

A CLINICAL HANDOUT

BOUNDARIES VS. SELFISHNESS

If you’ve ever set a limit and worried you were being selfish, this is for you. A boundary is something you do; selfishness is something you demand. Same words, very different moves.

A BOUNDARY

A limit on **my** behavior — what I will or won't do — to protect health, values, and capacity. The intent is to preserve connection where possible.

SELFISHNESS

A demand that **you** change to maximize my comfort, regardless of the impact on you.

THE 6 DISTINCTIONS

	BOUNDARY	SELFISH
Subject of control	Controls me. “I won’t discuss this. I’ll end the call if it comes up.”	Controls you. “You have to do X.”
Intent	Safety, clarity, sustainability.	Advantage or comfort at the other person’s expense.
Responsibility	I carry my share. I offer alternatives where I can.	I drop my share. Someone else picks it up.
Proportionality	Specific, time-bound, the lightest effective step.	Global, rigid, punitive.
Communication	Clear, calm, option-oriented. No JADE (justify, argue, defend, explain).	Manipulative, guilt-tripping, retaliatory.
Consequences	Predictable and neutral. “If it comes up again, we’ll pause.”	Punishment in disguise.

THE 5-C LITMUS TEST

C clear	C CHOICE-BASED	C CONSISTENT	C COMPASSIONATE	C CONTRIBUTION- aware
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IT WORKS ACROSS RELATIONSHIPS

<p>Partner</p> <p>Boundary "I can't keep having this same conversation late at night when I'm exhausted. Let's pick a time tomorrow when we're both fresh."</p> <p>Selfish "You're not allowed to bring this up unless I want to talk."</p>	<p>Parent / Family of Origin</p> <p>Boundary "I love you, and I'm not going to discuss my weight at family dinners. If it comes up, I'll step out for a bit."</p> <p>Selfish "You can't have an opinion about anything in my life."</p>	<p>In-Laws / Extended Family</p> <p>Boundary "We're not taking advice on parenting decisions. If it comes up, we'll change the subject. Dinner Sunday still sounds great."</p> <p>Selfish "Agree with our parenting or we're cutting you off."</p>
<p>Friend</p> <p>Boundary "I can't be the only person you process this with. Once you've talked to someone else too, I'll be glad to circle back."</p> <p>Selfish "Stop having problems."</p>	<p>Work / Boss</p> <p>Boundary "I won't be available after 7pm or on weekends. For genuinely urgent items, here's what counts as urgent and how to reach me."</p> <p>Selfish "Stop assigning me work I don't want to do."</p>	<p>Adult Child</p> <p>Boundary "We love hosting you. We need a heads-up by Thursday so we can plan, and we're not lending money this cycle."</p> <p>Selfish "You can only visit if you do exactly what we want."</p>

MICRO-SCRIPTS YOU CAN BORROW

<p>Empathic + Firm</p> <p>"We care about you, and we're keeping this plan."</p>	<p>Broken record (max 3x)</p> <p>"We're not taking advice on this."</p>	<p>Neutral consequence</p> <p>"If it comes up again, we'll wrap up for today."</p>
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TOOLS & AFTERCARE

<p>BIFF</p> <p>Brief · Informative · Friendly · Firm</p> <p>From Bill Eddy's work with high-conflict communication. Useful for emails and texts.</p>	<p>DBT FAST</p> <p>Fair · no excessive Apologies · Stick to values · Truthful</p> <p>From Marsha Linehan's DBT interpersonal effectiveness module — protects self-respect inside the ask.</p>	<p>ACT VALUES CHECK</p> <p>"Does this move me toward the partner, parent, friend, or colleague I want to be?"</p> <p>A one-question gut check from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.</p>	<p>AFTERCARE</p> <p>5 minutes of co-regulation → name the win → postpone the debrief 12 hours.</p> <p>Boundary-setting taxes the nervous system. Plan the recovery, not just the conversation.</p>
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Educational only — not therapy. If you're working with a therapist, bring this in. If you'd like to start, we offer a free 15-minute consult.

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