

Building Healthy Boundaries in Recovery

Understanding, Setting & Maintaining the Limits That Protect Your Life
The Recovery Files — Embrace, Empower & Evolve

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Introduction: What Are Boundaries?

Boundaries are the physical, emotional, and psychological limits we set to protect ourselves and define our interactions with others. They are the invisible lines that communicate to the world what we will and will not accept—how we expect to be treated, what we are willing to give, and where our personal space begins and ends. Boundaries help us communicate our needs, wants, and values, and ensure that we are treated with respect and dignity.

Think of boundaries as the fences around a property. A fence doesn't exist to keep everyone out—it exists to define what belongs to you, to create a clear entry point where welcome visitors can enter, and to protect what's inside from harm. Healthy boundaries work the same way: they don't isolate you from the world, but they do define the terms of engagement. They allow you to be generous, open, and connected while still protecting your well-being, your recovery, and your sense of self.

In the context of addiction and mental health recovery, boundaries are particularly important. During active addiction, boundaries are often the first casualties—you may have violated others' boundaries repeatedly, or allowed your own to be trampled in the chaos of substance use. You may have said yes when you meant no, tolerated behavior that was unacceptable, or given away pieces of yourself that you couldn't afford to lose. Recovery is the process of rebuilding those protective structures, one limit at a time.

Boundaries serve several critical functions in recovery. They protect your sobriety by creating clear limits around people, places, and situations that threaten your recovery. They support your mental health by preventing emotional overload and protecting you from toxic interactions. They teach others how to treat you, establishing expectations for respect and reciprocity. They preserve your energy for the hard work of recovery, preventing depletion through over-giving. And they build self-respect, because every time you honor a boundary, you send yourself the message that your needs matter.

For many people in early recovery, boundaries feel foreign—even threatening. If you grew up in a family where boundaries didn't exist, or where setting limits was met with anger or punishment, the very idea of saying "no" can trigger deep anxiety. This is normal. Learning to set boundaries is a skill, and like any skill, it takes knowledge, practice, and patience to develop. This worksheet will guide you through that process.

Key Takeaways

Boundaries are protective limits that define how you interact with the world

Like fences, boundaries don't isolate—they define terms of engagement and protect what matters

During active addiction, boundaries are often the first casualties

Boundaries protect sobriety, mental health, energy, and self-respect

Boundary-setting is a learnable skill that takes knowledge, practice, and patience

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Types of Boundaries

Understanding the different types of boundaries helps you identify where your limits are strong and where they need reinforcement. Most people are stronger in some areas than others, and recovery requires attention to all four types.

Physical Boundaries involve your personal space, your body, your physical environment, and your privacy. They define who can touch you and how, how close others can stand to you, who can enter your home or personal space, and what level of physical privacy you require. In recovery, physical boundaries also include limits around environments where substances are present, physical safety in relationships, and protecting your body through self-care practices like sleep, nutrition, and exercise. Violations of physical boundaries range from someone standing too close to you to physical abuse—and everything in between matters.

Emotional Boundaries protect your inner world—your feelings, thoughts, energy, and psychological well-being. They define how much emotional responsibility you take on for others, how much personal information you share and with whom, what emotional demands you will and won't accept, and how you protect yourself from others' negativity, manipulation, or emotional abuse. Emotional boundaries are often the most difficult for people in recovery, particularly those with codependent patterns. Learning to recognize where your emotions end and someone else's begin is a fundamental aspect of emotional boundary-setting.

Time Boundaries define how you allocate your most precious and non-renewable resource: your time. They establish limits around work hours, leisure time, self-care activities, recovery commitments, and social obligations. In recovery, time boundaries are critical because there are many competing demands—meetings, therapy, work, relationships, self-care—and without clear limits, recovery activities are often the first to be sacrificed. Time boundaries also protect you from over-commitment, which leads to stress, resentment, and ultimately relapse risk.

Material Boundaries relate to your physical possessions, money, and resources. They define what you're willing to lend, share, or give away, and under what conditions. During active addiction, material boundaries are often severely compromised—you may have borrowed money you couldn't repay, stolen from loved ones, or given away resources to obtain substances. In recovery, rebuilding material boundaries means learning to manage your finances responsibly, saying no to unreasonable financial requests, and protecting your resources so they serve your recovery and your future.

Recovery Boundaries are a special category that encompasses all four types above but focuses specifically on protecting your sobriety. These include limits around people who use substances, environments where drugs or alcohol are present, activities that trigger cravings, and relationships that undermine your recovery. Recovery boundaries may also include commitments to non-negotiable recovery activities—meetings, therapy, sponsor calls—that you protect from encroachment by other demands.

Key Takeaways

Physical boundaries protect your body, space, environment, and physical safety

Emotional boundaries protect your inner world from overload, manipulation, and taking on others' feelings

Time boundaries protect your most precious resource and ensure recovery activities aren't sacrificed

Material boundaries protect your finances, possessions, and resources

Recovery boundaries specifically protect your sobriety from people, places, and situations that threaten it

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How to Set Boundaries

Setting boundaries is both an internal process (knowing what you need) and an external one (communicating that to others). Many people struggle with boundaries not because they don't know what they need, but because they don't know how to express it—or they're afraid of what will happen when they do. The following framework provides a practical, step-by-step approach.

Step 1: Identify Your Needs, Wants, and Values. Before you can set a boundary, you need to know what you're protecting. This requires self-reflection—something that active addiction often suppresses. Ask yourself: What do I need to feel safe? What behaviors am I unwilling to tolerate? What values are non-negotiable for me? What does my recovery require? Pay attention to your body and emotions—resentment, anxiety, anger, and exhaustion are often signals that a boundary is needed. If you feel drained, taken advantage of, or resentful after an interaction, that's your internal alarm telling you a limit has been crossed.

Step 2: Communicate Clearly and Assertively. Effective boundary communication uses "I" statements rather than accusations. Instead of "You always disrespect me," try "I need to be spoken to with respect." Instead of "You're so selfish with my time," try "I am not available after 9pm on weeknights." Be direct, specific, and firm. Avoid over-explaining, apologizing, or softening your boundary to the point where it becomes a suggestion rather than a limit. You do not need to justify your boundaries—"No" is a complete sentence. However, providing a brief explanation can help the other person understand your position without making you vulnerable to negotiation.

Step 3: Be Consistent. A boundary that is enforced sometimes but not others isn't a boundary—it's a mixed signal. Consistency teaches others that your limits are real and will be upheld. This doesn't mean being rigid—boundaries can and should evolve as circumstances change. But it does mean that once you've communicated a boundary, you follow through every time it's tested. Inconsistency undermines your credibility and teaches others that persistence will eventually wear you down.

Step 4: Prepare for Resistance and Pushback. When you set boundaries—especially new ones—expect some resistance. People who benefited from your lack of boundaries will not celebrate when you establish them. They may react with anger, guilt-tripping, emotional withdrawal, accusations of selfishness, or increased pressure. This resistance is not evidence that your boundary is wrong—it's evidence that it's working. Remain calm, restate your boundary if necessary, and remember that you are not responsible for other people's reactions to your healthy limits.

Step 5: Follow Through with Consequences. Boundaries without consequences are just wishes. When communicating a boundary, include what will happen if it's violated. This isn't a threat—it's information. "If you continue to call me after midnight, I will stop answering your calls." "If you bring alcohol into our home, I will leave for the night." Then follow through. Every time. Consequences teach others that your boundaries are real, and they teach you that you are worth protecting.

Key Takeaways

Resentment, anxiety, anger, and exhaustion are signals that a boundary is needed

"I" statements communicate boundaries without accusations or blame

You do not need to justify your boundaries—"No" is a complete sentence

Inconsistency teaches others that persistence will wear you down

Resistance to your boundaries is evidence they're working, not that they're wrong

Boundaries without consequences are just wishes—follow through every time

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Maintaining Boundaries Over Time

Setting a boundary is an event. Maintaining a boundary is a practice. The initial act of communicating a limit is important, but the ongoing work of upholding, adjusting, and reinforcing your boundaries over time is where the real transformation happens.

Practice Self-Awareness Regularly. Boundary maintenance requires ongoing self-monitoring. Check in with yourself regularly: Are my boundaries being respected? Have my needs changed? Am I slipping back into old patterns of over-giving or people-pleasing? Am I honoring my own limits, or am I making exceptions that undermine my well-being? This isn't obsessive self-surveillance—it's the kind of healthy self-attention that recovery demands. Just as you monitor your sobriety daily, monitor your boundaries daily.

Communicate and Renegotiate as Needed. Boundaries are not set in stone. As your recovery progresses, your relationships evolve, and your circumstances change, your boundaries may need to be adjusted. A boundary that was essential in early recovery may become less necessary as you gain stability. A relationship that was once triggering may become safer as trust is rebuilt. Being willing to revisit and renegotiate your boundaries is a sign of growth, not weakness. The key is that changes should come from your own evolving needs, not from external pressure to relax your limits.

Seek Support. You don't have to maintain your boundaries alone. Surround yourself with people who respect and encourage your limits—friends, family members, sponsors, counselors, and fellow recovery members who understand the importance of boundaries. When you're struggling to hold a boundary, reach out. When someone is pressuring you to compromise your limits, talk it through with someone you trust. Recovery is a team effort, and boundary maintenance is no exception.

Develop a Self-Care Plan. Boundaries and self-care are deeply interconnected. When you're physically exhausted, emotionally depleted, or spiritually disconnected, your ability to set and maintain boundaries deteriorates. A comprehensive self-care plan—including sleep, nutrition, exercise, creative outlets, social connection, and recovery activities—provides the foundation of strength and resilience that boundary maintenance requires. Think of self-care as recharging the battery that powers your boundaries.

Expect Setbacks and Practice Self-Compassion. You will have days when you fail to hold a boundary. You will have moments when you say yes when you mean no, when you give more than you can afford, when you tolerate behavior you shouldn't. This is not failure—it's the reality of learning a new skill. The difference between old patterns and new ones isn't perfection—it's awareness. When you recognize that a boundary has been compromised, acknowledge it without self-punishment, learn from the experience, and recommit. Recovery is progress, not perfection, and this applies to boundaries as much as it applies to sobriety.

Key Takeaways

Setting a boundary is an event; maintaining it is an ongoing practice

Monitor your boundaries daily, just as you monitor your sobriety

Boundaries should evolve from your changing needs, not from external pressure

Surround yourself with people who respect and encourage your limits

Self-care provides the foundation of strength that boundary maintenance requires

Setbacks are part of learning—respond with awareness and self-compassion, not self-punishment

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Common Barriers to Boundary-Setting

Understanding what prevents you from setting boundaries is just as important as knowing how to set them. Most barriers are rooted in deeply held beliefs, fears, and patterns that developed long before your addiction—and that may have contributed to it. Naming these barriers robs them of their invisible power.

Fear of Rejection or Abandonment. Perhaps the most common barrier to boundary-setting is the fear that establishing limits will drive people away. This fear is often rooted in childhood experiences where expressing needs was met with withdrawal, anger, or punishment. In recovery, this fear can be intensified—you may have already lost relationships through addiction, making the remaining ones feel even more fragile. The reality is that healthy people respect boundaries. Relationships that can only survive when you have no limits are not relationships worth preserving.

Guilt and the "Selfish" Label. Many people—particularly those raised in codependent, religious, or culturally traditional environments—have been taught that prioritizing their own needs is selfish. This belief is toxic to boundary-setting because it frames self-protection as a moral failing. The truth is that boundaries are not selfish—they are necessary. You cannot sustain recovery, maintain relationships, or help others if you are chronically depleted. Setting a boundary is an act of self-respect, not selfishness.

People-Pleasing and Conflict Avoidance. If you've spent your life trying to keep everyone happy, boundary-setting feels like declaring war. The discomfort of saying no, the anxiety of potential conflict, and the fear of disappointing others can feel overwhelming. But people-pleasing is not kindness—it's a survival strategy that sacrifices your authenticity and well-being. Learning to tolerate the discomfort of other people's disappointment is a core recovery skill.

Low Self-Worth. If you don't believe your needs matter, you won't protect them. Low self-worth—often intensified by the shame of addiction—creates a belief that you don't deserve boundaries, that your needs are less important than others', and that you should be grateful for any relationship, regardless of how you're treated. Rebuilding self-worth is foundational to boundary-setting, and boundary-setting, in turn, builds self-worth. Each time you honor your own limits, you reinforce the message that you matter.

Lack of Models or Skills. If you grew up in a family where boundaries didn't exist—or where they were enforced through anger, violence, or manipulation—you may simply not know what healthy boundaries look like. You may confuse boundaries with walls, assertiveness with aggression, or self-care with selfishness. This is a skill gap, not a character flaw, and it can be addressed through education, therapy, and practice.

Fear of the Unknown. Boundaries change relationship dynamics, and change is frightening—even when it's positive. You may wonder: What will happen to my marriage if I stop enabling? Will my friendships survive if I start saying no? Who am I if I'm not the one who does everything for everyone? These questions are valid, and the uncertainty they create is real. But the alternative—a life without boundaries—is not sustainability. It is a path toward burnout,

resentment, and relapse.

Key Takeaways

Relationships that only survive when you have no limits aren't worth preserving

Boundaries are not selfish—chronic depletion serves no one, least of all your recovery

People-pleasing is a survival strategy, not kindness—it sacrifices your authenticity

Low self-worth and boundary-setting are reciprocal: each improves the other

Not knowing how to set boundaries is a skill gap, not a character flaw

A life without boundaries leads to burnout, resentment, and relapse

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Boundaries Specific to Recovery

While all the types of boundaries discussed earlier apply to recovery, there are specific boundary challenges that are unique to the recovery experience. These deserve focused attention because they directly impact your ability to maintain sobriety and build a healthy life.

Boundaries Around Substance-Related Situations. The most fundamental recovery boundary involves creating clear, non-negotiable limits around substances. This includes who you spend time with (avoiding active users who trigger cravings), where you go (staying away from bars, parties, or environments where substances are present), and what you will do if unexpectedly confronted with substances (having an exit plan). These boundaries may feel extreme, especially to people who don't understand addiction, but they are literally life-saving in early recovery.

Boundaries with Family Members. Family relationships are often the most complex boundary challenge in recovery. Family members may not understand your recovery needs, may continue enabling patterns, may bring up past hurts at inappropriate times, or may have their own unresolved issues with your addiction. Setting boundaries with family requires particular sensitivity—but it is essential. This may mean limiting contact with family members who are actively using, declining family events where alcohol is central, or setting limits on discussions about the past until you have the stability to address them.

Boundaries in Romantic Relationships. Most treatment professionals recommend avoiding new romantic relationships during the first year of recovery, and this itself is a boundary worth considering. For those in existing relationships, recovery boundaries may include honest communication about recovery needs, agreements about substance-free environments in the home, boundaries around emotional demands that threaten sobriety, and clear expectations about mutual support. Romantic relationships can be both the greatest support and the greatest threat to recovery, depending on the boundaries in place.

Boundaries Around Recovery Activities. Protecting your recovery activities from encroachment is a critical boundary. This means treating meetings, therapy appointments, sponsor calls, and self-care practices as non-negotiable commitments—not optional activities that can be sacrificed when something else demands your time. It also means setting limits on how much recovery work you take on, particularly in service roles, to avoid burnout. Recovery requires balance, and boundaries help maintain it.

Boundaries with Yourself. Perhaps the most overlooked category of recovery boundaries involves the limits you set with yourself. These include commitments to honesty (no more lying to yourself about your situation), limits on self-destructive thinking (catching and challenging negative self-talk), agreements about self-care (getting enough sleep, eating properly, exercising), and accountability to your own values and goals. Self-boundaries are the foundation upon which all external boundaries rest—if you can't keep promises to yourself, keeping them with others becomes exponentially harder.

Boundaries Around Technology and Social Media. In the modern recovery landscape, digital boundaries deserve attention. Social media can expose you to triggering content, old using

connections, or comparison spirals that threaten your well-being. Setting limits on screen time, curating your social media feeds, blocking contacts who threaten your recovery, and creating technology-free times and spaces can all support your sobriety and mental health.

Key Takeaways

Substance-related boundaries are non-negotiable and literally life-saving in early recovery

Family boundaries require sensitivity but are essential for protecting recovery

Recovery activities should be treated as non-negotiable commitments, not optional extras

Self-boundaries—honesty, self-care, accountability—are the foundation of all other boundaries

Digital and social media boundaries protect against triggers and comparison spirals

Boundaries in recovery aren't extreme—they're proportional to what's at stake: your life

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The Language of Boundaries

Having the right words makes boundary-setting dramatically easier. Many people know what they need but freeze when it comes time to say it. The following language frameworks provide ready-made structures that you can adapt to virtually any boundary situation.

The Basic "I" Statement: "I need [specific need]. I am not able to/willing to [specific behavior you won't accept]." This is the simplest and most versatile boundary format. Examples: "I need respect in our conversations. I am not willing to be called names." "I need my evenings for recovery activities. I am not able to work late on Wednesdays."

The Consequence Statement: "If [specific boundary violation], then I will [specific action you will take]." This format communicates both the boundary and the consequence clearly. Examples: "If you bring alcohol into our home, I will leave for the night and stay with my sponsor." "If you continue to call me when you're intoxicated, I will stop answering your calls."

The Compassionate Boundary: "I care about you AND I need [specific limit]." This format acknowledges the relationship while establishing the boundary. Examples: "I love spending time with you, and I need to leave by 9pm to get enough sleep for my recovery." "I care about what you're going through, and I'm not the right person to help with this. Can I help you find a counselor?"

The Broken Record Technique: When someone pushes back on your boundary, simply restate it calmly without escalation or new arguments. "I understand you want me to come to the party. I won't be attending events where alcohol is served." Repeat as needed, without raising your voice or adding new justifications. This technique is powerful because it demonstrates resolve without conflict.

The Delayed Response: "I need to think about that. I'll get back to you." This buys you time when you feel pressured into an immediate answer. Many boundary violations happen because someone puts you on the spot and you say yes before you've had time to consider whether you actually want to or should agree. Giving yourself permission to pause and respond later is itself a boundary.

Phrases to Avoid: "I'm sorry, but..." (apologizing for having needs), "This is probably stupid, but..." (minimizing your boundary), "I guess I could..." (leaving the door open), "You make me feel..." (blaming rather than owning your experience), and "I'll try..." (committing without committing). These phrases undermine your boundaries before you've even finished setting them.

Remember: Your tone matters as much as your words. Boundaries delivered with calm confidence are received very differently from boundaries delivered with anger, defensiveness, or excessive apology. Practice your boundary language until it feels natural—not aggressive, not passive, but firmly, gently assertive.

Key Takeaways

"I" statements communicate needs without blame or accusation

Consequence statements make boundaries concrete and enforceable

The compassionate boundary honors the relationship while establishing limits

The broken record technique demonstrates resolve without escalation

Giving yourself permission to delay a response is itself a boundary

Avoid apologizing, minimizing, or hedging when communicating boundaries

Calm confidence in delivery is as important as the words themselves

REFLECTION, ACTIVITIES & ACTION PLAN

Questions for Self-Reflection

These questions invite honest exploration of your boundary patterns, their origins, and their impact on your recovery. Take your time and write from the heart.

1. What were boundaries like in my family growing up? Were they modeled, respected, or punished?

Consider how your parents/caregivers handled boundaries. Were limits respected or overridden? Were you taught to advocate for yourself or to accommodate others without question?

2. Which type of boundary (physical, emotional, time, material, recovery) is most difficult for me, and why?

Think about where you struggle most. Is it saying no to time demands? Protecting your emotional energy? Maintaining physical space? Why do you think this area is hardest?

3. What specific boundaries does my recovery require that I have not yet fully established?

Be honest about gaps in your recovery boundaries. Are there people, places, or situations you know are dangerous but haven't set limits around? What's holding you back?

4. Who in my life consistently respects my boundaries, and who consistently pushes past them?

Take an honest inventory of your relationships. Who honors your limits? Who tests, ignores, or violates them? What patterns do you notice?

5.What beliefs do I hold that make boundary-setting feel wrong, selfish, or dangerous?

Explore the internal messages that block you. "Good people don't say no." "If I set limits, they'll leave." "My needs aren't as important." Where did these beliefs come from?

6.How has my lack of boundaries contributed to my addiction or complicated my recovery?

Trace the connection between boundary failure and substance use. Did you use to cope with resentment from over-giving? Did lack of boundaries expose you to triggers? Be specific.

7.What is one boundary I am most proud of setting, and what did it teach me?

Celebrate a success. Think of a time you held a limit despite difficulty. What happened? How did it feel afterward? What did it teach you about yourself?

8.What would my life look like if I consistently honored my own boundaries?

Imagine a life where your limits are respected—by you and by others. How would your energy, relationships, recovery, and self-respect change? Paint a vivid picture.

REFLECTION, ACTIVITIES & ACTION PLAN

Activities & Exercises

These activities build practical boundary skills through writing, reflection, and practice. Some may be enhanced by working with a therapist, counselor, sponsor, or trusted friend.

Activity 1: My Personal Bill of Rights

Create a list of 10-15 rights or entitlements that you believe you deserve in your relationships and interactions. These serve as the foundation for all your boundary-setting.

My Personal Bill of Rights

Examples to get you started: "I have the right to say no without guilt." "I have the right to prioritize my recovery." "I have the right to be treated with respect." "I have the right to change my mind." "I have the right to ask for what I need."

Reflection: How well am I currently upholding these rights?

Which right is hardest for me to claim, and why?

Activity 2: Boundary Scenario Practice

Write down 3-5 common scenarios where you struggle to set or maintain boundaries. For each, practice communicating your boundary assertively using "I" statements.

Scenario 1: Describe the Situation

Scenario 1: My Boundary Script

Scenario 2: Describe the Situation

Scenario 2: My Boundary Script

Scenario 3: Describe the Situation

Scenario 3: My Boundary Script

Rehearsal Feedback & Notes

Activity 3: Boundary Self-Care Plan

Develop a comprehensive self-care plan that supports your ability to set and maintain healthy boundaries. Self-care is the fuel that powers boundary maintenance.

Physical Self-Care That Strengthens My Boundaries

Emotional Self-Care That Supports Boundary-Setting

Recovery Practices I Will Protect with Time Boundaries

People, Resources, and Strategies for Boundary Support

My Boundary Emergency Plan

Activity 4: Boundary Reflection Journal

Use structured journaling to explore your experiences with setting and maintaining boundaries. Document successes, challenges, and insights.

A Recent Boundary Success

A Recent Boundary Challenge

An Insight About My Boundary Patterns

How Boundaries Are Impacting My Recovery

Where I'm Growing and What I'm Learning

Activity 5: Boundary Affirmations

Create positive affirmations that reinforce your commitment to healthy boundaries. Write them on sticky notes, cards, or your phone for daily reminders.

My Boundary Affirmations (Write 8-12)

The Affirmation I Need Most Right Now

How I Will Use These Affirmations Daily

REFLECTION, ACTIVITIES & ACTION PLAN

My Boundary Action Plan

Based on everything you've read, assessed, and reflected on, create a personal action plan for building and maintaining healthy boundaries that protect your recovery and well-being. Review regularly with your counselor or sponsor.

1. My Strongest Boundary Area

2. My Most Important Growth Area

3. One Boundary I Will Set This Week

4. One Recovery Boundary I Will Strengthen

5. One Boundary I Will Set with Myself

6. Support I Will Seek

7. How I Will Handle My Biggest Barrier

8. My 30-Day Boundary Goal

My Boundary Commitment Statement

"Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously." — Prentis Hemphill

Learning Objectives

Understand the concept and importance of boundaries in addiction and mental health recovery

Identify personal needs, wants, and values that inform boundary-setting

Practice communicating and asserting boundaries in various scenarios and relationships

Develop a personalized plan for maintaining and reinforcing boundaries as part of ongoing recovery

Support Resources

SAMHSA National Helpline

1-800-662-4357 (Free, confidential, 24/7)

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988 (24/7)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-7233 — When boundaries involve safety

Codependents Anonymous (CoDA)

coda.org — Boundary work is central to CoDA recovery

Al-Anon Family Groups

al-anon.org — Learning boundaries with loved ones in addiction

Psychology Today Therapist Finder

psychologytoday.com — Find therapists specializing in boundaries and assertiveness

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Embrace, Empower & Evolve

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