

New York  
Times  
Bestseller

# SET BOUNDARIES, FIND PEACE

*a guide to  
reclaiming yourself*

NEDRA GLOVER TAWWAB

## Advance Praise for *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*

“This is the boundary bible. Nedra teaches us not only how to set healthy boundaries but to be clear about our feelings and intentions. Finding peace requires showing up—Nedra has written the blueprint on how to not only show up but also do the work.”

—Alexandra Elle, author of *After the Rain*

“If you want the most comprehensive, relevant, and relatable guide to setting boundaries, speaking your needs, and living a more peaceful life, Nedra Tawwab’s book on boundaries is for you.”

—Sheleana Aiyana, author and founder of *Rising Woman*

“The book on boundaries we’ve all been waiting for! Nedra Tawwab offers clarity and direction with grace and compassion on a topic often discussed but rarely integrated. If you’re ready to live in alignment and shift your relationship with self and others, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* is your next must-read.”

—Vienna Pharaon, LMFT, founder of Mindful Marriage & Family Therapy

“*Set Boundaries, Find Peace* breaks down the what, why, and how of boundaries in a clear and compassionate way, leaving you confident, empowered, and prepared to tackle those tough conversations.”

—Melissa Urban, cofounder and CEO of Whole30

“Without healthy boundaries, we aren’t able to fully live the life we want to live. This empowering book provides a powerful road map for establishing expectations and personal limits so that you can live your life with the safety, respect, and self-actualization that you deserve.”

—Scott Barry Kaufman, PhD, host of *The Psychology Podcast* and author of *Transcend*

“*Set Boundaries, Find Peace* is a down-to-earth and practical guide on fully realizing your potential and giving yourself the freedom you deserve by clearly setting healthy boundaries in your personal and professional life, friendships, and relationships. Eye-opening and thoroughly engaging.”

—Myleik Teele, CURLBOX founder

“A comprehensive guide on how to understand and establish interpersonal boundaries . . . Readers who follow Tawwab on social media and those who find setting boundaries



# Set Boundaries, Find Peace

| *A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself* |

NEDRA GLOVER TAWWAB

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# Preface

My life before I had healthy boundaries was overwhelming and chaotic. I, too, have struggled with codependency, peace in life and at work, and unfulfilling relationships. But setting expectations for myself and others gives me peace. Inventing a life with healthy relationships is an ongoing practice, but it gets more comfortable with time and practice.

The moment that I let up on setting perimeters, my old problems resurface. Because of this, I've made healthy boundaries a part of my life practice. Consistently, I am practicing assertiveness and self-discipline to create the life that I want. In the past, I carried around a lot of resentment, hoping that others would guess my mood and wishes. Through trial and error, I've learned that people will not guess my needs. They went about their day while I suffered in silence.

The things that I once found hard to say, such as "I won't be able to help you move," now come out more firmly. I was scared, I didn't want to make anyone mad, and I didn't know the right words. I feared that standing up for myself would cost me my relationships. All the while, the personal cost was much higher.

When I first learned about boundaries, I was confused about how the concept applied to my life. "Boundaries" can be such a broad and intimidating term. This book will break down the many aspects of having healthy boundaries and offer insights into how we can honor the boundaries set by others. It took me years to not feel *as* guilty setting limits with others, because I didn't know that guilt was normal when you're doing something that you believe to be mean. This book will teach you how to manage the discomfort (guilt) that stops you from having the life that you want. Hopefully, it will give you the confidence and courage to create healthy boundaries in your own life.

# Introduction

Boundaries will set you free.

I've been a therapist for fourteen years. People don't come to therapy knowing they have boundary issues. When they walk in the door, boundary issues are disguised as issues with self-care, conflicts with other people, trouble with time management, or concerns about how social media impacts their emotional state.

Once they finish their tales of resentment, unhappiness, feeling overwhelmed, and codependency, I say to them gently, "You have an issue with boundaries." With that, we begin the work of uncovering boundary violations, learning to communicate boundaries to others, and dealing with the aftermath of setting boundaries. Yes, there's aftermath when dealing with the discomfort and guilt that comes from asserting yourself.

Instagram has become a space for me to post a lot of what I see as a result of boundary issues. My Instagram post "Signs That You Need Boundaries" went viral.

## **Signs That You Need Boundaries**

- You feel overwhelmed.
- You feel resentment toward people for asking for your help.
- You avoid phone calls and interactions with people you think might ask for something.
- You make comments about helping people and getting nothing in return.
- You feel burned out.
- You frequently daydream about dropping everything and disappearing.
- You have no time for yourself.



The overwhelming response I see to these posts online shows me how much people relate to the need for boundaries. My direct messages overflow with notes like “Boundary issue, please help!” Weekly, I host Instagram Q&As, and 85 percent of the questions pertain to boundaries.

I receive questions like

“My friends get drunk every week, and it makes me uncomfortable when I hang out with them. What can I do?”

“I can’t stop saying yes to my brother, who constantly asks to borrow money.”

“My parents want me to come home for the holidays. I want to go to my partner’s family’s house instead. How do I tell them?”

Answering all the questions I get on Instagram is impossible. Week after week, people have more questions about their struggles with communication in relationships. I’ve uncovered a bottomless pit of boundary issues! I knew that the only way to help more people sort through these problems was to compile the strategies I’ve learned into a book. And these don’t come just from my online and client work—I’ve had my own troubles with boundaries nearly my entire life. I continue to work on this every day, so I personally understand the deep importance of establishing healthy limits.

On most days, I ask a poll question on my Instagram Stories. Taking polls has been a fun way to learn from my community. At times I’m shocked by the results. Like the time I asked, “Are your expectations of your father different from the expectations you have for your mother?” Over 60 percent of people said no. I was shocked, because moms (I’m one) talk about expectations weighing more heavily on mothers. But the people of Instagram seemed to believe that both parents are equally as important. Sprinkled throughout this book you’ll find my Instagram polls and results.

Like most people, I have found that my family relationships have been the most challenging for me in which to set boundaries. Family systems have unspoken rules of engagement. If you want to feel guilty, set a limit with your family.

Last year, I received a text from a relative calling on me to help them fix someone. I knew I’d grown when I wrote back, “This is not

my job. And it's not your job either." After many years of trying to save the same person, I quit. It's not my job to save people. It's not my job to fix people. I can help people, but I can't fix them. At that moment, I was proud of my boundaries and how far I've come in my ability to honor them. Through trial and error, I've learned, "If you don't like something, do something about it." I had assumed that I had to accept things and help people, even if it harmed me. I did not want to disappoint others. This reflects the number one reason that people avoid setting boundaries: fear of someone getting mad at them.

Fear is not rooted in fact. Fear is rooted in negative thoughts and the story lines in our heads. Over the years, I learned that when people need my help, they have to recognize the issue and request assistance. And I have to be able and willing to help them. It took years for me to realize that I wasn't helping people by "fixing" them. I was getting in the way of them doing the work that they needed to do for themselves.

***Fear is not rooted in fact.***

Throughout this book, you will learn about more of my boundary fails and triumphs.

***Clarity saves relationships.***

It isn't easy to set limits, especially with the people we love. It may seem far worse to risk making someone mad than to have an uncomfortable conversation. But oh, the relationships I could have saved if only I had said something! Sometimes those things were big: "I will not be around you when you're drinking." And sometimes small: "Please take your shoes off when you come in my house." But they all mattered.

People don't know what you want. It's your job to make it clear. Clarity saves relationships.

This book presents a clearly outlined formula for knowing when you have a boundary issue, communicating the need for a boundary, and following it up with action. This process isn't always pretty. Communicating what you want and need is tough at first. And dealing with what comes after can be downright uncomfortable. But the more you do it, the easier it gets—especially when you experience the peace of mind that follows.

**Reasons People Don't Respect Your Boundaries**

- You don't take yourself seriously.
- You don't hold people accountable.
- You apologize for setting boundaries.
- You allow too much flexibility.
- You speak in uncertain terms.
- You haven't verbalized your boundaries (they're all in your head).
- You assume that stating your boundaries once is enough.
- You assume that people will figure out what you want and need based on how you act when they violate a boundary.



For fourteen years, I've been honored to help people make sense of their relationships and find the courage to create healthy relationships. In these pages, you will read stories to help you curate a deeper understanding of how boundary issues appear in real life. They are fictionalized versions of my interactions with clients. All names, identifying facts, and details have been changed to maintain anonymity. I hope you find yourself in these stories of others and learn how to shift your relationships.

Sometimes we know we need to set boundaries, but we have no clue how or where to start. This book serves as a guide to the benefits of limits and the hard work of setting expectations as you maintain your values in your relationships. Because we often don't know exactly how to express what we need, I've included wording suggestions. Feel free to use mine or practice your own phrases. Each chapter offers reflection questions or exercises to help you develop a deeper understanding of the material.





# What the Heck Are Boundaries?

*Boundaries are the gateway to healthy relationships.*

“I feel overwhelmed,” Kim said, burying her head in her hands. She had started seeing me two weeks after she had returned from her honeymoon. Newly married and excelling in her career, Kim prided herself on being the best at everything she did, but her worries about *getting it all done* had become all-consuming. She was depleted and dreaded getting out of bed in the morning. She not only was determined to be the best for herself, but she also always showed up as the “best” for others: the best friend, best daughter, best sister, best coworker. Now she wanted to be the best wife. And someday, the best mother. Being the best for Kim meant always saying yes. Saying no was mean. Saying no was selfish. She came to me hoping to figure out how to do more without feeling so exhausted.

On my couch, Kim went down the list of things she had agreed to do for other people in the coming week. She insisted that her friend *needed* her help to move. Her coworker would not be able to manage *his project* without her assistance. Kim was eager for solutions. She was trying to create more time to do all the things she’d signed up for.

As she rattled off everything she was trying to figure out, I asked her to pause. I gently pointed out that it was impossible to create more time. She looked a bit stunned at first. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I can help you lighten your load instead.” From the look on her face, it seemed as though this approach had never occurred to her. I wasn’t surprised. I meet so many people—especially women—who give and give so much, only to feel exhausted and even depressed as a result. This is why we live in a culture of burnout.



To start, I encouraged Kim to make a list of everything she needed to do at work and home that week. She already had her week completely mapped out (of course she did). She sketched a schedule for completing each task. She quickly saw that there was simply not enough time to do all the things she had planned.

I asked her, "What do you *really* have to do, and what can you delegate? Do you think your friend might be able to find someone else to help them move?" She mulled it over and said yes, but insisted that she *wanted* to help. At that moment, I could see that Kim had an issue with setting boundaries around how much and how often she's willing to help others and that this was contributing to her anxiety. She meant well, right? All she wanted to do was help people! But her level of willingness to help was impossible to sustain. She desperately needed to do *less*. When I mentioned delegating, Kim dismissed the idea immediately. She knew only one way to help others, and that was to say yes to doing it herself.

Kim's refusal to *say no* had led her to my office and was the root of her worry, stress, and crippling anxiety. According to studies, anxiety is rising. Complicated relationships are among the leading causes of increasing rates of anxiety, and anxiety and depression are the two most common reasons people pursue therapy. Just like Kim, people enter therapy when anxiety is starting to impact their daily life.

I worked with Kim to unpack her need to be present for everyone. I helped her see that saying no would give her the time she was seeking. Saying no would give her the freedom to settle into her role as a wife. Saying no would reduce her worry so that she could get out of bed and face the day without immediately feeling overwhelmed.

### **My Definition of "Boundaries"**

Boundaries are expectations and needs that help you feel safe and comfortable in your relationships. Expectations in relationships help you stay mentally and emotionally well. Learning when to say no and when to say yes is also an essential part of feeling comfortable when interacting with others.

### **Signs That You Need Healthier Boundaries**

Kim's ability to function was impacted by her constantly replaying her thoughts, planning, worrying about having enough time, and dreading getting started. In short, she was stressed out.

Mental health issues such as anxiety can be prompted by our neurological response to stress. When we are stressed, our brain has difficulty shutting down. Our sleep is affected. Dread sets in. As a therapist, I observe poor self-care, feelings of being overwhelmed, resentment, avoidance, and other mental health issues as common presentations of boundary issues.

### **Neglecting Self-Care**

We've all heard the analogy from airplane-safety language: "Put on your oxygen mask *first* before helping others." Simple, right? Nope. *Neglecting self-care* is the first thing to happen when we get caught up in our desire to help others.

I can't tell you how many people show up in my office lamenting, "I don't have time to do anything for myself." After a quick evaluation, it becomes apparent that these people are not making *any* time for themselves. In fact, it often seems like they've forgotten how to take care of themselves. They can't manage to carve out time to eat a healthy meal or find five minutes to meditate, but they spend hours volunteering at their kids' school every week. This type of imbalance is an immediate sign of boundary issues.

### ***The root of self-care is setting boundaries.***

Self-care is more than taking a spa day, and it isn't selfish. Saying no to helping is an act of self-care. Paying attention to your needs is self-care. And like putting on the oxygen mask, you'll have more energy for others if you apply it to yourself first. If you think about it, the root of self-care is setting boundaries: it's saying no to something in order to say yes to your own emotional, physical, and mental well-being.

### **Overwhelmed**

Kim sought therapy because she was feeling chronically *overwhelmed*. This is one of the most common manifestations of boundary issues. Overwhelmed people have more to do than the time required for their tasks. They are drowning in thoughts about

squeezing more into an already packed schedule. This type of busyness is endemic in our culture. Everyone is striving to do more and more. Time is an afterthought. But our well-being is the price. Understanding boundaries is a proactive way to gauge what is truly manageable, and it also allows you to give 100 percent to the task at hand without that nagging sense of *feeling overwhelmed all the time*.

## **Resentment**

Feeling taken advantage of, frustrated, irritated, annoyed, and bitter is the result of the *resentment* we feel when we don't set limits. Being resentful impacts the way we deal with people. It doesn't allow us to be our best selves in our relationships. It breeds conflict. It makes us paranoid. It puts up a wall. Long-term resentment affects how we perceive the intentions of others. When we're resentful, we do things out of obligation to others instead of for the joy of helping. Resentment can be palpable.

If a client comes in and says, "I have to take care of my mother, and I feel angry about it," I can immediately pick up on the irritation and resentment. Exploring why they perceive pressure and obligation to provide this care allows me to challenge my client's belief. Yes, they want their mother to be taken care of, but they don't have to be the only person providing that care. Implementing boundaries—through asking for support from other family members and delegating—can help alleviate stress.

### **Remember the signs that you need boundaries:**

- You feel overwhelmed.
- You feel resentful toward people for asking for your help.
- You avoid phone calls and interactions with people who might ask for something.
- You make comments about helping people and getting nothing in return.
- You feel burned out.
- You frequently daydream about dropping everything and disappearing.
- You have no time for yourself.



## **Avoidance**

Disappearing, ignoring, or cutting people off is *avoidance*. Not responding to a request, delaying setting the record straight, or failing to show up are ways that we avoid situations instead of dealing with them proactively. But prolonging issues by avoiding them means the same issues will reappear over and over again, following us from relationship to relationship.

Avoidance is a passive-aggressive way of expressing that you are tired of showing up. Hoping the problem will go away feels like the safest option, but avoidance is a fear-based response. Avoiding a discussion of our expectations doesn't prevent conflict. It prolongs the inevitable task of setting boundaries.

Thoughts of fleeing—"I wish I could drop everything and run away"—are a sign of extreme avoidance. Fantasies of spending your days alone, ignoring calls, or hiding means you are seeking avoidance as the ultimate answer. But creating boundaries is the only real-life solution.

Learning to be assertive about your limitations with others will help you eliminate these symptoms and manage bouts of depression and anxiety. A lack of understanding about boundaries breeds unhealthy habits. So let's break it down.

## **Understanding Boundaries**

Creating healthy boundaries leads to feeling safe, loved, calm, and respected. They are an indication of how you allow people to show up for you and how you show up for others. But it doesn't stop there.

### **The Meaning of Boundaries**

- They are a safeguard to overextending yourself.
- They are a self-care practice.
- They define roles in relationships.
- They communicate acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in relationships.
- They are parameters for knowing what to expect in relationships.
- They are a way that you ask people to show up by upholding your needs.
- They are a way to communicate your needs to others.

- They are a way to create healthy relationships.
- They are a way to create clarity.
- They are a way to feel safe.



A boundary is a cue to others about how to treat you. It can be explicit, such as saying “I’m about to share something that I’d like you to keep between just the two of us.” Or implicit, such as having a basket for shoes and socks right by the front door for guests. As you set your own limits, it’s important to remain aware of the boundaries people are trying to communicate to you as well.

Our family histories and personalities determine how we implement and accept boundaries. If your family operates on unspoken limits or regularly ignores limits, you will probably grow up lacking the communication skills necessary to be assertive about your needs. For instance, adult children of alcoholics can have a difficult time setting limits. Parents with addiction issues often send the message that a child’s boundaries are not more significant than the parent’s addiction. So these children grow up struggling to understand and define limits. If your family of origin communicates and respects healthy limits, you are likely more comfortable defining them in any scenario.

Personality determines our comfort level with respecting and rejecting boundaries. People with anxious tendencies are more prone to overreact when challenged. Emotional regulation is a common issue, as these people are unable to react appropriately given the situation. People who exhibit strong signs of being disagreeable, such as always having to be right, arguing over small details, or struggling to accept differences in others, are more likely to push back against boundaries. Openness (receptiveness to change) and consciousness (willingness to learn and grow) are personality traits of people who are more likely to respect limitations.

Boundaries are essential at all ages. They change in relationships, just as the people in relationships change. Transitions such as getting married, going away to college, or starting a family often require new ones.



**THERE ARE ACTUALLY** three levels of boundaries. See if any of these sound familiar to you.

### **Porous**

Porous boundaries are weak or poorly expressed and are unintentionally harmful. They lead to feeling depleted, overextending yourself, depression, anxiety, and unhealthy relationship dynamics. Kim from the opening story is an example of how porous boundaries can manifest and damage well-being.

#### **Porous boundaries look like**

- Oversharing
- Codependency
- Enmeshment (lacking emotional separation between you and another person)
- Inability to say no
- People-pleasing
- Dependency on feedback from others
- Paralyzing fear of being rejected
- Accepting mistreatment

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Examples of porous boundary setting:

- Saying yes to things you don't want to do
- Loaning money to people because you feel obligated or when you don't have the funds to do so

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### **Rigid**

At the other extreme, rigid boundaries involve building walls to keep others out as a way to keep yourself safe. But staying safe by locking yourself in is unhealthy and leads to a whole other set of problems. Whereas porous boundaries lead to unhealthy closeness (enmeshment), rigid ones are a self-protective mechanism meant to build distance. This typically comes from a fear of vulnerability or a history of being taken advantage of. People with rigid boundaries do

not allow exceptions to their stringent rules even when it would be healthy for them to do so. If a person with rigid boundaries says, “I never loan money to people,” they never stray from that, even if a friend who isn’t the type to borrow money is in a crisis.

#### **Rigid boundaries look like**

- Never sharing
- Building walls
- Avoiding vulnerability
- Cutting people out
- Having high expectations of others
- Enforcing strict rules

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Examples of rigid boundary setting:

- Saying no harshly as a way to discourage people from asking you in the future
- Having a rule that you never watch your sister’s kids

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#### **Healthy**

Healthy boundaries are possible when your past doesn’t show up in your present interactions. They require an awareness of your emotional, mental, and physical capacities, combined with clear communication.

#### **Healthy boundaries look like**

- Being clear about your values
  - Listening to your own opinion
  - Sharing with others appropriately
  - Having a healthy vulnerability with people who’ve earned your trust
  - Being comfortable saying no
  - Being comfortable hearing no without taking it personally
-

Examples of healthy boundary setting:

- Saying no without apologizing because it's the healthiest choice for you at that moment
- Supporting people financially, when appropriate, and when you can do so without causing financial harm to yourself



## Two Parts to Setting Boundaries

It's true that setting boundaries isn't easy. Paralyzing fear about how someone might respond can easily hold us back. You might play out awkward interactions in your mind and prepare yourself for the worst possible outcome. But trust me: short-term discomfort for a long-term healthy relationship is worth it every time!

Whenever you identify a boundary you'd like to set, remember that there are two steps to the process: communication and action.

### Communication

Verbally communicating your needs is step one. People cannot accurately assume your boundaries based on your body language or unspoken expectations. When you explicitly state what you expect, there is little room for others to misinterpret what works for you. Assertive statements are the most effective way to do this.

Verbally communicating your boundaries sounds like this:

- "When we have a disagreement, I'd like you to use a lower tone and take a break if you feel like you're getting too heated in the argument. Also, I will mention when I'm becoming uncomfortable with your tone."
- "It's important to me that you honor plans that we set up. If you need to change our plans, please send me a text a few hours before."



### Action



The process doesn't end with the communication. You must uphold what you communicate through your behavior. Betting on the other person to read your mind is a recipe for an unhealthy relationship. Action is required. For instance, let's say you've told your friend, "It's important to me that you honor plans that we set up. If you need to change our plans, please send me a text a few hours before." Because you've verbally communicated your boundary, when it's violated, you need to reinforce it with action. In this case, you would let your friend know that you can't accommodate the changed plans because they didn't give you enough notice. You might say gently, "I want to hang out with you, but my schedule won't allow for the adjustment. Let's set up a time to get together next week." It's hard, I know. But honoring your boundaries through action is the only way most people will understand that you're serious, which will help the people in your life become serious about your boundaries, too.

### **Boundaries Are for You and the Other Person**

In my workshops, participants often share how they failed at communicating a boundary. Many people believe that once a limit is set, others will fall in line. Therefore, the person setting it doesn't take action after communicating it. But this lack of action invites continued violations in the relationship. You will have to put in the work to ensure that your boundaries are respected. It's your responsibility to follow through on it.

The biggest fear around this work is how others will respond, so let's get prepared for how that might look.

### **Common Ways People Respond When You Share Your Boundaries**

It's important to consider how people might respond, but don't get too fixated on their possible reactions.

#### **Common Responses to Boundaries**

1. Pushback
2. Limit testing
3. Ignoring
4. Rationalizing and questioning