

Tool: Boundaries

Understanding and applying boundaries is an important part of our recovery. Boundaries are the foundation of self-care, sobriety, and serenity. Healthy boundaries are an extension of our personal values and support our recovery intentions. They create the environment we need to be effective and to feel safe physically, emotionally, sexually, mentally, and spiritually.

What exactly are these foundational elements of our recovery? Boundaries are the safe parameters or limits that we establish to help take care of ourselves in our personal life and in our relationships with others.

Establishing boundaries can be compared to “drawing a line in the sand” between what’s healthy and nurturing for us and what is not. Standing firmly on the side of what’s right for us helps maintain balance and sobriety in all our relationships. We can set boundaries with other people, and we can also set boundaries for our own behavior. Boundaries keep us focused on our self-care and recovery, rather than the behavior of others.

It may seem paradoxical, but boundaries actually foster greater intimacy. Consider our Tradition of anonymity. When we enter a COSA meeting or have a recovery conversation with another COSA member, we make an implicit promise to hold everything said in confidence, thereby protecting one another’s anonymity. That powerful boundary—of not repeating anything outside of the meeting—creates a trust-filled space where we may safely and vulnerably share without fear.

This same principle also benefits us in our personal relationships. Clear boundaries within a relationship foster healthy energy and communication. For example, we may become resentful when we overextend ourselves to please another. A healthy boundary is honoring what is right and true for us.

In addition to creating a safe environment where we can navigate our world, the process of setting boundaries helps us find our truth and our voice. It awakens our personal power. Setting and maintaining boundaries helps us gain greater self-esteem by honoring our own needs. For example, to nurture ourselves we may set a boundary that allows time to exercise or to use our creativity instead of taking on additional responsibilities.

Despite all the benefits that boundaries provide, we may be hesitant about setting them. In the past, we may have been exposed to systems where boundaries were viewed as selfish or egotistical. We may have been subjected to inappropriate boundaries set by others. We may be confused about the difference between controlling others and caring for ourselves. We may have been taught that saying a simple “no” or standing up for ourselves was considered impolite or even disrespectful. Such an atmosphere led to confusion and powerlessness. Fear of rejection, abandonment, or other perceived losses may have held us back as well.

In recovery we learn that we have the right to say “no” to things that are not right for us. Setting boundaries does not make us selfish or rude; it makes us responsible for ourselves, our actions, and our personal choices. We decide how to allocate our time, money, talents, and even our emotions.

Setting boundaries often impacts others in our lives, and relationships may change as a result. We are mindful that healthy boundaries do not punish or control another’s behavior. Many of us have experienced betrayals, which can make setting boundaries confusing, create fear of abandonment, and present us with many questions. How do we know if we are setting a healthy boundary or trying to control? We can begin by examining our motives. Does the boundary align with our personal values and our recovery intentions, or is it an attempt to control an outcome or to change someone else’s behavior? Are we seeking to simply avoid facing another person or situation? Self-reflection, meditation, and prayer can help us gain clarity. Our sponsors or other trusted COSA friends who practice healthy boundaries may also provide valuable insight.

Expressing our needs and boundaries may cause some people in our lives to chafe at or resist our request for what we need. We can share with them how the boundary is important to our values and well-being. Many will respect our boundaries and support us. Some may need time to adjust to this new way of interacting. Others may choose to no longer be in our lives once we begin setting boundaries with them. This can be especially difficult when it’s someone we love and want to keep in our lives, such as adult children. We hope that modeling healthy behaviors will heal and improve the relationship in the long run. We remind ourselves that the best thing we can do for others is to be our healthiest selves.

When establishing healthy boundaries, we may find it helpful to take some quiet, meditative time and check in with ourselves mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We consider what we need to help us feel grounded and safe. When reflecting on these needs, we listen to our Higher Power, our own inner voice, instincts, and even how our bodies react when we explore particular situations. We begin to get clarity on what boundaries are right for us. Clarity is especially important when we need to ask someone else to have a role in supporting our boundaries. Just as our concept of Higher Power may evolve and change over time so too our boundaries may evolve and change over time with the help of our sponsors, fellow COSAs, Step work, and COSA literature.

Sometimes a healthy boundary is as simple as speaking a truthful “no” to a triggering question or request. Other times we may need to decline certain invitations or situations that feel triggering or emotionally loaded. Perhaps a work-related or family event could be triggering or troublesome for us. We can set a time limit or other conditions in advance to create a safe exit strategy. It is simpler and easier to honor a boundary if we have set it before an unwanted situation occurs. For example, we may decide in

advance how to care for ourselves if someone exhibits unwanted flirtatious or sexual overtures or other triggering behavior.

We may need specific boundaries regarding sexual behaviors. For example, we can set a boundary with a sexual partner not to touch us while we are sleeping. We may need a period of sexual abstinence with a partner while we rebuild trust. We may wish to set boundaries for ourselves that give us time to develop a relationship before becoming sexual with a new partner.

What can we do when someone crosses one of our boundaries? We can communicate our needs to them and ask them for their support going forward. We can seek the experience, strength, and hope from a meeting and from phone calls with our sponsor or other trusted COSA members. We can ask our Higher Power for guidance and comfort. We can remind ourselves that it is appropriate to take care of ourselves.

We compare boundaries to a “line in the sand.” Unlike something set in stone, boundaries can change as we grow in recovery. Situations and relationships may have changed, too, allowing us to reexamine our needs and draw a new line to suit the changes. We have the right and responsibility to take care of ourselves and make choices that support our serenity and sobriety. Healthy boundaries are at the heart of honoring what is right for us.