



SESSION 5:

Healthy Boundaries for Healthy Relationships



What do we mean by boundaries?

A boundary is a real or imagined line that marks the limit or edge of something. It is something, such as a river, fence or imaginary line, that shows where one area ends, and another area begins.

Within all our relationships we have boundaries - the limit when someone's behavior moves from being acceptable to us to not acceptable.

When someone crosses our boundaries we call that a *boundary violation*.

Our emotional boundaries change

What behavior we see as acceptable or not acceptable can change quickly depending on:

- **Who the other person is & how close we are to them:** Giving you a big hug may be acceptable from your son but not from a cashier at the supermarket.
- **How we feel at that moment:** If we are hungry, exhausted, depressed or lonely we may be quicker to feel someone's behavior crosses our boundaries and is unacceptable. If we have eaten and slept well and feel content we may find *the very same behavior* much more acceptable and does not cross our boundaries.

Boundaries also change over time. Behaviour we felt used to be acceptable, for example, when a person we are caring for was healthy, can feel unacceptable if the person becomes ill and is dependent on us. Or the opposite can happen, a behavior that we never would have accepted before that person became ill, now feels acceptable.

In caregiving, both the caregiver and the person receiving care each have their own boundaries that should be respected.

How to work mindfully with boundaries

It is impossible to avoid boundary issues in caregiving, because it is impossible to avoid boundary issues in life.

However, when someone does something that crosses your boundaries, there are ways to respond that show what you think is acceptable, while also not making a difficult situation worse. You can use the “STOP” process that was shared in Session 2, which is also useful when dealing with boundary issues.

Stop, and recognize something is wrong

Take a moment to observe and try to name the emotions you are feeling. Is it anger, frustration, sadness, fear or all of these? Naming emotions helps you learn to recognize when something feels wrong, even if you don't immediately know what it is.

Take a breath, to direct your attention back to the body

Explore what the emotions feel like in your body - you may feel angry, but what does that feel like in your body? Now that you have your attention in your body, you can move your focus to more steady areas like your feet on the solid floor, breathing steadily to calm yourself.

Observe, what has happened? How has a boundary been crossed?

Recognize that a boundary has been crossed and that you have the right to protect yourself. Sometimes you will be able to explain clearly how a boundary has been crossed, other times you won't; you just know that something is not right.

Proceed, in a mindful way that protects yourself

Now you're ready to take skillful action to take care of yourself. This could be through having a conversation with the person who has crossed the boundary, or by moving out of the situation by stepping into the next room or taking a walk.

Be kind to yourself about your reactions

Caregiving can be challenging because so many boundaries can be crossed. In these kinds of situations resentment or anger is a natural and common response. A useful way to deal with resentment or anger is to be curious about how it feels in the body, heart, or mind. This act of tuning into the experience of the emotion allows you to pause before responding to a difficult situation. The pause can keep us from reacting unskillfully, which can make matters worse.

Homework exercise

In your day-to-day interaction with the person you care for, do your best to pay attention to any boundary issues that come up. When you notice a boundary issue, use the STOP practice. Try to work through each step, noticing what feels challenging and what feels natural.

If you have a reaction to a boundary situation that you regret, practice kindness to yourself and try to recognize how you could have used each step in the "STOP" process to react differently.

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