

**The  
Advonet  
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health  
Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

# Autism and Boundaries

## What are Boundaries?

Boundaries are the personal limits and rules that we set for ourselves.

These can be different and individual to the person, encompassing relationships, communication, sensory needs, and daily interactions. They help define what we are comfortable with, what we need to feel safe, how much load we can take on, and how we expect others to treat us.

Boundaries can be physical, emotional, social, or even digital, and they serve as a way of protecting our well-being.



Establishing and implementing boundaries is important for everyone. They support mental and emotional health, prevent burnout, reduce stress, and promote a sense of autonomy. Boundaries also help to clarify expectations between people, which can lead to better interactions.

This document aims to go over what boundaries are and provide helpful tips to implement them into everyday life.

## Autistic Experiences and Boundaries

Every one will have their own unique experiences, feelings, and challenges when it comes to setting boundaries. For autistic people, these can be further shaped by things like masking, communication differences, sensory overload and more. The section below explores a range of autistic perspectives and experiences around boundaries.



Workplace hierarchies can make it hard to set or speak up about boundaries, especially with all the unspoken rules about what you can and cannot say. This can lead to anxiety about being judges, misunderstood, or making a mistake.



Some people find it easier to set boundaries with those they are less close to, while it can feel much harder with people they have strong personal relationships with. This is often linked to a fear of rejection or anxiety.



As a way of coping, some may respond by putting up very strong boundaries to keep others at a distance and to protect themselves from getting hurt.



Worrying about seeming rude can make it hard to put boundaries in place. Saying no - especially to those we care about - can bring up feelings of guilt, discomfort, or even frustration.



Placing high expectations on ourselves can lead us to ignore or push past our own boundaries, which can negatively effect our wellbeing.



For many autistic people, delayed processing or response times can make it harder to notice when a boundary has been crossed, needs to be set, or needs to change.

## Masking and Boundaries

Masking can be seen in different ways, such as forcing eye contact, mimicking social scripts, hiding sensory discomfort, or pushing through exhaustion to appear okay. While masking can be a survival tool, it often comes with other costs such as burnout and exhaustion. Masking can also make setting or recognising boundaries harder.

### How can Masking Impact Boundaries?



#### Ignoring internal signals

Those who mask can find it hard to know when situations are making them feel comfortable or overwhelmed, making it hard to know when a boundary has been crossed.



#### Over-Accommodation

Autistic people may put other needs first, even to the point of burnout, in order to avoid conflict or so they can appear as “easygoing”. This can lead us to adopting a “people-pleasing” attitude and ignore our boundaries to please other people.



#### Fear of Rejection

Saying no, asking for space, or setting other boundaries can feel difficult if the person is scared of rejection or has experienced negative repercussions in the past.



## Boundary Challenges for Autistic People

Many autistic people can find aspects of boundary-setting and recognition difficult. Below highlights some of the common challenges that can be faced when looking at boundary setting for autistic individuals.

### Communication and Literal Thinking

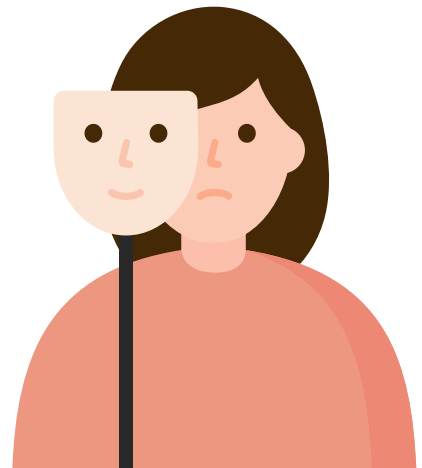
Language processing and literal thinking can sometimes lead to misunderstandings with boundaries, especially if these are expressed vaguely or through hints rather than direct communication. It can be difficult to read hidden rules or pick up on nonverbal cues that people may show, leading to potentially crossing someone else's boundary.



Sometimes we can struggle to know how to communicate our own boundaries, this can make it hard knowing what we are 'allowed' to say and how to say it, especially if we are trying to communicate when we are overloaded, stressed, burnt out, or in a shutdown.

### Masking and People-Pleasing

Many autistic people find that masking and people pleasing can make it hard to implement boundaries due to fear of upsetting someone, or needing to fit in or avoid conflict. This can lead to us suppressing our own needs and struggle to say no, even when the situation makes us uncomfortable or overwhelmed. By doing this, it can increase the risk of meltdowns, burnout, and sensory overload.



## Boundary Challenges for Autistic People PT.2

### Sensory Overload or Shutdowns

In high stress or overstimulating situations, it can become harder to advocate for boundaries or recognise when a limit has been reached. When in sensory overload or a shutdown, it can also be difficult to communicate and implement boundaries with other people.



### Alexithymia: Difficulty Identifying emotions

Many autistic people experience alexithymia, this can make it difficult to know how we feel about certain situations, or when a boundary has been crossed. This may be even harder if emotional discomfort can feel like stress, fatigue, or shutdown. For example, someone might agree to a social plan without realising they are emotionally drained, which may cause a meltdown or burnout later.



## Benefits of Boundaries

Setting personal boundaries supports us in multiple different ways. They can help autistic individuals prevent sensory overload, social exhaustion, and masking pressures. They are essential to help and improve our overall wellbeing and aid in having our needs met.



### Managing needs

Setting clear boundaries can help autistic people manage their access and sensory needs when attending social events and other activities.



### Well-being

Setting boundaries can help promote wellbeing, by being clear on what we can and cannot do and what our needs are.



### Prevent overload

By identifying and communicating limits in advance, individuals can avoid situations that are overwhelming or dysregulating.

### Preventing burnout



Having clear boundaries can help to prevent burnout and doing too much. For example, being clear on attending activities or managing workload.

### Reduce anxiety



Clear expectations can help reduce uncertainty, which can be especially calming for autistic individuals who struggle with unpredictability.

### Respect



Boundaries help other people understand how to interact with you in a way that matches your needs and preferred communication style.

## Bounaries in Different Contexts

Boundaries can look different depending on your individual needs, where you are and who you are with. Understanding how to adapt boundaries to different settings can make it easier for to feel supported in all areas of life.

Below outlines some of the different contexts that boundaries may be seen in and some examples of the boundaries you might want to implement.

### In friendships

- Asking friends to avoid sarcasm, teasing or distressing topics
- Saying no to plans without guilt or pressure to explain
- Not replying to messages straight away when needing recharging time
- Choosing how often to message or meet up
- Needing quiet or alone time



### In Family

- Having privacy respected, for example, space in your room and alone time
- Setting limits on physical affection
- Deciding how much to share about emotions, social life or work
- Choosing not to go to certain events or gatherings, or setting a limit to how long you will stay



### At Work or Further Education

- Saying no to extra responsibilities or last-minute changes
- Requesting clear instructions and communication preferences, for example, written instead of verbal
- Asking for flexible hours or remote work, if available
- Defining professional vs personal boundaries with colleagues
- Boundaries on attending work events and gatherings



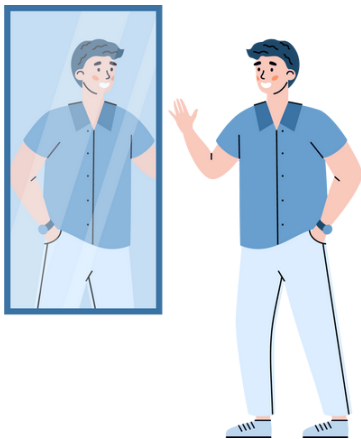


## Setting Boundaries

Setting boundaries is about knowing your limits, expressing them clearly, and protecting your well-being. Below includes some helpful tips about identifying and implementing boundaries.

### Personal Boundaries

Boundaries are not just for other people. You can also set your self boundaries, like limiting screen time, amount of tasks to complete, scheduling recovery and breaks, or not forcing yourself to mask in situations where you may not need to.



### Uncomfortable Vs Comfortable

Pay attention to how different environments, activities and certain situations make you feel. You don't need to know the exact emotion, but it can be helpful to notice signs such as tension, overload, irritation and tiredness, as this may signal that a boundary could be needed.



### Planning for Pushback

Some people may not respect your boundary straight away, or may accidentally overstep your boundary. Having a plan for if this happens, like leaving the situation, a script to use, or having a support person to talk to can be helpful.



## Setting Boundaries PT.2

### Scripting and Planning

Rehearsing your boundaries on your own, or with a trusted person can be a helpful way to practise implementing this and make it easier to speak up in real situations.

Script examples include:

- “I really enjoy spending time with you, but I need some time to recover after social situations as I feel very overwhelmed”
- “When you touch me without telling me first, I feel very panicked. I want you to warn me or ask me before”.

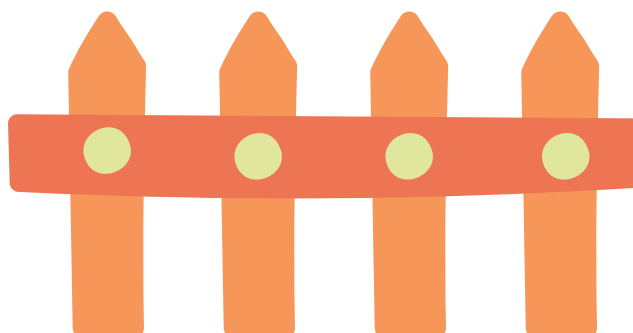


### Language

When communicating boundaries, being direct and specific can be helpful and enables others to understand your needs without guessing. Using “I” statements can also help communicate how you feel.

Examples of this include:

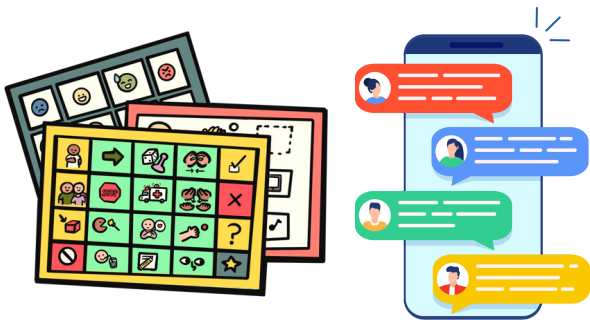
- “I need to leave wafter an hour”
- “I am not comfortable about that topic”
- “Please do not touch me without asking”



## Setting Boundaries PT.3

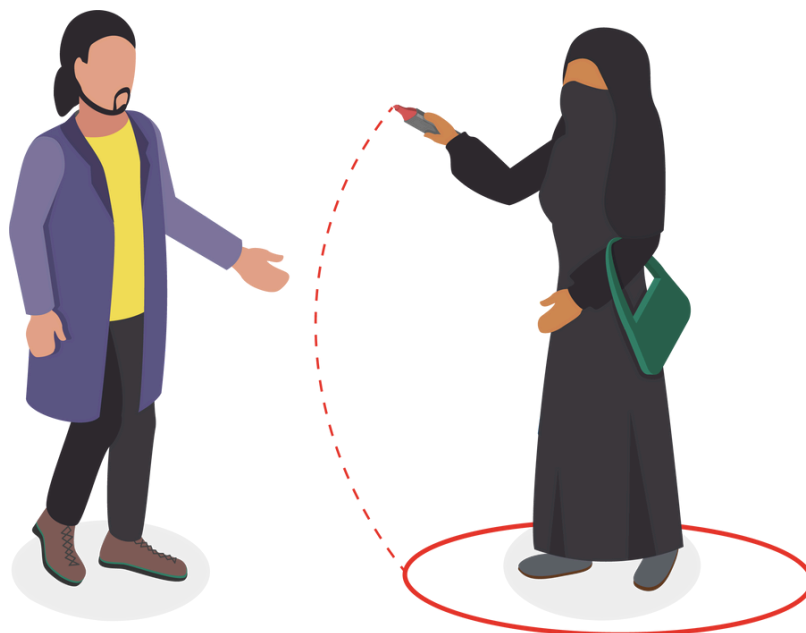
### Alternative Communication Tools

Remember that it is more than okay to use alternative communication when implementing boundaries. This may be in the form of messaging, using cards, AAC, apps, or hand gestures to express boundaries.



### It's Okay to Say No

Remember, that saying no is okay. Often, we can feel worried about saying no due to many different factors. You do not need to overexplain or apologise for your boundaries. Remind yourself that setting these is not rude and it helps protect your own well-being and mental health - it is respectful for both you, and other people.



## Setting Boundaries - Tips



**Practice Boundary  
Setting**



**Remember its Okay to  
Say No**



**Use Preferred  
Communication**



**Ask for Support if  
Needed**



**Plan for Pushback**



**Use Scripting and  
Planning to Prepare**

## 4 Simple Steps

Setting boundaries can feel like a difficult place to start. Below outlines 4 simple steps you can take to implement a boundary with someone.

**1**

### **Say what happened**

Describe the behaviour clearly and factually. For example “when you roll your eyes....”

**2**

### **Say how you feel**

Use “I” statements to explain your feelings. For example “I feel upset and unheard”.

**3**

### **Say what you need**

Be specific about what you want to happen instead. For example “I would like you to listen without reacting that way”

**4**

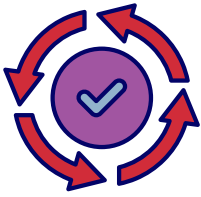
### **Say what you will do if it keep happening**

This step may not be necessary to say, but can be helpful for you to tell yourself and decide what you are prepared to carry out. For example “If it keeps happening, I might need to take space or leave the conversation”.

## Maintaining Boundaries

Maintaining boundaries means reminding others, and sometimes ourselves, of what we said we need. This can sometimes feel uncomfortable and can be additionally challenging for those who find conflict distressing, experience pressure to mask, or worry about being misunderstood.

Below outlines some tips on how to maintain boundaries.



### Consistency

Reinforce your boundaries and stick to them. Try to avoid making exceptions too often - doing so may confuse others or weaken the boundary over time.



### Celebrating Progress

Maintaining boundaries can be difficult and takes practice. Take time to acknowledge your efforts, even if they don't always go perfectly.



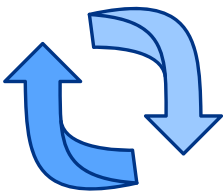
### Reminders and Visual Aids

Written or visual reminders can help reinforce boundaries with yourself, and others, without always needing verbal explanations.



### Knowing your limits

It is okay to change and adjust your boundaries if they are no longer working. Changes should be based on your own needs, not pressure from others.



### Repetition

It is okay to repeat your boundary if someone forgets or oversteps. You do not need to justify this every time - just repeat it clearly. For example: "I have mentioned I need time to recharge after work, so I won't be able to talk right now".

## Helping Someone Set Boundaries

Many autistic people can find guidance, encouragement and support when it comes to identifying, expressing and maintaining boundaries. Offering proactive, respectful support can make a big difference. Below outlines some tips and advice on how to support someone with their boundary setting.



### Practicing

It can be good to help the person rehearse how to express boundaries in different situations. Practice saying no, asking for space, or walking away. This can help to build confidence and reduce anxiety when these situations happen in real life.



### Identifying personal limits

Some people may struggle to know when they are overstimulated or uncomfortable by something. You can support them by exploring these feelings and patterns together. For example, what drains them, brings them stress, and when do they seem most comfortable? Tools like emotion charts, check ins and sensory logs can all be helpful in doing this.

### Support preferred communication

Not everyone finds it easy to speak boundaries out loud. Make sure you advocate for and respect people's preferred communication, such as:

- Writing things down
- Using communication cards or visual aids
- Practicing scripts together
- Using AAC or other communication tools
- Formatting any emails or messages together



## Helping Someone Set Boundaries PT.2

### Communication Support

Some people may need help expressing boundaries. You can help support them by being present when they set boundaries, offer encouragement, and stepping in (if they have agreed to this beforehand).

There may be times when someone has communicated a boundary, but it is not being respected. This can be very overwhelming, and with their consent, it can be helpful for you to reinforce / communicate this boundary for them.



### Respect Their Boundaries

Model respectful behaviour by honouring their boundaries yourself. If they say “no” take this seriously and show that you see boundary setting as valid and okay.



### Help Maintaining Boundaries

If someone is struggling to enforce a boundary, you can offer to support them with this. This might mean being nearby during the conversation, reminding others of their needs, or being their to debrief with afterwards.

### Creating a Safe Environment

Ensure that the person knows it is okay to have needs, say no, and change their mind. Implementing boundaries with a safe person before trying to do this with others can build confidence. Validate their feelings and experiences and offer support.





## Helping Someone Set Boundaries



**Practice Boundary Setting**



**Identify Personal Limits**



**Use Preferred Communication**



**Respect their Boundaries**



**Help Communicate their Boundaries**



**Help them Maintain Boundaries**

# Additional Resources

## Local Organisations and Support

**Leeds Recovery College** – An NHS service that runs courses where you can learn more about mental health.

**Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service** – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.

**Live Well Leeds** – Provide a range of services to people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including 1-to-1 support and groups.

**Citizens Advice** - Provide support with workplace and educational adjustments, as well as rights and setting legal boundaries.

**Workplace Leeds** - Offer 1-to-1 mental wellbeing support and work retention support, as well as workshops around employment.

Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

## Contact Us



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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.