

BPD Relationships Boundaries Action Plan

How to set boundaries effectively &
compassionately
when you or someone you love has BPD

BPD Boundaries Action Plan

Welcome!

I am honored that you've chosen to read this BPD Boundaries Action Plan. There are a lot of places on the internet you can get information about BPD, but you chose my mailing list – and I'm very grateful.

When I set out to write this, I thought it was just going to be a worksheet. Maybe a few pages of explanation. But it turned out a little bit longer because I wanted to give context, and help you understand why I make the recommendations that I do.

I recommend reading it all, of course – but the worksheets should be helpful on their own.

I wanted to make this packet specific to BPD, and to combat stigma surrounding the diagnosis. However, every person with BPD is an individual and there are some people or situations for which the advice in here isn't relevant – that's okay! Use your judgment.

Whether you have BPD or you're in a relationship with someone with BPD, hopefully this packet will help you understand yourself and the person you love a little better.

I'd love to hear your feedback – feel free to email me at info@bpdeducation.com and let me know what you thought.

Best,

Catherine

Catherine Humenuk, MSW, LCSW, C-DBT

PS: Language and limitations

I welcome anyone who wants to heal their relationships to read this packet. I tried to use language that is inclusive of all humans regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, physical ability, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and trauma history.

I tried to be mindful of the fact that there are many kinds of relationships: friendships, parent/child, romantic, etc. I also tried to be inclusive of relationships involve more than 2 people: like friend groups, polyamory, families, etc. It is difficult to use language that encompasses all humans and all the ways we relate to each other, so sometimes I have failed.

If at any point you find my writing awkward, or non-inclusive, I assure you that this is a skills deficit in my writing and not intentional exclusion.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	4
HOW IS THIS SPECIFIC TO BPD?.....	4
GROUND RULES	6
STEP 1: PREVENTION.....	7
WORKSHEET 1: PREVENTION PLAN	10
STEP 2: LIMITS.....	11
WORKSHEET 2: WHAT ARE YOUR LIMITS?	13
STEP 3: CONSEQUENCES.....	14
WORKSHEET 3: DRAWING THE LINE.....	16
WORKSHEET 4: BPD-FRIENDLY SCRIPTS FOR SETTING BOUNDARIES	19
THE POWER OF “AND ALSO”.....	20
STEP 4: RESTORATION.....	21
WORKSHEET 5: RESTORATION	22
CONCLUSION.....	23
APPENDIX: WHEN SOMEONE WANTS TO END A RELATIONSHIP	24

Introduction

What this is: This BPD Boundaries Action Plan (BAP) is a step-by-step guide to setting and maintaining boundaries in relationships that involve one or more people with borderline personality disorder or other mental health diagnoses that make relationships challenging (such as substance use disorders or trauma-related disorders).

What this isn't: The BAP is a tool, but it's not therapy. It can't replace family therapy or couple's counseling. Using the BAP will not cure or treat any mental health diagnosis. I strongly encourage you to supplement the BAP with the help of a licensed mental health provider whenever possible. The BAP is also *not* a crisis plan or a safety plan – those things are separate.

Who it's for: Since relationships involve multiple people, it makes sense for everyone to be on the same page and use the BAP together. However, everyone moves at their own pace and not everyone is ready to do the work at the same time. The BAP can be used individually – just fill out the worksheets on your own. You don't need to wait for the other person to be ready.

Another important note: the BAP was designed for adults. In adult relationships, either party has the right to walk away from the relationship at any time. Children can't legally walk away from their guardians, so their power to set boundaries is limited. You can still use the BAP for relationships involving minors (ex: a parent and a teenager, or teenage friends), but be aware that some parts might not be applicable.

When to use it: The sooner the better! The best defense is a good offense. Don't wait until the next crisis or argument – find a peaceful moment to work on it. If you can have the plan settled before you need it, you're more likely to use it effectively.

How to use it: The BAP has four sections: Prevention, Limits, Consequences, and Restoration. Each section has specific instructions, and worksheets for you to complete either alone or together. If you are working on the BAP together, remember that you are a team! It is the two of you vs the problem, not one vs the other. Reassure each other. Take breaks if you need.

How is this specific to BPD?

There are a lot of excellent resources out there for setting boundaries. I recommend the book *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* by Nedra Glover Tawwab if you are interested in learning more about boundaries in general.

So why did I bother making a whole new booklet?

BPD Boundaries Action Plan

Because this booklet is specifically for relationships where one (or more) person has borderline personality disorder. And the resources that are out there don't always apply.

People with BPD experience their emotions much more intensely than the average person. They are likely to perceive any criticism as complete and total rejection. This makes it incredibly difficult for them to be on the receiving end of a boundary without experiencing an emotional crisis.

People with BPD also tend to behave impulsively when their emotions are overwhelming. These impulsive actions can have negative consequences for their loved ones. In the moment when the impulsive behavior is occurring, the person with BPD does not realize the seriousness of what they are doing and will not be receptive to the feedback that most boundary guides recommend. It might actually make the situation worse.

I'm not blaming people who are mentally ill. In fact, I've got some harsh truths for the non-BPD people in these relationships. In any adult relationship, people share the responsibility for their ineffective patterns.

Many of the popular books about BPD create an us-vs-them dichotomy. They give the idea that the person with BPD is irrational, manipulative¹, and unreasonable. By default, the non-BPD partner is assumed to be a completely innocent victim of the other person's mental illness.

That simply isn't true. If you're an adult in a relationship with another adult, then you are both responsible for the patterns of behavior in your relationship. If you are sitting around waiting for the other person to change without doing any work yourself, then you are also to blame (please see ground rule #6 in the next section).

So when I say this booklet is designed specifically for relationships where one or more people have BPD, what I mean is:

- 1) It pays special attention to helping people regulate their emotions
- 2) It addresses certain behavior patterns which are common among BPD relationships
- 3) There are scripts for setting boundaries that are less likely to trigger fears of abandonment
- 4) I made a special effort to avoid scapegoating either partner based on diagnosis

¹ Banish this word from your vocabulary. It is worse than useless – it is harmful. From now on it's "the M-word."

Ground Rules

For the BAP to be effective, there are a couple ground rules that must be followed:

- 1) Boundaries are not for controlling other people. Boundaries are for protecting our energy, our time, and our emotional resources. For this reason, there are specific instructions to only talk about yourself.
- 2) All people are free to decide where they draw the line. We cannot force other people to talk to us, complete the BAP with us, or stay in relationships with us.
- 3) There is no scapegoat. It takes two or more people to be in a relationship, so blaming all the relationship's problems on one person is not logical, effective, or fair (see #6 for exception).
- 4) All people are generally trying their best. All people make mistakes. When someone falls short, disappoints us, or upsets us, we will remember that this is not a personal attack.
- 5) Relationship patterns are not made overnight, and they are not solved overnight. We will have patience with each other. We will seek additional help and resources as needed.
- 6) The BAP should not be used to fix an abusive relationship. If you are being physically, sexually, emotionally, or financially abused – the BAP will not solve this.
- 7) **Threatening suicide or harm to others, is never appropriate unless you truly cannot keep yourself safe. If you cannot keep yourself safe or are thinking of harming another, emergency services must be called. It is never okay to ask your partner to act as a crisis therapist. Both parties agree to involve emergency services or a crisis hotline in the event of suicidal or homicidal threats/actions.**

Are we all agreed?

Good.

Let's get started.

Step 1: Prevention

The most important thing you can do to set and maintain effective boundaries is prevention.

This goes for both people!

Think of yourself as having an emotional gas tank. You need gas to go places – and when you go on little trips in your day-to-day life, you burn gas. Every now and then you need to fill up your gas tank, or you'll eventually run out.

If your tank is on 10% and suddenly you need to go on a long trip, you won't be able to.

The same is true with your emotional gas tank – daily life activities take small amounts out of the tank. But every now and then you are faced with something that takes a lot of energy out of the tank. If your tank was already low, you are a lot more likely to panic, or act impulsively.

By taking opportunities throughout the day to fill our tank a little bit at a time, we can make sure we never accidentally find ourselves stranded on empty.

Prevention will help us with our boundaries in two ways:

- 1) Setting and holding a boundary can take a lot of energy at first. The more energy we have, the more likely we are to be able to stick with it.
- 2) When our tanks are full, we are less likely to engage in ineffective behavior that harms our relationships in the first place. When others have less need to set boundaries with us, our relationships will naturally improve.

Day-to-day things that take energy out of your emotional gas tank:²

- Physical
 - Not getting enough sleep
 - Poor nutrition
 - Physical illness
 - Using alcohol, nicotine, or other drugs
- Schedule
 - Too many things to do
 - Schedule disruptions
 - “Getting ready” tasks like getting up, showering, brushing teeth, getting dressed

² Not a complete list! And not everything on this list will be true for everyone. For example, some people feel more stressed when they have to stick to a routine, while other people get stressed out when there are unexpected changes to their usual routine.

BPD Boundaries Action Plan

- Emotional
 - Loneliness
 - Disappointment
 - Anger
 - Resentment
 - Even pleasant feelings can be draining if they are intense!
- Interpersonal
 - Dealing with people you don't like
 - Conflicts with friends or family
 - Misunderstandings
 - Feeling left out
 - Comparing yourself to others on social media

Day-to-day things that fill your emotional gas tank³:

- Physical
 - Getting enough sleep
 - Eating nutritiously
 - Taking your medication as prescribed
 - Moving your body in a way that feels good (dance, yoga, weightlifting, walking, swimming, stretching, etc)
 - Avoiding alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs
 - Using a weighted blanket
- Schedule
 - Penciling in time for rest
 - Leaving time in your schedule for traffic or other delays
 - Prioritizing tasks and skipping the least-important ones
 - Delegating some tasks to others
 - Showering or picking out clothes before bed
- Emotional
 - Allowing ourselves to feel our emotions in the moment and let them pass
 - Journaling
 - Artwork or crafting
 - Using a self-soothe kit
 - Practicing mindfulness
 - Learning & practicing DBT skills to regulate emotions
 - Therapy
- Interpersonal
 - Spending time with loved ones

³ Again, everyone is different. Some things on this list may not work for you. And too much of anything is not a good thing – so use your best judgment here.

BPD Boundaries Action Plan

- Spending time with pets (cuddling or teaching them a new trick!)
- Going to a recovery group, a therapy group, or support group
- Learning & using DBT interpersonal effectiveness skills
- Avoiding social media
- Unfollowing accounts that aren't helpful for my mental health

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list – but it's a good place to start.

On the next page, there's a worksheet for you to complete individually.

Worksheet instructions⁴:

- 1) If multiple people are using the BAP at the same time, make sure each person has their own copy.
- 2) Here are some sample do's and don't's:
 - a.  Do: take ownership of your own ineffective habits. Example: "I often stay up late at night texting and am tired the next day."
 - b.  Do not: blame other people for your own actions. Example: "I get no sleep because Sally is always texting me."
 - c.  Do: be as specific as you can. Example: "I get easily annoyed when I feel overwhelmed by multiple responsibilities. Afternoons are hard for me because I have to finish my work, prepare dinner, and pick up the kids."
 - d.  Do not: generalize. If you're using words like *always*, *never*, *can't*, *won't*, *impossible*, and so on – you're probably generalizing. Example: "I can never finish my work because my kids are always interrupting me."
- 3) For each item, you will be prompted to give a specific plan of action.
 - a. If you say that you plan to go to bed earlier, how are you going to do that? A specific action plan might be "I will make sure to turn my phone off at 9pm, take a shower, use a face mask, and be in bed by 10pm, starting tonight."
 - b. If you say you are going to journal when you are upset, your plan might be "I will carry my journal in my purse so that I will always have it available."
- 4) Take as many breaks as you need. Try setting a timer for 5 minutes, get up, stretch your arms and legs, stand outside for a moment, drink some water, or scream into a pillow. Then come back to it.
- 5) When you are done, pat yourself on the back!

⁴ These instructions apply to all worksheets in this packet

Worksheet 1: Prevention Plan

Common signs that I am feeling worn-out, stressed, or vulnerable (these might be feelings, emotions, or thoughts that go through my head when I am upset):

Situations that tend to contribute to me feeling worn-out, stressed, or vulnerable (remember not to blame others! Stay objective, like “when I stay up late texting”):

Actions I can take to make my body feel better (specific bedtime, foods, or movements):

When *exactly* I plan to take these actions: _____

Actions I can take to make my schedule easier (delegate, plan ahead, stick to routine, etc):

When *exactly* I plan to take these actions: _____

Actions I can take to soothe my emotions (journal, arts and crafts, therapy, mindfulness):

When *exactly* I plan to take these actions: _____

Actions I can take to strengthen my relationships (DBT skills, quality time without phone):

When *exactly* I plan to take these actions: _____

Step 2: Limits

With the prevention plan in place, it's time to move on to limit-setting.

Make sure you do some preventative actions before going to this step! Take some deep breaths, soothe yourself with a warm beverage, or cuddle with a fuzzy blanket (or all three).

The single most important thing to remember about setting limits is that we are ***not*** setting limits on what other people do. We can't control other people. Plain and simple.

This is also the hardest part to accept, so I'm going to say it again: **we are *not* setting limits on what other people do.**

Instead, **we are identifying the line between what behavior we can tolerate and what we can't.** We will identify potential consequences in the next section, but for now, we are only identifying challenging behaviors.

All behavior is on a spectrum, and the way we feel about it varies depending on the context, our personal history, and how vulnerable we are feeling in the moment (which is why prevention is so important!). There is no behavior that is good or bad all by itself.

When we are setting limits in this step, what we are doing is identifying when a behavior crosses the line from "something that I can handle" to "something I am no longer comfortable with, or do not have the skills/desire to handle, or makes me feel angry or afraid."

Let's use the behavior of yelling as an example. I grew up in a small house, and nobody in my family ever raised their voice – we communicated our anger differently. Because I don't have any experience with yelling, I usually feel threatened when people raise their voice at me. But when I am at a football game, I don't mind yelling, because it's not directed at me. And now that I am older and I live in a larger house, I don't mind someone yelling my name if they're trying to get my attention from far away.

In this case, my limit for yelling might be: "I feel threatened when people raise their voice in anger at me while standing in the same room, or on the phone."

Here's some ideas for how to phrase your limits:

-  I don't want my partner to drink.
-  I am uncomfortable when my partner is intoxicated. I worry for their health.
-  I need my mother to stop complaining to me about my siblings.
-  I feel annoyed when my mother complains to me. I feel pulled in two directions.

BPD Boundaries Action Plan

For this step, you're going to follow a formula:

I feel _____ (identify one or more specific feeling words)
when _____ (specific person, relationship type, or just "people" / "someone")
_____ (describe the specific action that takes place).

Then you're going to identify your part in the situation as it is now. What things do you say, think, and do that keep the situation "stuck" instead of solving it? We will talk about what to do in the future in the next section.

I participate in this situation by _____ (specific thought/action that fuels the fire).

Examples:

*I feel **anxious** when **my partner** is **running late on their way home from work**. I participate in this situation by **calling them over and over, and telling myself they don't love me**.*

*I feel **overwhelmed** when **my ex** calls me several times in a row. I participate in this situation by **answering the phone even though I don't want to**.*

*I feel **annoyed** when **my coworker** asks me to cover for her at work. I participate in this situation by **picking up the shift because I don't want the department to be short-staffed**.*

A few important notes before you get started:

- 1) Each person should complete their own worksheet. Your limits don't have to match!
- 2) No scapegoating! If you can identify a dozen things that the other person does wrong, but you don't see your part in the situation, you are probably not seeing things realistically (see #4 and #5 for exceptions).
- 3) If you have trouble identifying your emotions, or if you find yourself always using "sad/angry/afraid," try going to www.feelingswheel.com and see which of those words fits your situation best. Improving your emotional vocabulary is great for your mental health!
- 4) This BAP is not designed for abusive relationships. If the action you are identifying is an act of physical or sexual abuse, please stop here and seek out resources for intimate partner violence, or sexual assault survivors.
- 5) If you are not sure if your relationship is abusive, and the action you are identifying *might* be emotional or financial abuse, proceed with great caution. I recommend seeking out the support of a licensed mental health provider who can help you identify whether the relationship is abusive.

Worksheet 2: What Are Your Limits?

Think of a situation that frequently causes you emotional pain. Follow the formula to identify the specifics of the behavior, and what part you have in the situation. Both people should fill this worksheet out separately. No scapegoating, and no blaming! We are trying to be objective.

Remember that this does not apply to abusive situations.

Situation 1

I feel _____ (feeling words) when _____ (person)

(specific action, including time/place/other context as needed). I participate in this situation by _____

(specific thoughts I have, or actions I do, that prevent the situation from being resolved).

Situation 2

I feel _____ (feeling words) when _____ (person)

(specific action, including time/place/other context as needed). I participate in this situation by _____

(specific thoughts I have, or actions I do, that prevent the situation from being resolved).

Situation 3

I feel _____ (feeling words) when _____ (person)

(specific action, including time/place/other context as needed). I participate in this situation by _____

(specific thoughts I have, or actions I do, that prevent the situation from being resolved).

Situation 4

I feel _____ (feeling words) when _____ (person)

(specific action, including time/place/other context as needed). I participate in this situation by _____

(specific thoughts I have, or actions I do, that prevent the situation from being resolved).

Situation 5

I feel _____ (feeling words) when _____ (person)

(specific action, including time/place/other context as needed). I participate in this situation by _____

(specific thoughts I have, or actions I do, that prevent the situation from being resolved).

Step 3: Consequences

So far, we've figured out what we need to do for prevention: ways that we can be responsible for ourselves, our emotions, and our own healing. Hopefully those prevention plans are well underway.

We've also identified some limits – behaviors that make us uncomfortable. And we've identified what our part in those patterns are.

Now it's time for the bit that actually turns a limit into a boundary: the consequences.

And if you did Step 2 thoroughly and honestly, this step will flow naturally.

We set boundaries when we match an unwanted behavior with a consequence. **Until there's a consequence, it's not a boundary. It's just a request.**

Let's take a closer look at the difference, using the example of someone who drinks heavily and becomes verbally abusive.

Limit: "I am uncomfortable around you when you drink. You get really mean."

Request: "Please do not drink around me anymore."

This limit is incomplete. It does not include my part in the situation. It is mostly focused on the other person. *It may be 100% true!* But it's not complete, so it won't be effective.

Incomplete limits ("I feel afraid when you yell at me," or "I feel unwanted when you stay out late") rely on making the other person feel guilty. We hope they'll feel bad enough to change.

People who set incomplete limits like this often say things like, "If they really loved me, they wouldn't want me to feel this way, and they would change." That's a very powerful notion, but it's just not true. That's not how human behavior works.

So how do we fix up our incomplete limit, and turn a request into a boundary?

We complete the limit using the formula in worksheet 2.

Limit: "I am uncomfortable around you when you drink. You get really mean. I participate in this by picking you up from the bar, and spending time with you while you are intoxicated."

When we phrase it like that, the consequence is right there: **we just stop participating!**

Consequence: "I am uncomfortable around you when you drink. You get really mean. *I will no longer pick you up from the bar or spend time with you while you are intoxicated.*"

When we set boundaries in this way, we are breaking the pattern in the relationship without attempting to control the other person.

Other examples:

- Limit: I feel afraid when you raise your voice during arguments. I participate in this situation by yelling back.
Consequence: *I will hang up the phone or leave the room if you raise your voice.*
- Limit: I feel awkward when you complain about my siblings to me. I participate in this situation by defending my siblings.
Consequence: *I will say, "this is inappropriate," and change the topic.*

Common objections:

- Wait, that seems too easy!
 - Easy to say, but very hard to do.
 - You must be consistent. The best thing you can do is make sure you are taking care of yourself (Step One), so that you are able to handle their reaction – and your reaction! – to setting the boundary.
- But this lets the other person off the hook for their bad behavior!
 - The BAP is for adults, and not for abusive situations. Unless you are a law enforcement officer, someone else's bad behavior isn't your business.
- What if they don't want to be in a relationship with me after I set a boundary?
 - People are allowed to end relationships, even if they're doing it for stupid reasons. If someone wants to end a relationship with you, let them. Do what you must do to come to terms with this – talk to friends, talk to a therapist, scream into a pillow, cry it out – but do not attempt to force someone to stay with you through guilt, threats, bribes, custody arrangements, financial control, or any other means.
 - Practice the DBT skill of Radical Acceptance.
- What if their behavior is dangerous?
 - The BAP is not a crisis plan or a safety plan. However, if someone is threatening suicide you should always take it seriously and involve your local crisis resources. If you are not a trained therapist or crisis interventionist, it is appropriate to set a boundary by involving crisis resources instead of trying to counsel the person yourself.
 - You should never have to put yourself in harm's way to enforce a consequence. In almost all situations in adult relationships, you can choose to leave the conversation or leave the room. If you are physically prevented from doing so, this would count as abuse.
 - If someone threatens or tries to hurt you because you set a boundary, call emergency services. If this happens, it is not your fault for setting the boundary – violence is never an appropriate recourse.
- What if they keep doing it?
 - Keep enforcing the consequence. Become a broken record.
 - Remember that you can only control yourself. By setting the boundary you are giving yourself some relief, even if they keep doing the behavior.

Worksheet 3: Drawing the Line

Go back to Worksheet 2 and review your limits. For each situation, write down what you will no longer do, and what you will do or say instead.

Situation 1: I will no longer _____.
Instead, I will _____.

Situation 2: I will no longer _____.
Instead, I will _____.

Situation 3: I will no longer _____.
Instead, I will _____.

Situation 4: I will no longer _____.
Instead, I will _____.

Situation 5: I will no longer _____.
Instead, I will _____.

Worst-Case Scenario

Imagine that you have set your boundary and the other person has a terrible reaction. Short of violence or threats of suicide (in which case the BAP no longer applies, please involve crisis resources or emergency services), what might those terrible reactions be?

Things the other person might say:

Things the other person might do:

If the worst were to happen, what would you do?

Ways that you could prepare yourself in advance:

Ways you could respond after the fact:

Next we're going to go over some examples and a suggested script for setting boundaries. I call them "BPD-Friendly" because they are good for both the BPD and non-BPD person in a relationship.

If you do not have BPD, using these scripts will be helpful to reassure the person with BPD that they are not being abandoned. Because people with BPD experience their emotions more intensely and are hyper-sensitive to rejection, they often perceive any criticism of their behavior as a criticism of their whole self – and they fear that abandonment is to follow. Using these scripts will help them to stay emotionally regulated (although it may still be an emotional experience – nobody really likes being on the receiving end of a boundary).

If you are the person with BPD, these scripts are good for you too! When you are flooded with emotion, these scripts will help to stay on-topic, and avoid saying hurtful things in the heat of the moment. By staying focused on the topic at hand and choosing your words carefully, you minimize the potential of causing harm with your request.

Something to consider for everyone in the relationship: people can give good feedback with bad delivery. If you are on the receiving end of feedback like this, try your best to separate the valuable information and ignore the rest. When someone communicates a legitimate concern to you, it's unfair to criticize them for their tone.

Reasons people set boundaries in sloppy, mean, or obnoxious ways:

- They are emotionally overloaded at the time and can't control their tone of voice
- They do not have the communication skills the situation requires
- They are afraid of your reaction, so they are being defensive or vague
- They have tried to tell you in other ways in the past, but you haven't responded well

What to do if you are on the receiving end of unkind words:

- Separate the facts from the delivery. Are there any kernels of truth? Can you focus on those?
- Be honest with yourself: are you using their tone as a reason to ignore their feedback?
 - Have they tried to say things like this before, and you didn't listen?
- How would you like them to have said it?
 - If you can't think of any better way, this is a sign. Their delivery isn't the problem, it's your unwillingness to accept the feedback about your behavior.
 - If you *can* think of a better way for them to have said it, just imagine they said it that way. You can address the delivery style later.
- Is this the appropriate time to address the delivery style? Or can it wait?
 - It can almost always wait.
 - "Thank you for that feedback. I'd like to talk more about it in a little bit, after we have both calmed down."

BPD Boundaries Action Plan

Before we get to the worksheet, let's break down its individual parts.

1: Regulate your nervous system. Check in with yourself first. Take as many deep breaths as you need. If the situation isn't urgent, take some time to move around, ground yourself, or whatever else you need to do so that you can calmly approach the situation. You want to be calm enough that you can say what you have to say out of compassion, not defensively or angrily.

The other person is probably not prepared, so they may become dysregulated quickly. If so, feel free to regulate yourself out loud – say things like, “I’m feeling overwhelmed so I’m going to take a few deep breaths before I respond,” “This is getting tense. Let’s take a five-minute break,” or even “Would you like a hug before we keep going?”

Other people's emotions are not your responsibility, *however*, if you are willing and able to assist someone in de-escalating their nervous system, the conversation is more likely to be successful.

2: Reassure. Think big picture! You are setting this boundary because you want the relationship to change for the better, right? Make sure you communicate that **first** – otherwise, the other person's anxiety will be too high for them to hear it later.

- I care about you very much. Our relationship is important to me.
- I love you and that isn't going to change.
- You matter to me, and I'm worried about you.

Whatever you do – do **not** follow up your reassurance with the word “but.” Use “and also.”

3: State your limit. Be clear that the person is separate from the behavior. Be factual and stick to the present moment (or a singular event from the recent past). This is not the time to air all your grievances, predict the future, or shame someone for bad choices.

-  I feel terrified when you drive under the influence. I worry about your safety.
-  I hate it when you drive drunk. It's so careless and you're going to get hurt.
-  You're making a huge mistake. You're going to get arrested or kill someone.

Remember that your predictions might be valid – but this is not an effective time to discuss them.

4: Say what behavior *you* are going to change. Do not ask the other person to change.

- I will be putting my phone on do not disturb during work hours.
- I will not invite you to my house if you've been drinking.
- I will speak up for my friends even if it's difficult or uncomfortable.

5: Connect it to the big picture. Tell the other person why this is so important.

- This way I can give you my full attention when we do talk, outside of work hours.
- Your safety is important to me, and I couldn't live with myself if you were in an accident.
- I care about you, *and* I care about my friends. I won't talk badly about anyone I love.

6: Hear them out – but be a broken record. You have had your chance to talk, so let the other person speak too. Validate their feelings (you don't have to agree with them) and reassure them you are committed to the relationship. You haven't asked anything of the other person, so you don't need to back down – even if they don't like it. Re-state your boundary as needed.

Worksheet 4: BPD-Friendly Scripts for Setting Boundaries

1: Ways that I can regulate my nervous system before talking to the other person.

1-5 second strategies: _____

1-5 minute strategies: _____

1-5 day strategies: _____

Signs the other person might be becoming dysregulated: _____

Ways I can model regulation during the conversation: _____

2: Reassure. Begin the conversation by stating your affection or love for the other person, how much you value the relationship, and (if appropriate!) that you want the relationship to continue.

Whatever you do – do **not** follow up your reassurance with the word “but.” Use “and also.”

3: State your limit. Use your “I feel ____ when ____” statement from Worksheet 2. Make sure you stick to one limit at a time. Stick to your feelings, and the facts – no judgments or assumptions about the other person here. No predicting the future, shaming, or blaming.

I feel _____ when _____

4: What are you going to change? State the behavior you are going to stop, and the new behavior you are going to do instead. Do not make requests of the other person.

I will (or will not) _____
when/if (describe the situation) _____

5: Connect it to the big picture. Make sure to use “I” statements. If true and appropriate, offer reassurance again (i.e. tell the person how much you care, confirm that you aren’t leaving)

This boundary is important because _____

This boundary will help maintain/strengthen the relationship by _____

Reassurance statement (if appropriate) _____

6: Hear them out – but be a broken record. Let the other person talk, but don’t back down.

Ways to validate even if you don’t agree _____

Ways to model regulation _____

The Power of “And Also”

Two things can be true at the same time. Learning to think this way is a very important part of BPD recovery, but it’s also helpful for anyone’s emotional growth.

People with BPD have a really hard time holding two opposite ideas at the same time (this is called splitting). Examples relevant to relationship boundaries might be:

- My partner **either** loves me **or** they are angry with me. They can’t be both.
- My parent **either** gives me what I need **or** they are sabotaging me.
- My friend **either** thinks I’m funny **or** they think I’m stupid and weird.
- My loved one **either** approves of my actions **or** they think I am a bad person.

I want to stress that people with BPD don’t think this way intentionally. They are not aware of this thought process – it’s automatic. Splitting is a symptom of BPD, not a choice.

It is ultimately the person with BPD’s responsibility to seek mental health treatment. No matter how much you love someone or how carefully you talk to them, you can’t heal for them.

What you *can* do, if you are invested in the relationship and are willing and able, is choose to phrase things differently. This isn’t a magic bullet, but it can be very effective in pre-empting a splitting response. I use it in my work with clients, and they report it’s very helpful to hear.

An “and also” statement is where you explicitly state the two things that are true, even if they appear to be in conflict. Some examples of “and also” statements you might use when setting boundaries are:

- I love you very much, **and also**, your behavior right now is annoying me.
- I recognize you are trying your hardest to get better, **and also**, sometimes you say things that are very hurtful to me.
- I disagree with your interpretation of events, **and also**, I believe that it feels very true to you right now.
- I realize this may be painful to hear, **and also**, I believe that setting this boundary will help us improve our relationship in the long term.

“And also” statements also work for people who have BPD. They can help you identify and challenge moments when you are splitting.

- They hurt my feelings, **and also**, they have a valid point.
- They love me, **and also**, they are feeling upset with me right now.

Using “and also” statements works by:

- Acknowledging everyone’s right to their feelings, even if they are conflicting
- Assuming all parties are reasonable people trying their best
- Preventing the other person from feeling the need to defend themselves

I hope you find these statements as powerful as I do!

Step 4: Restoration

By now, you've engaged in some preventative emotion regulation strategies. You've identified your limits and expressed them to the other person with a consequence attached.

Congratulations! You've done a lot of hard work!

There is a good chance that right after setting the boundary (like, the moment the words leave your lips) you will feel intensely emotional. You might feel relief, or fear of the other person's response, or any number of other emotions.

Any emotion that you have right now is valid – *but it probably won't be helpful to act on it.*

In addition to your own emotions, the person you have set a boundary with is also probably very emotional. They may be devastated, furious, or embarrassed.

You are not responsible for managing their emotions – especially if the other person is taking them out on you – but in many situations, you can choose to act in ways that will benefit the relationship long-term.

Goals of restoration

- Soothe your own nervous system
 - Your body is likely experiencing strong emotions, and a desire to fight, take flight, or freeze. Your top priority right now is to soothe yourself – so that you can do what you need to do to get on with your day.
- Empathize and validate the other person
 - Once you have soothed yourself, you may choose to respond to the other person's emotions. It is important that you not try to do this until after you have taken at least a few steps to calm yourself – otherwise you are likely to get involved in an unproductive cycle.
 - Empathizing and validating does *not* mean enabling or encouraging harmful behavior – it means acknowledging the other person's feelings and their right to have them.
- Repair the relationship
 - Remind your loved one that you care deeply about them and want the best for them. Remind them that you see their behavior as separate from who they are as a person. Focus on your desire to maintain the relationship.
 - Allow the other person to ask you for help or reassurance – but you do not have to negotiate the boundary you have set.
- Strengthen the relationship
 - In most cases, we set boundaries so that we can maintain relationships, not end them. In the long term, boundaries are actually very helpful at letting people know where they stand, what they can and can't get away with, and what to expect from you.
 - If you are ending the relationship, be clear. (see appendix)

Worksheet 5: Restoration

Part One: The Here-and-Now. If your body is giving you crisis signals, soothe yourself. Return to your prevention worksheet and identify things you can do to help yourself feel better.

Soothing myself in 1-5 seconds: _____

Soothing myself in 1-5 minutes: _____

Now turn your attention to the other person. It is not your responsibility to manage someone else's emotion or engage with dangerous behavior – but you may want to offer them comfort. Remember that you should not comfort someone by backing down on your boundary.

Validating statements: _____

“And also” statements: _____

Physical comfort (hugging, cuddling): _____

Part Two: Repairing the Relationship. After some time has passed (this may be a few minutes or a few days, depending on the situation), you will want to begin the repair process. Honestly reflect on your behavior during the boundary setting. Did you do it with an urge to punish the other person or teach them a lesson? Do you need to apologize for the way you delivered it? Do not apologize for the boundary itself.

Taking ownership of any harm caused to the other person: _____

Reiterate your commitment to the relationship (only if true): _____

What if you were the person on the receiving end of the boundary? Once you have soothed yourself, is there any truth to what the other person said? Do you need to make any amends for your behavior? Did they take a risk, make themselves vulnerable, or show trust in you, by setting the boundary instead of leaving?

Taking ownership of my own behavior: _____

Acknowledging the other person's vulnerability: _____

Reiterate commitment to the relationship (if this is difficult, use an “and also” statement to express that you are hurt but you want to keep the relationship going): _____

Part Three: Strengthening the Relationship. Boundaries are (usually) a beginning, not an end. Once the boundary has been set, how do you see the relationship moving forward?

How I will stick to the boundary when I am tested: _____

How I will acknowledge and appreciate the other person's efforts: _____

Ways that we can intentionally create positive experiences together: _____

If you are ending the relationship, state this very clearly: _____

Conclusion

If you've worked your way through this packet, give yourself a huge pat on the back.

Setting boundaries can be a difficult and emotional process.

You're trying something new, which requires courage, vulnerability, and hope.

It is my sincere wish that anyone who reads this packet will have learned a little bit more about themselves and their loved ones; that they feel validated; and that they have hope for their future.

I welcome your feedback – success stories, and suggestions for improvement. I plan to continue creating resources for people with BPD and their loved ones, so your experience using this BAP is important to me.

All the best,

Catherine

Catherine Humenuk, MSW, LCSW, C-DBT
info@bpdeducation.com

Appendix: When Someone Wants to End a Relationship

I made this packet for people who want to change parts of an ongoing relationship.

But that isn't always the case. Sometimes people set boundaries to end relationships.

If you are the person who wants the relationship to end, be clear. Say what you mean. People who are in crisis can't understand subtleties of language. When you are vague or refuse to be clear about your intentions, you are just prolonging the other person's pain – and your own.

-  "I am ending this relationship."
-  "I am moving out."
-  "I don't know if this is working out for me anymore."
-  "I feel like I might do better in a new apartment."

Have you ever seen *Dumb and Dumber*? There's a scene where a man says, "What are my chances?" and the woman says, "Not good ... I'd say one in a million." The man responds, "So you're telling me there's a chance. Yeah!"

Gender stereotypes aside, this is a great example of how the human brain works. People who don't want the relationship to end will hold on to even the smallest hope of reconciliation. Their brains are doing this to avoid the pain of acknowledging the relationship is over.

When you're vague about ending the relationship, both people experience *much more pain*. You must have the same conversation over and over and over, and each time you have the conversation it is painful for both people.

If you are the person ending the relationship, it is your responsibility to be clear. It's going to hurt – let it hurt once, and not a dozen times.

If you fear retaliation in the form of violence, coercion, or financial control, I encourage you to seek out resources for intimate partner violence. That is beyond the scope of this packet.

If you are the person being left, stay calm and let them leave. I know, I know, that's not a particularly helpful thing to say to someone who is in crisis. But I mean it. Use all the prevention methods in your skill set. Practice Radical Acceptance. Use a crisis plan. Call a crisis hotline. But do not try to make them stay.

You cannot force someone to be in a relationship with you. Trying to do so is unkind, confusing, or even cruel. It is completely reasonable to feel abandoned or betrayed when relationships end – that doesn't mean you have a right to control someone else's behavior.

We don't have to like it when people leave us, but we do have to accept it. Accepting does not mean approving – it just means we acknowledge reality and move forward. **When we accept that someone is leaving us, it means we stop trying to change their mind.**

Two things can be true at the same time:

- You can love someone with your whole heart, **and also**, they can want to leave.
- You can see a great future with someone, **and also**, they don't see that future.
- You can put a lot of work into the relationship, **and also**, it isn't going to last forever.
- Someone can love you very much, **and also**, they want to end their romantic relationship with you.
- You have sacrificed a lot for your child, **and also**, they have the right to cut contact when they are adults.

Here are some hopeful “and also” statements.

- You can be devastated that a relationship is over, **and also**, now you are free to pursue a new relationship with someone else.
- You can be angry that someone hurt you, **and also**, be grateful for what you learned about yourself from this relationship.
- You can be lonely and afraid for your future, **and also**, your future might be a lot better than you think.

I highly encourage you to seek out the help of a licensed professional or self-help, whether that takes the form of DBT skills learning, grief counseling or support groups, anger management, or other resources.

When old relationships come to an end, new relationships have room to begin.