



Emotional Regulation & Healthy Boundaries

Turning Overwhelm into Coherent Limits

C. Quick Foundations

What are boundaries?

From the boundaries research:

- Boundaries are the **limits and rules** you set for yourself in relationships—what’s okay and what’s not okay. They exist on a spectrum:
 - **Porous:** too open; trouble saying no; oversharing; absorbing others’ feelings.
 - **Rigid:** too closed; keeping everyone at a distance; difficulty with intimacy.
 - **Healthy:** able to say “no” *and* say “yes” to closeness and new experiences.

In therapy we highlight **six boundary types**: physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual, material, and time.

What is emotional regulation?

- Emotional sovereignty is the **capacity to feel fully without being ruled** by your feelings—responding instead of reacting. Emotional regulation happens across four domains:
 - **Mental** - what stories you tell yourself
 - **Physical** - how your body carries / discharges stress
 - **Emotional** - how you name and move feelings
 - **Spiritual / Meaning** - how you connect to something bigger (values, purpose, sacredness)

This resource links the two aspects:

Unhealthy boundaries = dysregulated system.

Healthy boundaries = regulated system + coherent self.

2. Healthy vs Unhealthy Boundaries + Emotional States

Boundary “Styles” and How They Feel

Porous Boundaries (too open)

MARINA TUDOR Psychotherapist, NCC, LCPC, CCTP, C-DBT, EMDR

Website: <https://www.marinatudor.com/>

LinkedIn Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marinatudor/>

Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/marina-tudor-rockville-md/403331>



- Behaviours:
 - Say yes when you mean no
 - Overshare personal details too fast
 - Take responsibility for everyone's feelings
- Emotional state:
 - Anxiety, resentment, burnout, people-pleasing panic
- Nervous system:
 - Hyper-arousal (fight/flight), difficulty calming down

Rigid Boundaries (too closed)

- Behaviours:
 - Rarely ask for help
 - Guard personal information
 - Avoid closeness even with safe people
- Emotional state:
 - Loneliness, numbness, chronic distrust
- Nervous system:
 - Shut-down / freeze; difficulty feeling safe even when safe

Healthy Boundaries (balanced)

- Behaviours:
 - Can say “no” without collapsing in shame
 - Can say “yes” to intimacy when it's aligned
 - Adjust boundaries to context (e.g., work vs close friend)
- Emotional state:
 - More stable, less whiplash; capacity to feel + think at the same time
- Nervous system:
 - Greater window of tolerance; easier to recover after stress

Key link:

Unhealthy (porous or rigid) boundaries usually show up when the nervous system is **dysregulated**. Healthy boundaries are much easier when you have even a little bit of **regulation** on board.

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So we don't just "fix boundaries" with scripts; we **co-regulate and self-regulate**, then set the limit.

3. Emotional Regulation + Boundaries: A Practical Map

This section shows how emotional regulation supports healthy boundaries, using the 6 boundary types.

For each type:

- **Unhealthy pattern** (porous / rigid)
- **What you might feel**
- **Regulation move** (mental / physical / emotional / spiritual)
- **Healthy boundary script** (therapeutic processing -aligned)

D. Physical Boundaries (*personal space, touch*)

Unhealthy - Porous

- Let people touch/hug you when you're uncomfortable
- Stay physically close when your body wants distance

Feels like: Tension, flinching, freezing, "I don't want this but I can't move."

Regulation move: **Body first**

- Step back, plant your feet; feel the ground.
- Take 3 slow breaths; notice chest / shoulders / jaw.

Healthy script:

- "I'm not comfortable with hugs. A wave is better for me."
- "I need a little more space; I'm going to sit over here."

Unhealthy - Rigid

- Avoid all touch, even with people you trust
- Won't ask for a hug or comfort even when you need it

Feels like: Numb, disconnected, "I don't need anyone."

Regulation move: **Emotion + meaning**

- Place a hand on your chest and ask: "What do I actually need right now?"

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- Recall one safe touch memory (friend, pet, partner) to remind your system that **safe closeness exists**.

Healthy script:

- “I don’t want to be crowded, but I’d really like a handshake / a brief hug if that’s okay.”
-

B. Emotional Boundaries (*how you share and protect your feelings*)

Unhealthy - Porous

- Overshare deeply with people who haven’t earned trust
- Take on others’ emotions as your responsibility

Feels like: Emotional hangover, shame after sharing, exhaustion.

Regulation move: Mental + emotional

- Thought: “Their feelings are *theirs*, my feelings are *mine*.”
- Name your feeling: “Right now I feel overwhelmed / sad / anxious.”

Healthy script:

- “I care about what you’re feeling, but I can’t fix it for you. I can listen for a few minutes.”
 - “I’m not ready to talk about this in detail yet.”
-

Unhealthy - Rigid

- Never share how you feel; always “fine”
- Shut down when emotions appear

Feels like: Flat, invisible, misunderstood.

Regulation move: Emotional micro-expression

- Write one sentence in a journal: “Today I feel...”
- Tell a trusted person one feeling, without explaining it away.

Healthy script:

- “I’m not ready for a deep conversation, but I can share that I’m feeling off today.”
-

C. Intellectual Boundaries (*thoughts, beliefs, ideas*)

Unhealthy - Porous

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- Change your opinions to avoid conflict
- Let others mock your ideas without speaking up

Feels like: Self-betrayal, confusion, resentment.

Regulation move: Mental

- Thought: “It’s okay for us to see things differently.”
- 3 breaths, then: “My view matters even if they disagree.”

Healthy script:

- “I see that differently, but I respect your view.”
 - “Please don’t joke about that; it’s important to me.”
-

Unhealthy - Rigid

- Refuse to hear any other viewpoint
- React with anger when your beliefs are questioned

Feels like: Defensiveness, tightness, threat.

Regulation move: Physical + mental

- Relax your jaw and hands; drop your shoulders.
- Thought: “Listening doesn’t mean agreeing.”

Healthy script:

- “I’m open to hearing your view, as long as we talk respectfully.”
-

D. Sexual Boundaries (*how / with whom you express sexuality*)

Unhealthy - Porous

- Say yes to sexual contact you don’t want
- Ignore your body’s “no” to keep someone close

Feels like: Disconnection, shame, numbness, shock.

Regulation move: Physical + spiritual

- Put a hand on your heart / lower belly; breathe deeply.



- Silent statement: “My body’s no is valid.”

Healthy script:

- “I’m not comfortable with that; I’d rather just cuddle / talk.”
 - “I don’t want to be sexual right now.”
-

Unhealthy - Rigid

- Avoid any sexual closeness even when you want safe intimacy
- Believe all sexuality is unsafe or shameful

Feels like: Frozen, cut off from desire, lonely.

Regulation move: Emotional + meaning

- Journaling: “What does safe sexuality look like *for me*?”
- Remember: consent includes your desires, not just your fears.

Healthy script:

- “I’d like to go slow. Let’s start with ___ and talk as we go.”
-

E. Material Boundaries (*money & possessions*)

Unhealthy - Porous

- Lend money or things you can’t afford to lose
- Feel guilty saying no to requests

Feels like: Financial anxiety, resentment.

Regulation move: Mental

- Thought: “Saying no to this request is saying yes to my stability.”
- Quick numbers check: “Can I truly afford this?”

Healthy script:

- “I can’t lend money, but I can help you think through options.”
 - “I’m not comfortable lending my car, but I can give you a ride on Friday.”
-



Unhealthy - Rigid

- Refuse any help even when struggling
- Never share resources, even when you want to

Feels like: Isolated, pressured, “It’s all on me.”

Regulation move: Spiritual / meaning

- Reflect: “What would balanced generosity look like?”
- Small experiment: ask for or offer *one* concrete thing.

Healthy script:

- “I’d appreciate help with __, if you’re able.”
-

F. Time Boundaries (*how you spend & structure your time*)

Unhealthy - Porous

- Say yes to every request
- Work late most nights; no recovery time

Feels like: Exhaustion, irritability, constant rush.

Regulation move: Physical + mental

- Stand up, stretch; feel your feet.
- Thought: “Every ‘yes’ to others is a ‘no’ to something else.”

Healthy script:

- “I’m not available tonight, but I could help on Saturday for an hour.”
 - “I can’t stay late; I have plans after work.”
-

Unhealthy - Rigid

- Schedule so tightly there’s no spontaneity
- Refuse to adjust even when it would help you grow

Feels like: Brittle, anxious if plans change.

Regulation move: Emotional + mental

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- Practice one tiny change: swap one activity for rest or play.
- Thought: “Flexibility can also be safe.”

Healthy script:

- “I had planned to do X, but I’m open to shifting a little today.”
-

4. Putting It Together: 5-Step “Regulate then Boundary” Flow

You can teach this as a simple sequence:

1. **Notice**
 - “I feel off / tight / resentful.”
 - Name the **boundary type** involved (physical, emotional, etc.).
2. **Regulate (90 seconds)**
 - 3-10 slow breaths,
 - Feel feet on the floor,
 - Name one emotion + one need.
3. **Clarify**
 - Ask: “What is my **yes** here? What is my **no**?”
 - Align with values (time, health, family, honesty).
4. **Communicate**
 - Use an “I” statement, short and kind:

“When X happens, I feel Y, so I need / will Z.”

5. **Reinforce & Review**
 - Expect some discomfort or pushback—especially with porous or rigid patterns.
 - Afterward, ask:
 - “Did this boundary protect my energy?”
 - “What do I want to keep or tweak next time?”



Healthy vs Unhealthy Boundaries + Regulation Checklist

Use this as a quick scan:

1. What kind of boundaries am I using?
 2. How regulated am I when I set them?
 3. What small adjustment can I make today?
-

A. Boundary Style Self-Scan

Check all that apply in the LAST WEEK.

1. Porous Boundaries (Too Open)

- I say “yes” when I actually mean “no.”
- I feel responsible for other people’s moods.
- I often feel drained or resentful after helping others.
- I share very personal things with people I don’t fully trust yet.
- I feel guilty or anxious when I try to set a limit.

If you checked 3+ → your boundaries may be more **porous** right now.

2. Rigid Boundaries (Too Closed)

- I rarely ask for help, even when I’m overwhelmed.
- I avoid emotional conversations, even with safe people.
- I often say “I’m fine” when I’m not.
- I keep people at a distance to avoid being hurt.
- I feel uncomfortable with closeness, even when I want connection.

If you checked 3+ → your boundaries may be more **rigid** right now.

3. Healthy Boundaries (Balanced)

- I can say “no” without over-explaining.
- I share personal information slowly and with people who earn my trust.
- I can be close to others without feeling responsible for their emotions.
- I ask for help or support when I need it.
- I adjust my boundaries depending on the situation (work vs. partner vs. family).

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If you checked 3+ → you are practicing **healthy boundaries** in at least some areas.

B. Boundary Type + Regulation Checklist

Use this section in any situation that feels “off.”

1) Circle the boundary type. 2) Check what’s true. 3) Choose a regulation step.

1. Which Boundary Type Is Involved?

- Physical (touch, personal space)
 - Emotional (sharing feelings, emotional labor)
 - Intellectual (opinions, beliefs, ideas)
 - Sexual (desire, consent, intimacy)
 - Material (money, possessions, lending/borrowing)
 - Time (schedule, availability, energy)
-

2. What’s Happening With My Boundary?

Porous (too open) – check any that fit:

- I’m saying yes, but my body feels like no.
- I’m doing more than I actually have capacity for.
- I’m letting someone talk to me in a way that hurts.
- I feel like I have to fix or manage their feelings.
- I give / lend more than I can afford (time, money, energy).

Rigid (too closed) – check any that fit:

- I’m shutting down and withdrawing, even from safe people.
- I’m refusing help I actually need.
- I won’t share how I feel at all.
- I’m saying “no” to everything by default.
- I’m keeping distance because I’m scared, not because it’s aligned.

Healthy (balanced) – check any that fit:

- I’m able to say no where I need to.
- I’m able to stay in connection without abandoning myself.
- I’m being honest about what I can and can’t do.
- I’m adjusting my boundary based on context, not fear.

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3. Regulation First: What Does My System Need?

Check 1-3 regulation steps to do **BEFORE** you respond.

 **Mental (Thoughts)**

- Name the story: “The story I’m telling myself is...”
- Remind myself: “Their feelings are theirs; my feelings are mine.”
- Ask: “What is my YES? What is my NO?”

 **Physical (Body)**

- 5 slow breaths (inhale 4, exhale 6).
- Plant both feet on the ground and relax my shoulders.
- Step back or change my physical position before speaking.

 **Emotional (Feelings)**

- Name 1 feeling: “Right now I feel...”
- Place a hand on my chest or belly and breathe into it.
- Give myself permission: “It’s okay to feel this and still set a boundary.”

 **Spiritual / Meaning (Perspective)**

- Remember: “I am allowed to protect my energy.”
 - Ask: “What would be the most self-respecting choice here?”
 - Take 30 seconds to reconnect (prayer, intention, looking at the sky, a grounding object).
-

C. Healthy Boundary Scripts (Fill-in-Your-Own)

Once you’ve regulated (even a little), use one of these to respond.

1. “When / I Feel / So I Will” Script

When you _____,
I feel _____,
so I will / I need _____.

- I have written one version for **family**.
 - I have written one version for **work**.
 - I have written one version for **friend / partner**.
-

2. Short & Clear “No” + Optional Alternative

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“I’m not available for _____.
I can offer _____.”

Examples you can customize:

- “I’m not available to talk about this late at night. I can talk tomorrow afternoon.”
- “I can’t lend money right now. I can help you think through other options.”

Write your own:

I’m not available for _____.
I can offer _____.

3. Emotional Boundary Script

Use when you feel responsible for someone else’s emotions.

“I care about how you feel, and I also need to take care of myself.
I can listen for _____ minutes, then I need to stop / take a break.”

- I have practiced saying this out loud at least once.
-

D. Mini Self-Check: After I Set a Boundary

After any boundary conversation, pause and check:

- I feel **relief** (even if I’m a bit shaky).
- I can breathe a little more deeply.
- I’m proud of myself for speaking honestly.
- If there was pushback, I didn’t collapse completely.
- I learned something about where my boundary needs to be.

If instead you notice:

- I feel intense shame / panic
- I want to over-explain or take it back
- I’m spinning mentally for hours afterward

...then your system likely needs **more regulation + support** around this boundary. That doesn’t mean the boundary was wrong—it means you deserve more resourcing as you practice it.



E. Weekly Reflection (Optional)

Use this once a week:

1. A boundary I held well this week:

 2. A moment my boundaries felt porous or rigid:

 3. One regulation tool that helped (or could help next time):

 4. One small boundary adjustment I'll practice next week:

-