

Setting Boundaries

Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships. A person with healthy boundaries can say “no” to others when they want to, but they are also comfortable opening themselves up to intimacy and close relationships.

Boundaries are a very important part of professionalism. They keep the relationship between the caregiver and the patient both safe and appropriate. Boundaries help protect us by clarifying what is our responsibility. Setting clear boundaries and expectations with your patients will help you to apply your professional knowledge and skills to meet the needs of your patients.



Know Your Boundaries

Boundaries should be based on your values, or the things that are important to you. For example, if you value spending time with family, set firm boundaries about working late. Your boundaries are yours, and yours alone. Many of your boundaries might align with those who are close to you, but others will be unique. Know your boundaries before entering a situation. This will make it less likely you'll do something you're not comfortable with.

What to Say

You always have the right to say “no.” When doing so, express yourself clearly and without ambiguity, so there is no doubt about what you want.

- “I’m not comfortable with this.”
- “I can’t do that for you.”
- “This is not acceptable.”
- “Please don’t do that.”
- “Not at this time.”
- “I don’t want to do that.”

What to Do

Use Confident Body Language

Face the other person, make eye contact, and use a steady tone of voice at an appropriate volume (not too quiet, and not too loud).

Be Respectful

Avoid yelling, using put-downs, or giving the silent treatment. It’s okay to be firm, but your message will be better received if you are respectful.

Plan Ahead

Think about what you want to say, and how you will say it, before entering a difficult discussion. This can help you feel more confident about your position.

Compromise

When appropriate, listen and consider the needs of the other person. You never have to compromise, but give-and-take is part of any healthy relationship.

Instructions

Respond to the following practice questions as if you were really in each scenario. Think about the language you would use to firmly state your boundary.

Scenario 1

You're working with a patient and another patient yells and beckons for you to come over. You acknowledge the patient with eye contact and hand motion to signal hold on.

Response (once you're with the patient)

Please don't yell across the floor. I will be glad to assist you as soon as I am able to.

Scenario 2

A patient inquires about your personal life.

Response

I appreciate your interest, but I like to keep my personal life private.

Scenario 3

A patient has commented on your physical appearance.

Response

I feel uncomfortable when you comment on my physical appearance.

