

MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY 3: COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

Everyone can benefit from having solid communication and boundary-setting skills. When it comes to supporting people with substance use disorders, these skills are crucial to being able to interact with and offer people healthy forms of assistance. Boundaries can be defined simply as the limits we set with ourselves and others. Communication skills are incredibly important, as they help us to have effective conversations and put our boundaries into action.

COMMUNICATION

It is important to be able to have tough conversations about substance use if you have concerns. Reaching out and showing meaningful support could make a world of difference. You can feel more confident about starting the conversation if you know some of the following skills and tips:

Start from a place of honesty and genuine concern

Are you really ready to listen and help? It's important to note that when confronted about substance use, people often react defensively. Responding with kindness and genuine concern even when someone is defensive can help to keep the door open for future conversations. Avoid saying anything along the lines of "You've got a problem and you need to do something about it." This kind of speech can do more harm than good. Saying something more like, "I care about you and I'd like to talk about your use of pain medications. I'm here to support you in getting healthy." This may help them be more receptive to having a conversation and can help to ward off defensiveness. State the truth in a compassionate way. Being honest is one of the most important things you can do to help someone. Don't use judgemental language, but approach the problem directly. Speak clearly about what you are objectively seeing the other person do or problems they are having in a way that is kind. Remember, being truthful is a way of conveying respect and kindness.

Ask permission

This is respectful of the person's autonomy and dignity, and can be an empowering way to start the conversation. For example, "What are your thoughts about that? Can we talk openly about what's been going on?"



MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY 3: COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

Listen

Use motivational interviewing listening techniques. In other words, really listen, don't just listen to respond; focus in on what the person shares and demonstrate empathy and compassion:

- Ask open ended questions- these questions don't have a yes or no answer, but rather invite the person to share their perspective.
- Communicate with affirmation- share positive attributes about the person's qualities and actions.
- Practice reflective listening- rephrase the emotional experience of others.
- Summarize- review the key points of what the person has said to check for understanding and demonstrate engagement in the conversation.

Be Assertive

There is a range of different ways to communicate with with others:



We must always try to maintain being **assertive**, which means standing up for ourselves and our rights, without being too **aggressive** towards others or too **passive** about what we allow. This is especially important when it comes to how we communicate with others about problems where boundaries come into play.

MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY 3: COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are the ways we create limits on how much influence and control others to have on us, or the impact we have on other people. It's important to note that there is a range between healthy boundaries and unhealthy boundaries, and that this is often a difficult thing to navigate.



When we are too guarded and keep people too far away from us, we don't let others in emotionally, or are **closed off** to any constructive feedback or positive influence others may have to offer. This can also include being too rigid with the way we offer support and assistance to others.

When we are too relaxed with our boundaries and allow people to get too close (this is sometimes called **enmeshment**), we are easily influenced or even controlled by others. We can be manipulated or led to do or tolerate things we aren't comfortable with, or that even harm us. This can also look like someone trying to control, manipulate, or enable others, or being overly focused on someone else to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

The middle ground is what we should strive for, and it often requires flexibility and calibration along the way. When we practice **healthy boundaries**, we are able to balance the need for connection with others with an appropriate level of independence. This means being open to positive influence and healthy assistance from others, without becoming too dependent. It also includes not overstepping the boundaries of others, and taking responsibility for how our actions impact others. In turn, it means recognizing that others are responsible for their actions as well, and that supporting someone does not mean taking on their challenges as your own. We should aim to act without harming someone else or doing things for others that they should be doing for themselves.

MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY 3: COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

Having healthy boundaries comes after having an awareness of what is actually our responsibility and within our ability to control.

It is vital that the people around someone who is experiencing a substance use disorder are supportive to them on their path to recovery, whether it be family, romantic partners, teachers, coworkers or friends. Making changes and facing tough issues are difficult things to do. People working towards recovery need meaningful support, but also clear boundaries and expectations. Understanding the stages of change is crucial to being able to offer the support that people truly need. *Check out the Reflection Activity PDF for a refresher on the Stages of Change.* It's important to be there for people as they are taking healthy actions towards owning their recovery and making changes without enabling problematic behaviors. Enabling can be defined as aiding someone's substance use or other associated unhealthy or self-sabotaging behaviors, intentionally or unintentionally. People in the precontemplation or contemplation stages of change are less likely to be looking for healthy forms of assistance and need a different kind of support than those in the preparation, action, and maintenance stages of change.

Some questions to ask yourself before helping someone are:

- Can they do this on their own?
- Have they tried to solve the problem? If so, what did they do?
- How will my helping in this way benefit this person?
- How will my actions impact our relationship?
- What am I hoping the outcome of my assistance will be?
- Are there any potential risks to the person if I do help them in this way?
- Is there any danger of harm if I do not help?
- What am I teaching with my actions?
- How will this practically help the person on their path to recovery?



MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY 3: COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

If the answers to any of these questions are along the lines of:

- this person can do this on their own,
- if I help this way I could be aiding someone in harming themselves or others, or
- this way of helping is actually assisting them to avoid the consequences of their actions,

then they may not be looking for genuine help, but rather consciously or unconsciously seeking to use your support to continue problematic behaviors related to their substance use disorder.

Support without boundaries isn't actually helping at all, but support with healthy boundaries can save a life. Setting boundaries isn't a clear cut or an easy thing to do. Learning more about this is vital to being able to support those in need, even if that means refraining from taking any actions at the point of their recovery where it could do more harm than good. At the same time, be aware that when people are trying to work towards recovery, that's the time they need practical support and meaningful words of encouragement from those around them.

Recommended further reading:

Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself by Melody Beattie

Don't Let Your Kids Kill You by Charles Rubin

Love First by Jeff and Debra Jay

Boundaries, Where You End And I Begin: How To Recognize And Set Healthy Boundaries By Anne Katherine

The *Boundaries* book series by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend



MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCY 3: COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

[How to Create Healthy Boundaries](#) | University of Kentucky

[The Four Basic Styles of Communication](#) | University of Kentucky

[Setting Boundaries in a Relationship](#) | Break the Cycle

[Setting Boundaries, Healthy Relationships](#) | Love is Respect

[8 Steps to Setting Healthy Boundaries](#) | Thrive Global

[Being assertive: Reduce stress, communicate better](#) | Mayo Clinic

