesman who tries to step inside, by politely exiting from a meeting that goes on past its agreed end-time, by respectfully saying “no” to someone who wants time you need for yourself.

Keeping good boundaries often means being able to say “no” and sometimes this can feel hard if you feel there is a risk of losing someone's approval or friendship. But if you fail to maintain your own boundaries in a relationship, you may be modelling unhealthy behaviour to those you are in relationship with.