BOUNDARIES · AGREEMENTS & ADHD

FIGURING IT OUT TOGETHER

Some boundaries get broken because someone doesn't care. Many get broken because the agreement was never built to survive a busy, distractible human life. This is about telling those two apart, deciding what your boundaries are, and working them out together when the first version doesn't hold.

DECIDING WHAT YOUR BOUNDARY IS

A boundary isn't a rule you impose on someone else, it's a line that protects your own okay-ness, and it starts with paying attention to your own signals. Resentment, dread, and that keeping-score feeling are usually the first sign one is missing. Ask yourself:

- **What do I need here to feel respected, safe, or steady?**
- **What's mine to control?** You can decide what you'll do. You can't control whether they change, and a boundary built on controlling them will keep failing.
- **Is this a preference or a need?** Both are allowed, and knowing which one it is keeps you from spending your energy in the wrong place.

WHAT A BOUNDARY SOUNDS LIKE

Each of these is about what you'll do, not what they have to do. "When the conversation turns to yelling, I'm going to take a break and come back in twenty minutes." "If plans change at the last minute again, I'll make my own plans instead of waiting around." "When I'm spoken to that way, I'm going to end the conversation."

DRAFT YOUR BOUNDARY

Turn the questions above into one boundary you could hold.

A situation where resentment or dread keeps showing up

What I need there, to feel respected, safe, or steady

The boundary I'll hold: "When ___, I will ___"

DECIDING THE CONSEQUENCE

A consequence isn't a punishment you hand down, it's what you'll do to take care of yourself if the pattern continues. It works best when it's protective rather than punitive, something you can follow through on, and proportionate to the size of the problem. A good one is:

- **Protective, not punitive.** The question is 'what will I do to protect my own okay-ness,' not 'what will make them sorry.'
- **Something you can follow through on.** An empty threat teaches the boundary isn't real.
- **Proportionate.** It fits the size of the problem, and it can start small.

CONSEQUENCES THAT PROTECT YOU

Each of these is something you can do on your own, without their cooperation. "If you're late again, I'll start without you." "If the bill isn't paid on time, I'll set up autopay from my own account." "If this keeps coming up at midnight, I'm going to bed, and we'll pick it up tomorrow."

Watch out for the threat you won't keep. If you wouldn't follow through on a consequence, don't say it out loud, and pick a smaller one you will.

SET YOUR CONSEQUENCE

Decide it now, before the moment, and pick something you'll follow through on.

What I'll do if the pattern continues (my action, not their punishment)

When and how I'll do it

One small version I could start with

WHEN SOMEONE KEEPS MISSING AN AGREEMENT: CAN'T VS WON'T

Before you treat a broken agreement as not caring, check which one you're looking at.

SIGNS IT'S CAPACITY, NOT CARING (COMMON WITH ADHD)

They agreed sincerely and meant it, they feel awful afterward, the misses are forgetful and inconsistent rather than pointed, and the breakdown is in follow-through, time, or memory rather than in willingness. Time blindness, working memory, and remembering-to-remember are executive-function challenges, not character flaws.

What to do then is different. You don't lower the boundary or drop the consequence, because your need is still your need. What changes is the target of the conversation. Instead of "try harder," which asks willpower to fix a wiring problem, you build a system that doesn't depend on remembering in the moment: shared calendars, visible reminders, doing the task together, making it automatic. Keep the **boundary** (what you need) separate from the **strategy** (how it gets met), and redesign the strategy together until it holds.

One honest caveat, both directions. ADHD is an explanation, not a permanent excuse, and caring looks like taking responsibility for building the systems rather than relying on being forgiven again. "It's the ADHD" also can't erase the impact on the other partner. Their frustration still counts, and it deserves a place in the conversation.

REFLECT TOGETHER

Pick one broken agreement and answer these side by side. The goal is a shared map, not a scoreboard.

The agreement that keeps breaking

What I've been telling myself it means

If I looked at it as capacity, not caring, what would I try

TRIAL AND ERROR IS THE PROCESS, NOT A FAILURE

The first version of almost any agreement is a rough draft. When it breaks, that's information about the setup, not a verdict on the relationship. Expect a few versions before one sticks. Conversation starters that keep it collaborative:

> "This system didn't work. That's information, not a fail. What got in the way?"
>
> "Can we build something that doesn't rely on you remembering in the moment?"
>
> "I'm not frustrated with you, I'm frustrated with the setup. Let's change the setup."
>
> "What would make this easier to do?"
>
> "Let's try it for two weeks and check back, no shame either way."
>
> "Here's what I still need. How do we get there in a way that works for your brain?"

TRY THIS TOGETHER

Redesign the strategy, not the boundary. Write the next version down so it's not living in one person's head.

The current version of the agreement

What's not working about it

What we'll try next (the strategy, not the boundary)

When we'll check in on it

Build the system together, not the blame. A missed agreement is a prompt to change the setup, not proof that someone doesn't care. This aligns with ADHD-affirming, executive-function-informed couples work.

EDUCATIONAL ONLY, NOT THERAPY.