

# Compassionate Boundary Setting to Build Compassion Resilience

## Section 6



INTRODUCTION

*“Without boundaries, you will act, sleep, work, groan, feel used and fulfill basic responsibilities rather than make choices to live and love fully, to work hard and nobly, to fulfill your purpose and to contribute passionately to your world.” – Black, J. and Enns, G, *Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life*. Oakland, CA. Raincoat Books)*



INFORMATION

Distribute this document to all participants to explore prior to the following application activities.



APPLICATIONS

### Key Activity

#### Helpful Workplace Behaviors (20-40 minutes)

This activity is a highly valuable activity to do with school teams or schoolwide at a staff meeting. It will also prepare you for the Staff Culture section of the Toolkit.

### Wellness Practice

#### Preparing to Write Your Mission Statement

### Circle Agenda

#### Staff Circle Agenda, Section Six

### Core Content Visual to Display in Common Staff Areas

#### Tips for Setting Compassionate Boundaries – Use this Visual and Display in Staff Break Areas

Posting this visual in common staff areas will serve as a reminder of content covered to staff and perhaps serve as a future conversation starter for deeper reflection among staff members.

### Supplementary Activities/Handouts

#### Compassionate Boundaries Reflection (15 minutes)



LINKS

### Links Specifically for Leadership

#### Leadership Support for Boundary Setting – Guided Discussion (15-30 minutes)

The leadership team will address key questions after participating in the Helpful Workplace Behaviors activity with the whole staff or a small group of staff members.

**For links specifically for leadership and additional resources, please visit the Toolkit online.**

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### INTRODUCTION

“Without boundaries, you will act, sleep, work, groan, feel used and fulfill basic responsibilities rather than make choices to live and love fully, to work hard and nobly, to fulfill your purpose and to contribute passionately to your world.”<sup>1</sup>



### INFORMATION

Boundaries support our well-being and the well-being of those we care about and serve. Boundaries can refer to the division between our personal and professional selves, between our thoughts and those of our clients and colleagues, and between our own opinions and the mission/policies of our organization, among many other possible distinctions. Effectively managing boundaries might mean remaining mindful of our professional obligations in the midst of emotionally charged encounters, treating clients with respect at all times rather than assuming a tone of excessive intimacy, accepting organizational policy even when we feel that more might be done, or leaving our work at the office at the end of the day.

Boundaries are particularly important in work with clients who are experiencing distress and suffering, many of whom may be survivors of trauma and have histories of numerous violations and exploitations that have left them without the means to establish or maintain boundaries. As providers, we have the responsibility of setting and maintaining professional boundaries with clients. Setting clear boundaries can not only protect our relationships with clients, but it can also allow us to maintain a level of self-awareness and self-regulation, protecting us from compassion fatigue.

As we are clear about what these boundaries are, we can communicate them in a proactive manner and be open to discussion and collaborative implementation and problem solving. Discussing these boundaries with others can help clarify processes to both support consistent boundaries and consider exceptions to them.

Policies within any organization are most effective when boundary consensus is reached prior to policy setting. Policies should define boundaries and spell out the processes to communicate, implement, challenge and revise them. The culture leader of an organization, usually someone in an administrative or manager position, is most often the one best suited to guide staff when situations arise that may merit exceptions to the agreed upon boundaries.

<sup>1</sup> Black, J., & Enns, G. (1998). *Better boundaries: Owning and treasuring your life*. Oakland, CA: Raincoat Books

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To help identify needed boundaries, consider at least five ways that you would complete each of these three statements:

1

**I have the right to ask for**  
(examples: privacy, information before making a decision, etc.)

2

**To protect my time and energy, it is OK to** (examples: change my mind, set a time limit, etc.)

3

**People may not**  
(humiliate me in front of others, go through my desk/wallet/purse, etc.)

### Behavior and Beliefs in Relationships that Might be Signs of Ignored/Unestablished Boundaries:

**Too close** – total dependence, *“I need your approval and support 100% of the time.”*

**Avoid conflict** – *“If I ignore it, it will go away eventually.”*

**Victimhood** – Identify self as the victim, *“I have no power.”*

**Distant** – Due to past real or perceived violations, one is fiercely independent, *“I dare you to come close!”* or shies away from openness with others.

**Invisibility** – Not wanting to be seen or heard so that boundaries are not violated.

\* [Revised from livestrong.com](https://www.livestrong.com)

### Three Types of Boundaries:

**Permeable** – A boundary is set but there is very little reinforcement of the boundary. At times, having overly permeable boundaries will allow unwanted emotional and mental assault from others and may mean that we are letting too much of ourselves out, limiting our privacy and self-care.

**Rigid** – These are the boundaries that you reinforce at all costs. Too rigid boundaries can limit us to be open to new ideas or perspectives and can often keep us in the dark and unapproachable.

**Flexible** – Flexible boundaries are firm and clear yet open to new ideas and resources when needed. They are also sufficiently closed to protect us from harm.

It is important to also recognize that there may be times when saying “no” or setting a boundary doesn’t seem feasible in order for the needs or yourself, your family, or your team to be met. In these situations, it can be helpful to remember the concept of locus of control. Ask yourself:

- What about this situation do I have control over?
- Can I change something about this situation to ease the fatigue in this moment?
- Is this a “yes” for now and is there a way for me to be able to say “no” in the future?
- What other areas am I able to set a boundary in to support this area?

Remember, that even when needing to say yes to something, there is always room to say “no” to perfection.

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### How might these different boundaries play out at work?

Consider an example: Your boss regularly asks you to take on extra tasks that might require you to work over your 40 hours a week. You...

**Permeable** – almost always agree to these asks despite wanting to say no. You may feel guilt and a sense that you are being ordered to do so. This may open you up to abuse or disrespect.

**Rigid** – never say yes to extra tasks because you have isolated your own work and are not open to new tasks or ways of working. You may be disengaged from the work or organization.

**Flexible** – occasionally agree to take on extra tasks when the circumstances warrant it, but without feelings of guilt or the sense that you are being ordered to do so. You are also able to accept when others say “no” to your requests.

### But What About Compassion?

Our maintenance of boundaries does not override our empathic responses. We continue to make ourselves open to and respectful of students, entering into their worlds and imagining what they have been through.

We, in other words, employ both empathy and boundaries when relating to students and others. For example, if out of rage a student says something disrespectful to you, you can say, “*Oh, \_\_\_\_\_, I cannot let you talk like that to me because I would never want you to think that it would be OK for someone to talk like that to you. I want to help us both to feel respected.*”

### Boundaries Between Interactions

People in the healthcare field find that, between interactions with challenging clients or colleagues, it is very helpful to do something to release tension and re-set for the next interaction. Examples include taking some slow breaths, visualizing a scene that is calming to you, stretching, humming, changing scenes (placement in the room) or having lunch with a colleague.

#### SELF-CARE



#### STRATEGIES

### Self-care strategy for the SPIRIT – Core Values

#### [Preparing to Write Your Professional Mission Statement](#)



#### WHAT'S NEXT

### Positive Staff Culture – how does compassionate boundary setting inform our staff culture?

And then I learned the spiritual journey  
had nothing to do with being nice.  
It had to do with being real and authentic.  
Having boundaries.  
Honoring and respecting my space first,  
others second.  
And in this space of self-care,  
being nice just happened, it flowed...  
not motivated by fear, but by LOVE.

*By Michelle Olak*

## Helpful Workplace Behaviors to Inform Compassionate Boundary Setting

1. Begin by asking the group to envision a compassionate work environment, where they can be their best self in their job. What staff behaviors would lead to such an environment?
2. Create a space to document a group brainstorm, for example some large flip-chart paper if in person or a Jamboard if together virtually.
3. Ask the group to share what they envisioned, encouraging them to share their ideas as behaviors. If the group shares attitudes instead of behaviors, ask *“What behavior would demonstrate this attitude?”*
4. If participants are having difficulty coming up with ideas, ask them what behaviors are important to the mission and well-being of the organization. After the group is done brainstorming, add to the title of the exercise, *“Our Yeses.”*



The second step of this exercise is to brainstorm what things staff need to say “no” to in order to support their “yeses”. These “nos” may become individual boundaries that staff members choose to set. Have the group brainstorm what things they need to say “no” to in order to support the items on the “yes” list. (Example: **Helpful Behavior** – Communicating concerns directly to the person the concern involves. **The “No” to support the Yes** – engaging in gossip with other staff members.)

5. Review the tips for how to set such boundaries in your professional and/or personal life. Practice role playing communication between staff about some of the identified boundaries.

### Tips for Setting Compassionate Boundaries

- Know what you want to say “Yes” to in your life (values and priorities).
- Be proactive. Have “meetings” to discuss boundaries. Structure offers safety for both sides.
- Just say it! Don’t make them guess. Use simple and direct language.
- Reinforce by pointing out the violations or near violations **IN THE MOMENT**.
- Give explanations that are specific, relevant to the other person, and offer shared solutions.
- Back up your boundary with action. If you give in, you invite people to ignore your needs.
- Remember your locus of control. Boundaries aren’t about perfection. When you must say “yes,” look for where you have control.

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Questions that may get staff thinking for this activity from the perspective of behaviors with clients as well as with colleagues.

### Clients: Do you think it is OK to...

1. Friend clients on Facebook or other social media.
2. Share personal phone numbers with clients who may need extra support.
3. Touch a client when they are upset.
4. Call clients to remind them to bring documents or other important items to an appointment.
5. Visit with or accept calls from client when off duty or outside of work hours.
6. Talk about your personal life with a client during an appointment.
7. Find ways to provide clients with health-related services without being reimbursed.
8. Attend events in a client's life, such as a graduation, wedding, family gathering, etc.
9. Maintain relationships with clients, after they are no longer in your care.
10. Keep secrets (personal or health-related) between you and a client that is different than client confidentiality.

### Colleagues: Do you think it is OK to...

1. Engage in gossip about other colleagues or clients.
2. Take on the extra work of a colleague.
3. Work overtime.
4. Ask a colleague to work overtime.
5. Be available at all hours.
6. Touch a colleague when they need a hug.
7. Criticize colleagues when you feel they did not do their job well.
8. Assist a colleague more than they give.
9. Complain to colleagues about your job.
10. Talk with colleagues about personal problems while at work.

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### Examples of simple and direct language for boundaries

**To set a boundary with a colleague that complains too much about what you cannot control:**

*"I am working on showing up with good energy for my clients, I find that talking too much about what I can't control makes that hard for me. Let's switch topics."*

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**To set a boundary with someone who takes more ideas/ assistance than they give:**

*"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the collaboration I have had with other providers. I am happy to offer you advice and want to be sure that I also learn a few tricks from you. I'd love to know how you approached \_\_\_\_\_."*

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**To set a boundary with someone who seems to always share bad news:**

*"I am making it a priority to find things to laugh about. Humor and positivity are how I make it through the day in good shape! I need you to bring some funny stuff along with the bad news. Want to hear what made me laugh yesterday?"*

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**To set a boundary with an angry person:**

*"I want to work with you and figure this out. It will be hard if our brains are not calm enough to think. How about we take a 5-minute break?"*

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**To say no to extra commitments:**

*"Although our agency's goals are really important to me, I need to discuss what can come off my plate or what I can do in a different manner in order to take on anything new. I am working on how to balance my family's needs and my workload."*

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**To set a boundary with someone who is critical without your permission:**

*"I find that the feedback that works best for me to grow is given when I ask for it. It would be helpful to me if you would ask for my permission before giving me feedback. Can you do that?"*

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**To buy yourself time when making decisions:**

*"I find I make my best decisions when I have time to think them through; I'll need a day to think on it."*



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### Self-Care Strategy for the SPIRIT – Core Values

## Preparing to Write Your Mission Statement

This activity will help you to prepare for the work of writing your Mission Statement in the Spirit section of the toolkit.

### Why a mission statement?



Creating and consistently revisiting a mission statement that connects your personal and professional life can bring awareness to what motivates us and helps us to be more intentional at work, at home, and in the community. Job satisfaction and compassion resilience are connected to being able to see that we are fulfilling our sense of purpose – our mission.<sup>2</sup>

### How does it relate to setting boundaries?

The content of your mission statement informs your boundary needs. Understanding your unique boundary needs can inform the writing of your mission statement. Since you have now spent time reflecting on and identifying your professional and personal boundaries you can begin to reflect on how these boundaries play a role in your sense of mission or purpose.

### Reflection questions:

1. When considering Helpful Workplace Behaviors you and your colleagues identified, list those behaviors that are important for you to meet the obligations of your job. Then list those that are important for you to feel a sense of purpose in your work.

 Behaviors that help me meet work obligations	Behaviors that support my sense of purpose in my work 

2. Now list words that you notice in the second column (or that come to mind when reviewing that column) that might be important to consider when you write your Mission Statement. Save this list for the Mission Statement activity in the Spirit Section of this toolkit.

<sup>2</sup> Weir, K. (2013). *More than job satisfaction. Monitor on Psychology, 44(11), 39.*



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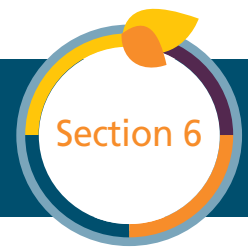
Staff Support



Circle Agenda

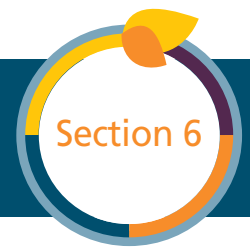
Circle Topic	CR Section 6: Compassionate Boundaries
<p><b>Planning</b></p>	<p>Send the <a href="#">introduction document</a> from Section 6 in the online toolkit at least 4 days prior to the circle to all participants.</p> <p>Hold a meeting with leadership to prepare for this section and invite the leader(s) to consider the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As the participants explore what boundaries they can set to support the priorities in their work and non-work life, you have the opportunity to support such conversations and to demonstrate your own practice of boundary setting to support your priorities.</li> <li>2. If you are part of the group conversation, it can be helpful to reiterate that you believe it is a leader's role to engage with supervisees in looking at boundaries and monitoring expectations accordingly.</li> </ol> <p>For the full leadership preparation document, please visit <a href="#">this page</a>.</p>
<p><b>Purpose of Circle/ Learning Objectives</b></p>	<p>We are learning how to set boundaries that will help us build compassion resilience.</p>
<p><b>Materials/ Preparation/Time</b></p>	<p><b>Time:</b> 45-50 minutes</p> <p><b>Materials:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Circle kit</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Values and shared agreements created in first session</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Flip-chart paper</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Markers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Copies of the following for all participants: List of affirmations from last session (if facilitators choose to do so), <a href="#">Tips for Compassionate Boundary Setting</a> and, if doing Bonus Activity, <a href="#">Preparing to Write Your Personal Mission Statement</a>.</li> </ul> <p><b>Set-up:</b> Up to 15 chairs arranged in a circle without furniture in the middle.</p> <p><b>To consider:</b> <a href="#">Understanding Your Social Location as a Facilitator – Active Bystander Intervention: Training and Facilitation Guide</a>.</p>

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Circle Topic	CR Section 6: Compassionate Boundaries
<p><b>Welcome/Check-In (5 minutes)</b></p>	<p><i>“Without boundaries, you will act, sleep, work, groan, feel used and fulfill basic responsibilities rather than make choices to live and love fully, to work hard and nobly, to fulfill your purpose and to contribute passionately to your world.”</i> – Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life</p> <p>(Go-around) When is a time this past week when you didn’t set a boundary and it led to feeling fatigued?</p>
<p><b>Grounding/Wellness Practice (5 minutes)</b></p>	<p>Lead the group in a feet grounding exercise:</p> <p>Get into a position where both soles of your feet are on the ground and firmly connected. Either lower your gaze or close your eyes. Take a couple of breaths at your regular pace. Bring your awareness to the soles of your feet, as though you’ve never felt your feet before; getting really curious about what your feet feel like. Notice the connection of the soles of your feet to your shoes, to the ground, to the bare earth; noticing any sensations in your feet. Notice what happens inside the rest of your body as you do this exercise. What do you feel? When you are ready, open your eyes and come back to the group. Your feet can serve as a great opportunity for mindfulness throughout your day.</p> <p>If you would like to consider a different grounding practice, please review the <a href="#">mindfulness appendix</a> for additional suggestions.</p>
<p><b>Review (5 minutes)</b></p>	<p><b>Share:</b> Last time we met we looked at expectations and their impact. We ended with you giving examples of affirmations that you could remember when your unrealistic self-expectations pop up. (If you compiled the affirmations in a document, share with participants.)</p> <p>Today we will explore how saying no in the context of our yeses (or our priorities) is key to being compassion resilient at work and home.</p>

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Circle Topic	CR Section 6: Compassionate Boundaries
<p><b>Guiding Questions (25 minutes)</b></p>	<p><b>Helpful Workplace Behaviors Activity:</b></p> <p>Post a few pieces of flipchart paper around the room. Put the following title on each piece of paper:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Behaviors at work that are helpful to the workplace culture</li> </ul> <p>Begin by asking the group to envision a compassionate work environment, where they can be their best self in their job. What staff behaviors would lead to such an environment?</p> <p>Give each participant a marker and ask them to write their ideas on the flipchart paper. If the group shares attitudes instead of behaviors, ask <i>“What behavior would demonstrate this attitude?”</i></p> <p>Point out that this list is their YESES – the people they want to be – their valued behaviors. Write <i>“Our Yeses”</i> on the top of the flipchart paper. Ask participants to answer the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(Go-around) What might you need to say NO to in order to support your YES from this list? (Record participant answers on another flipchart paper for all to see.) For example: <b>Helpful Behavior</b> – Communicating concerns directly to the person the concern involves. <b>The “No” to support the Yes</b> – to engaging in gossip with other staff members.</li> <li>Handout Tips for Compassionate Boundary Setting.</li> <li>(Paired activity) Practice stating two of the boundaries listed.</li> <li>(Open mic) What are some examples for each boundary?</li> <li>(Go-around) Share a possible organizational policy or procedure your organization could add to support one of the shared boundaries identified. (Record suggestions shared by the group. If there is not time to complete this round, participants could write a policy or procedure idea down on a piece of paper to be collected and shared with the leadership team.)</li> </ol>
<p><b>Putting it into Practice (5 minutes)</b></p>	<p><i>“Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They’re compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment.”</i> – Brené Brown</p> <p>(Go-around) After reflecting on the connection between boundaries and resentment, what is one boundary you plan to begin or continue to uphold to keep you out of a place of resentment?</p>
<p><b>Closing (5 minutes)</b></p>	<p>As we close, I ask us all to take a deep breath, take a moment to connect with your breath, relax your body.</p> <p>(Go-around) What is one of your yeses that strongly connects with your personal sense of purpose?</p> <p><b>Bonus Activity:</b> Handout <a href="#">Preparing to Write Your Personal Mission Statement</a> for reflection between sessions.</p>

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### Tips for Setting Compassionate Boundaries



1. **Know what you want to say “Yes”** to in your life (values, behaviors and priorities).
2. **Be proactive.** Have “meetings” to discuss boundaries. Structure offers safety for both sides.
3. **Just say it!** Don’t make them guess. Use simple and direct language.
4. Reinforce by pointing out the violations **IN THE MOMENT.**
5. **Give explanations that are specific,** relevant to the other person, and offer shared solutions.
6. **Back up your boundary with action.** If you give in, you invite people to ignore your needs. Remember your locus of control. Boundaries aren’t about perfection. When you must say “yes,” look for where you have control.
7. **Remember your locus of control.** Boundaries aren’t about perfection. When you must say “yes,” look for where you have control.

## Compassionate Boundaries Reflection



### 1. Take a few moments to identify:

- a. One of your personal boundaries (relationships with your friends, family or inner circle of associates)
- b. One of your professional boundaries (in relationships with clients and colleagues)
- c. One of your social boundaries (relationships in social situations, with new people or associates)

### 2. Take some time to consider the last time someone crossed one of your boundaries in the work environment *without resistance from you* (or when you crossed one of your boundaries). Note your feelings and thoughts afterwards.

### 3. Take some time to consider the last time someone (client, colleague, or others) attempted to cross one of your boundaries in the work environment (or you were tempted to cross your boundary) and *you communicated your boundaries*. What was the outcome? Note your feelings and thoughts afterwards. If there is anything you would do differently now, write it down.

### 4. What new or ongoing boundaries stand out to you now after having reviewed the slides and making the above reflections? What would you like to adjust in your approach to boundary setting?

## Guided Discussion

### Leadership Support for Boundary Setting

The leadership team will address key questions **after** participating in the Helpful Adult Behaviors activity with the whole staff.

1. How do our policies impact boundary setting? (example: Client behavior policies support staff to uphold boundaries for personal safety.)
2. How do our policies align with the work the staff has just done to identify helpful behaviors and boundaries?
3. What do you notice about the interpretation of policies by the staff? How can you support clarity?
4. What process have you put in place to encourage staff to talk with you about circumstances that lead them to consider altering a boundary that the organization or they have set with clients or colleagues? (example: Define that staff should consult with a supervisor if they want to be flexible with a client about a rule.)
5. How has the conversation about boundaries with staff impacted your own sense of personal and professional boundaries?