

Building Healthy Relationships Through Boundaries in Addiction Recovery

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Substance use disorder can cause chaos in families, leaving family members overwhelmed, confused, and unsure about what to do. Setting boundaries is one way to help both the person with substance use disorder and their family members find stability and create a healthier family dynamic, but defining and maintaining these boundaries can be tricky, especially in the early stages of recovery. Before recovery, family members often feel like they are walking on eggshells, unsure of what to expect from the person suffering from substance use disorder. Even in recovery, setting clear boundaries can be challenging, with family members struggling to respond to their loved one's behavior and slipping back into old survival patterns without boundaries.

Boundaries are limits we set for our interactions with others. We define what we are and are not willing to tolerate in our lives. In the context of addiction and the family, boundaries define the limits of acceptable and non-acceptable behavior of family members, especially those struggling with addiction issues. Verbalized expectations help to create an environment of safety, security, and predictability. Communication is more effective, and support for each other flows more freely in such an environment. Many boundary issues arise in addiction, persist in sobriety, and even emerge in recovery. These issues make straightforward discussions about boundaries crucial.

Early recovery involves trying to replace the chemical with new living skills, such as setting and adhering to boundaries. In many cases, substance use has been a way of numbing emotions and avoiding uncomfortable feelings. Boundaries can assist with facing those feelings head-on and learning new coping strategies. Instead of turning to drugs or acting out

feelings when someone offends or hurts you, it is more appropriate to acknowledge that you feel hurt, communicate the kind of treatment you want from others, and indicate what you will and will not tolerate in the future. People in recovery find that old relationship behavior patterns are no longer satisfying or effective, leading to feelings of confusion or even loss. They may not know they can negotiate for change or have a right to determine what is unacceptable.

Healthy Boundaries in Addiction Recovery

So, what do healthy boundaries look like in addiction recovery? While there is no one-size-fits-all answer, some general principles can be helpful. Here are a few examples:

Physical boundaries:

Physical boundaries refer to the physical space between individuals and their sense of personal space. It is essential to establish physical boundaries that feel comfortable and safe. A physical limit might involve declaring who you will hug or the types of physical touch you deem appropriate. It might mean not allowing alcohol or other drugs in your house or limiting smoking to the outside. It could also involve discussing the need for personal space and privacy with your loved ones or roommates.

Social boundaries:

Social boundaries refer to how individuals interact with each other. It is appropriate to establish appropriate, respectful social boundaries that convey your choices about topics of conversation, behaviors, or decisions about how much time you will spend on certain activities or with certain people. Social boundaries can also involve limiting time spent with certain people or severing relationships with people likely to trigger a relapse. Ways to set social boundaries include talking to your friends and family about the importance of surrounding yourself with supportive and positive influences or addressing the need to stay away from individuals who may trigger cravings or jeopardize your recovery. It is crucial to communicate your boundaries around social events where alcohol or drugs may be

present. Choose alcohol and drug-free social environments. Discuss your strategies for handling triggers and how your loved ones can assist you. Have difficult discussions with people who have enabled you in the past and how they can help you by not unintentionally supporting your addiction. Work with the significant people in your life to develop a safety plan, including emergency contacts, signs of relapse, and what to do in crises.

Emotional boundaries:

Emotional boundaries refer to rules about how individuals express and respond to emotions. An early recovery task is learning to identify and communicate your emotional needs appropriately. Boundaries help you protect those needs and enable you to practice healthy expression of feelings. By acknowledging and expressing emotions appropriately, you can treat others with dignity and respect and teach others to treat you the same way. Learning to say "no" to people and situations that stress you out or lead to your discomfort is achievable through boundaries.

Establishing guidelines for open and honest communication sets the stage for freedom to talk about your feelings, triggers, and challenges and encourages others to share their feelings and concerns. Communicating and clarifying the support you need from friends and family is a much-needed skill and an example of boundaries. Letting others know that you will ask for help and maintaining recovery activities as a priority is another excellent example of boundary setting.

Discuss your boundaries with significant others and how you will handle conflicts healthily and non-destructively. If necessary, consider involving a therapist or counselor to mediate discussions. If you're in a romantic relationship, have a candid conversation about emotional and physical expectations in the early stages of recovery. Discuss your expectations about working together to rebuild trust.

Personal Accountability and Boundaries:

Personal accountability encompasses acknowledging and owning one's actions, decisions, and needs. It involves recognizing the impact of our choices on ourselves and others and actively participating in cooperative living and working environments.

Setting boundaries around responsibility is an integral aspect of personal accountability. These boundaries define who is responsible for specific tasks or decisions in various life aspects, such as financial matters, household duties, parenting responsibilities, and personal recovery journeys. By clearly delineating these responsibilities, individuals can cultivate a sense of autonomy and agency while promoting mutual respect and understanding.

Embracing personal accountability and establishing clear boundaries promotes self-reliance and empowerment and fosters collaboration and cooperation among individuals in various social contexts. It's essential to recognize that part of personal accountability involves refraining from enabling others by taking over their responsibilities and not allowing others to assume your roles and obligations. Assuming others' rightful contributions can undermine autonomy and personal growth. Ownership of one's own responsibilities promotes self-reliance and fosters a sense of agency. By respectfully declining offers from others to assume our responsibilities, we affirm our capacity to handle challenges and navigate life's complexities independently. Honoring our responsibilities contributes to healthier relationships and a stronger sense of self.

Tips for Setting and Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

Setting and maintaining healthy boundaries requires practice and commitment. Here are some helpful suggestions:

Know what is and is not working in your life:

Identify the ways things operate in your life, the way you do things, and the ways you feel about the quality of your life. If you identify habits, behaviors, attitudes, or relationships that are not working, identify what you would like to change about those things and what you want to replace them with.

Start with clear communication:

Setting healthy boundaries with others begins with clear communication. Be honest and direct about your needs and expectations, and be willing to listen to others. Use "I" messages and avoid finger-pointing and blaming.

Practice assertiveness. Assertiveness involves expressing yourself clearly, respectfully, and confidently. Assertively letting other people know what you want and need and how you will be taking appropriate care of yourself is an exercise in boundaries. Adhering to others' boundaries is also about maintaining healthy boundaries.

Be consistent. Maintaining healthy boundaries requires consistency. Please stick to your boundaries even when it's complicated. If your resolve or assertiveness seems to fade, be willing to review the desired changes and why your efforts may be inconsistent. Use affirming self-talk, practice, and other techniques to reclaim your momentum.

Establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries is crucial for both the individual recovering from substance use disorder and their family members. Everyone concerned must learn how to identify, set, and maintain boundaries to replace old, unhealthy behaviors with new, healthy ones. Family members must flex their recovery muscles by communicating their expectations and treating their loved ones in a way that supports recovery.

To establish healthy relationship patterns and work together, all must communicate expectations and limitations for supporting their loved one's recovery and their own. Everyone must learn to express their needs and desires assertively rather than aggressively or passively. Many people in early recovery find that their old relationship patterns are no longer satisfying or practical, necessitating new skills to manage a new lifestyle.

In recovery, it's essential to recognize that relationships and family system roles, rules, structures, and functions may need to change. System change can be challenging, but by establishing healthy boundaries and learning to communicate effectively, individuals and their loved ones can more easily

navigate this transition. By doing so, they can create a supportive environment that promotes everyone's recovery.

