

# The Role of Personal Boundaries in Psychological Well-Being: A Theoretical Review

Olivia Bomester<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Helderberg College of Higher Education, 27 Annandale Drive, Helena Heights, Somerset West, 7130, South Africa

\*Corresponding Author: [bomestero@hche.ac.za](mailto:bomestero@hche.ac.za)

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**Abstract:** *Personal boundaries are foundational to psychological well-being, influencing emotional regulation, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. This theoretical paper explores the role of boundaries in mental health, drawing from key psychological theories such as Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Cognitive-Behavioural Theory. This discourse explores the various types and levels of boundaries, as well as how they function within families, the workplace, romantic relationships and friendships. Additionally, the theoretical review examines the role of boundaries in promoting psychological well-being, the consequences of avoiding boundary-setting, practical steps for establishing and maintaining boundaries, and common reactions individuals may encounter when asserting their boundaries.*

**Keywords:** Personal Boundaries; Psychological Well-Being; Stress Reduction; Emotional Regulation; Enhanced Self-Esteem; Interpersonal Relationships

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## 1. Introduction

The term *boundaries* is frequently employed in conversation, yet it is often not fully understood. In its most fundamental sense, boundaries denote the rules of engagement (Mayo Clinic, 2023). The American Psychological Association (APA, 2025) delineates a boundary as a psychological demarcation that protects the integrity of an individual or group or that helps the person or group set realistic limits on participation in a relationship or activity. According to Moore (2022), boundaries refer to the standards one establishes to safeguard one's well-being by determining what one will and will not tolerate. Consequently, it can be posited that boundaries represent interpersonal limits that relate to the internal guidelines individuals formulate for their interactions with the other people (Chernata, 2024; Rosenberg, 2017). These interpersonal limits are influenced by an individual's personality, cultural background, and situational context (Nash, 2018). Having conceptualised the concept of boundaries, it is crucial to consider their significance. According to Chernata (2024), the creation and maintenance of personal boundaries are vital in modern society. Essentially, boundaries determine the types of behaviour, communication, or influence that one is willing to accept from others, as well as what one is ready to give or receive in interpersonal exchanges (Chernata, 2024; Lee, 2020). In basic terms, people need limits in their lives to safeguard their mental and emotional health, which are essential components of their psychological well-being (Lee, 2020; Rosenberg, 2017). As noted by Tawwab (2021), establishing clear personal boundaries is crucial for preventing self-overextension; they define roles within relationships; they convey acceptable

and unacceptable behaviours; they facilitate the development of healthy relationships; and ultimately, they provide clarity.

In her book *Good Boundaries and Goodbyes*, Terkeurst (2022) declares that health cannot bond with unhealth. Furthermore, she adds that *where there is an abundance of chaos, there is usually a lack of good boundaries* (Terkeurst, 2022). When individuals struggle to establish and communicate their personal boundaries effectively, *chaos* is likely to emerge across various aspects of their lives, including family dynamics, workplace interactions, romantic relationships, and friendships. Ultimately, the absence of clearly defined boundaries may lead to violations of one's interpersonal limits by others, which can adversely impact psychological well-being. Chernata (2024) and Huckabee (2025) emphasise that the establishment of healthy personal boundaries is essential for maintaining psychological well-being. Through an analysis of existing research and literature, this theoretical paper aims to examine the significance of boundary-setting and its influence on psychological well-being.

## 2. Statement of The Problem

Personal boundaries constitute a foundational concept in contemporary psychology, capturing critical dimensions of both intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning (Moiseeva et al., 2020). This construct has garnered increasing scholarly and clinical attention due to its significant implications for emotional well-being, relational quality, and overall mental health. In the context of modern society, characterised by rapid and pervasive transformations across social, cultural, and technological domains, the ability to establish and maintain healthy personal boundaries has become increasingly vital (Gabbard, 2017; Hearn et al., 2021). These conditions often pose challenges to individual identity and psychological stability, accentuating the relevance of boundaries as a protective and regulatory mechanism (Chernata, 2024).

## 3. Rationale for Theoretical Review

The rationale for focussing on this topic is because the researcher found very limited academic journal articles specifically on the topic of personal boundaries and psychological well-being. After much searching, one journal article could be identified in the recent years. Chernata (2024) wrote a theoretical research paper entitled 'Personal boundaries: Definitions, role, and impact on mental health' and this article was published in *Personality and Environmental Issues*, Volume 3, Issue 1. This article explores what personal boundaries are, how they function, and why they are crucial to psychological well-being. The author argues that healthy personal boundaries are vital for psychological stability and interpersonal health.

Much of the existing literature focuses on the *management of psychological separations between work life and personal life*. In a database search over the past ten years (2015 – 2025), several academic journal articles focussing on the topic of boundaries highlight the imbalance or conflict between work life and personal life, due to the lack of establishing clear boundaries (Meller et al., 2021; Michaelides, 2024; Unger, 2023; Weiss & Ortlieb, 2024). Furthermore, several well-established psychologists and scholars have written academic and semi-academic books that explore the intersection of personal boundaries, drawing on theory, research, and clinical practice.

Earlier texts dating from the 1990s, along with those from the 2000s, are presented in the following table:

**Table 1: A précis of academic and semi-academic literature examining the relationship between personal boundaries and psychological well-being.**

Authors	Year	Title	Focus
Carla Wills-Brandon	1990	<i>Learning to say no: Establishing healthy boundaries</i>	Boundary-building strategies
Anné Katherine	1991; 1993	<i>Boundaries: Where you end and I begin</i>	Emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual boundaries, and how to assert them in relationships
Henry Cloud and John Townsend	1992	<i>When to say yes; how to say no to take control of your life</i>	Christian-integrated psychology to help individuals take personal responsibility for setting boundaries
Rokelle Lerner	1995	<i>Living in the comfort zone: The gift of boundaries in relationships</i>	Boundaries in relationships
Anne Cope Wallace	1997	<i>Setting psychological boundaries: A handbook for women</i>	Boundaries in women's lives
Svetlana Nartova-Bochaver	2003	<i>Psychological space sovereignty</i>	Boundaries in adolescence and adulthood
Anné Katherine	2006	<i>Where to draw the line</i>	Personal boundaries and emotional well-being
Nina Brown	2006	<i>The destructive narcissistic pattern</i>	Boundaries in relationships, particularly narcissistic individuals
Anne Linden	2008	<i>Boundaries in human relationships: How to be separate and connected</i>	Bridges theory with clinical practice
Brené Brown	2012	<i>Daring greatly</i>	Emotional-setting as part of authentic living
Nancy Levin	2020	<i>Setting boundaries will set you free</i>	Emotional boundaries
Terri Cole	2021	<i>Boundary boss: The essential guide to talk true, be seen, and finally live free</i>	Women's empowerment through boundary setting
Brené Brown	2021	<i>Atlas of the heart</i>	Emotional-setting as part of authentic living
Nedra Glover Tawwab	2021	<i>Set boundaries, find peace: A guide to reclaiming yourself</i>	Combining clinical psychology with practical tools. Book encourages small actionable changes over time, not instant transformation

Given the preceding discussion and reflecting on the tabulated information, contemporary research exploring the psychological impact of personal boundary-setting on individual well-being is particularly timely and relevant.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

The concept of personal boundaries is deeply rooted in a variety of psychological theories that explain how individuals establish and maintain limits in interpersonal relationships, professional contexts, and self-regulation practices. These theoretical frameworks highlight the fundamental role boundaries play in promoting psychological well-being (OpenAI, 2025).

##### 4.1 Attachment Theory

In pursuance with Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978) attachment theory posits that the quality of early caregiver-child relationships plays a foundational role in shaping an individual's attachment style, which subsequently affects their ability to form and sustain healthy interpersonal boundaries. Secure attachments foster emotional safety and autonomy, both of which are facilitated by clear and flexible boundaries (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). On the other hand, inconsistent or overly rigid boundaries are often related to anxious or avoidant attachment styles, which can undermine psychological well-being by increasing relational distress and emotional insecurity. Therefore, cultivating secure attachment patterns through the

establishment of appropriate personal boundaries is important for reducing anxiety and enhancing relational and emotional health (Lo et al., 2020).

#### 4.2 Self-Determination Theory

Scholars Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) developed the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which accentuates autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs. Boundaries serve as mechanisms through which individuals protect their autonomy and maintain a healthy balance between personal needs and external demands. Research has shown that individuals with well-defined boundaries experience greater intrinsic motivation, psychological resilience, and life satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). In contrast, blurred or absent boundaries are linked to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and diminished well-being, particularly in caregiving or high-demand environments (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Roth et al., 2019).

#### 4.3 Cognitive-Behavioural Theory

Cognitive-Behavioural Theory (CBT) emphasises the interchange between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in shaping psychological outcomes (Beck, 1967; Ellis, 1957). From this perspective, boundaries impact cognitive schemas and self-talk related to self-worth and interpersonal expectations. For example, maladaptive beliefs such as “I must always say yes” can result in chronic boundary violations, leading to increased stress and reduced well-being (Hofmann et al., 2012). CBT-based interventions often aim to reform these cognitive distortions, thereby permitting individuals to assert boundaries that align with their values and mental health needs (Behar et al., 2020).

### 5. Types and Levels of Boundaries

#### 5.1 Types of Boundaries

Contemporary psychologists often classify personal boundaries into four distinct categories, namely: physical, emotional, mental, and time boundaries. Additionally, they identify three different levels of these boundaries, namely: porous, rigid, and healthy.

- i. **Physical boundaries:** These boundaries pertain to your personal space, the nature of physical contact, and your autonomy over your body. Upholding these boundaries is vital for ensuring your comfort and safety in different settings (Chernata, 2024; Mundi, 2024, Tawwab, 2021). Lee (2020) argues that individuals are entitled to bodily autonomy and preferences, no matter what they are.
- ii. **Emotional boundaries:** Emotional boundaries serve to safeguard your feelings and emotional well-being. They empower you to determine the extent of emotional investment you wish to make in others, helping to prevent emotional exhaustion (Chernata, 2024; Mundi, 2024; Tawwab, 2021).
- iii. **Mental boundaries:** Mental boundaries involve discerning which ideas, beliefs, or thoughts you are open to engaging with and recognising when you need to take a mental pause (Chernata, 2024; Mundi, 2024).
- iv. **Time boundaries:** Establishing boundaries around your time is key to achieving a healthy work-life balance, enabling you to dedicate time to relaxation, hobbies, and personal connections. Effective time management is vital for preventing burnout (Lee, 2020; Chernata, 2024; Mundi, 2024; Tawwab, 2021).

## 5.2 Levels of Boundaries

The aforementioned types of boundaries exist on a spectrum from porous to rigid, as can be seen in the following figure:



**Figure 1: The boundaries spectrum**

### 5.2.1 Porous Boundaries (*Too open; Lack of limits*)

As explicated by Lee (2020) and Tawwab (2021), porous boundaries are weak or poorly expressed limitations, and unintentionally harmful. They lead to feeling depleted, overextending oneself, depression, anxiety, and unhealthy relationship dynamics. People with porous boundaries tend to sacrifice their own needs to make others happy (Moore, 2022). People with porous boundaries often sacrifice their free time and do not prioritise self-care. They end up feeling overwhelmed and burned out in an attempt to please everyone (Lee, 2020). Individuals who have lax boundaries often struggle to say no to others and may have trouble speaking up for their wants and desires, primarily to avoid disappointing others (Moore, 2022). Porous boundaries manifest in the following ways: oversharing, co-dependency, enmeshment, inability to say no, people pleasing dependency on feedback from others and accepting mistreatment (Lee, 2020; Tawwab, 2021).

According to OpenAI (2025), the following list are **practical examples of porous boundaries:**

#### **Porous physical boundaries**

- Allowing people to invade personal space without discomfort (e.g., standing too close, hugging everyone regardless of comfort level).
- Letting others use your personal belongings (e.g., cell phone, clothes, or workspace) without setting limits.
- Keeping your doors unlocked or not minding if someone enters your room uninvited.
- Feeling uncomfortable saying “no” when someone touches you in a way that makes you uneasy.

#### **Porous emotional boundaries**

- Oversharing personal struggles with people who have not earned your trust.
- Absorbing others’ emotions to the point of feeling emotionally exhausted.
- Feeling responsible for other people’s happiness and abandoning your own needs.
- Letting people guilt-trip you into doing things you do not want to do.
- Struggling to say “no” when others ask for emotional support, even when you are overwhelmed.

#### **Porous mental boundaries**

- Easily swayed by the opinions of others without engaging in critical evaluation.
- Finding it hard to express your own views during discussions due to a fear of conflict.
- Permitting others to make choices on your behalf, even in relation to personal matters.
- Experiencing a sense of obligation to concur with everyone in order to prevent discord.
- Allowing others to frequently interrupt or disregard your ideas without standing up for yourself.

### **Porous time boundaries**

- Saying “yes” to every request, even when you do not have time.
- Constantly working overtime without setting restrictions, leading to burnout.
- Allowing others to disturb your work or personal time without addressing it.
- Spending excessive time on social media, television or distractions, and thereby disregarding priorities.
- Abandoning personal plans to accommodate others, even when unnecessary.

### **5.2.2 Rigid Boundaries** (*Too closed; Overly strict*)

As indicated by Lee (2020) and Tawwab (2021), rigid boundaries involve building walls to keep others out as a way to keep oneself safe. It is interesting to note that whereas porous boundaries lead to unhealthy closeness (i.e. enmeshment), rigid ones are a self-protective mechanism meant to build distance. This type comes from a fear of vulnerability or a history of being taken advantage of. Rigid boundaries manifest in never sharing, building walls, avoiding vulnerability, cutting people out, having high expectations of others, and enforcing strict rules (Lee, 2020; Tawwab, 2021).

As stated by OpenAI (2025), the list below provides **practical examples of rigid boundaries**:

#### **Rigid physical boundaries**

- Dodging all physical contact, including handshakes or friendly pats on the back, even when culturally appropriate.
- Refusing to let anyone enter your personal space, including close friends or family.
- Keeping physical distance excessively large even in safe or intimate settings.
- Feeling highly uncomfortable with any form of touch, even in non-threatening situations.

#### **Rigid emotional boundaries**

- Not expressing emotions even when it is necessary or appropriate.
- Avoiding emotional intimacy in relationships, fearing vulnerability.
- Dismissing others’ emotions or invalidating their feelings.
- Refusing to ask for help or emotional support, even when needed.
- Cutting people off at the first sign of conflict instead of addressing issues.

#### **Rigid mental boundaries**

- Refusing to consider new ideas or perspectives, even when presented with evidence.
- Dismissing others’ opinions as wrong without listening or engaging in discussion.
- Being unwilling to compromise or adjust your thinking in relationships or at work.
- Rejecting feedback or constructive criticism, assuming you are always right.
- Avoiding conversations with people who have different viewpoints.

#### **Rigid time boundaries**

- Refusing to be flexible with your schedule, even when it is sensible to adjust.
- Not making any time for socialising, family, or self-care due to a strict work or study schedule.
- Blocking out all spontaneous activities, making life overly rigid.
- Expecting others to follow your schedule exactly, without considering their needs.
- Getting upset when unexpected delays slightly disrupt your plans.

### 5.2.3 Healthy Boundaries (*Balanced and respectful*)

Healthy boundaries manifest through being clear about your values, sharing with others appropriately, having a healthy vulnerability with people who have earned your trust, being comfortable saying no, being comfortable hearing the word no without taking it personally, and saying no without apologising because it is the healthiest choice for you (Tawwab, 2021). Healthy boundaries therefore require much effort to establish and maintain (Mayo Clinic, 2023). According to Moore (2022), having healthy boundaries allows you to separate yourself from others and take care of yourself in a way that does not make you feel burnt out. Additionally, Huckabee (2025) argues that healthy boundaries involve personal commitments, not commands, and enforcing boundaries mean *acting* on them, rather than solely stating them. According to OpenAI (2025), the following list presents **practical examples of healthy boundaries**:

#### Healthy physical boundaries

- Being comfortable with personal space and adjusting it based on the relationship and context (e.g., allowing close friends to hug you but maintaining space with acquaintances).
- Politely saying “I prefer a handshake instead of a hug” when needed.
- Locking your room or personal spaces while still welcoming trusted people when appropriate.
- Sharing belongings selectively (e.g., lending a jacket to a friend but not letting everyone take your personal items).

#### Healthy emotional boundaries

- Sharing personal emotions selectively, based on trust and relationship depth.
- Offering support without taking on others’ emotional burdens as your own.
- Recognising that you are responsible for your emotions, not others’ feelings.
- Saying “I understand you are upset, but I need time to process my own emotions too.”
- Allowing yourself to feel and express emotions without fear of judgment while respecting others’ emotional needs.

#### Healthy mental boundaries

- Listening to others’ perspectives while critically evaluating information before accepting or rejecting it.
- Expressing your thoughts and beliefs confidently without fear of judgment.
- Respecting differences in opinion without feeling threatened or defensive.
- Being open to learning and growing, while maintaining your core values.
- Engaging in healthy debates without feeling the need to control or dominate conversations.

#### Healthy time boundaries

- Prioritising important tasks while allowing room for flexibility.
- Scheduling personal time for rest, hobbies, and social life without guilt.
- Setting clear expectations with others about your availability (e.g., “I’m free after 18:00”).
- Saying “I can’t take on extra work right now” when your schedule is already full.
- Managing distractions and allocating time intentionally to avoid procrastination.

## 6. Boundaries in Different Contexts

According to Tawwab (2021), boundaries need to be firmly established within different contexts, namely family, work, romance, and friendships. When effectively implemented, boundaries promote respect, autonomy, and psychological stability; however, when neglected, they often lead to resentment, stress, and emotional exhaustion.

### 6.1 Boundaries in Family Relationships

Family boundaries refer to the limitations and regulations that individuals establish to safeguard their emotional well-being, personal space, and time. Numerous researchers argue that these boundaries are essential for nurturing healthy relationships, fostering respect, and ensuring that individual needs are fulfilled (Charles et al., 2021; Hall & Fiese, 2020). Family boundaries play a vital role in encouraging respect, protecting well-being, nurturing healthy relationships, and facilitating individual growth (Peterson & Green, 2022). Moreover, other scholars assert that well-defined family boundaries are fundamental for cultivating respect, ensuring emotional safety, and fostering mutual understanding among family members (Johnson & Ray, 2023).

It is important to note that the establishment of boundaries is closely allied with family well-being and mental health outcomes. Various scholars highlight that individual who struggle to set and respect boundaries regularly encounter increased stress, emotional fatigue, and relational conflicts (Tawwab, 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2024). Conversely, the practice of boundary setting is linked to enhanced communication, mutual respect, and personal empowerment within the family context (Lee & Kim, 2023).

Within this particular context, boundaries may encompass physical, emotional, and time-related dimensions of family interactions. The table below illustrates practical examples of physical, emotional, mental, and time boundaries within the family setting.

**Table 2: Practical examples of boundaries within the family context**

Type of boundary	Definition	Practical examples
<b>Physical boundaries</b>	Refers to personal space and physical touch within the family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knocking before entering a bedroom.</li> <li>- Setting rules around physical affection.</li> <li>- Designating private areas (e.g., a home office or bathroom).</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional boundaries</b>	Involves managing emotional responsibility and regulating emotional closeness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not venting adult problems to children.</li> <li>- Respecting when a family member says they need space.</li> <li>- Validating but not absorbing others' emotions.</li> </ul>
<b>Mental boundaries</b>	Relates to protecting thoughts, values, beliefs, and intellectual autonomy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agreeing to disagree on certain topics.</li> <li>- Not mocking or dismissing ideas.</li> <li>- Encouraging autonomy in decision-making (e.g., choosing clothing or school subjects).</li> </ul>
<b>Time boundaries</b>	Involves how time is structured, protected, and shared within the family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting aside individual downtime</li> <li>- Establishing consistent family routines.</li> <li>- Balancing family and personal commitments</li> </ul>

### 6.2 Boundaries in The Workplace

Establishing boundaries in professional settings is key for fostering effective collaboration, ensuring psychological well-being, and promoting organisational success (Clark et al., 2022; Milligan & Cross, 2023). In addition, various authors emphasise that the capacity to establish and honour boundaries in the workplace leads to healthier work relationships, alleviates burnout, and boosts productivity (Tawwab, 2021; Zhang & Richards, 2024). The subsequent

table presents practical illustrations of emotional, physical, temporal, digital, and task-based boundaries.

**Table 3: Practical examples of workplace boundaries**

Boundary type	Practical examples in the workplace
<b>Emotional boundaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not taking on coworkers' emotional burdens.</li> <li>- Seeking support when emotionally overwhelmed.</li> <li>- Communicating respectfully during conflict without personal attacks.</li> </ul>
<b>Physical boundaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintaining personal space in open-plan offices.</li> <li>- Using closed doors or headphones to reduce interruptions.</li> <li>- Respecting others' physical space and comfort zones.</li> </ul>
<b>Temporal (Time) boundaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Logging off at the end of the workday.</li> <li>- Not checking emails after work hours unless urgent.</li> <li>- Blocking time for focused work without meetings.</li> </ul>
<b>Digital boundaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Turning off notifications during non-work hours.</li> <li>- Using separate accounts or devices for work and personal use.</li> <li>- Setting expectations for response times in emails or chats.</li> </ul>
<b>Task-based boundaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Delegating tasks appropriately based on roles.</li> <li>- Saying no to tasks that fall outside of one's job scope.</li> <li>- Clarifying responsibilities to avoid overload or confusion.</li> </ul>

According to a number of contemporary scholars, while boundaries are essential within organisations, they are frequently challenged or violated due to hierarchical structures, excessive workloads, blurred roles, and organisational cultures that prioritise constant availability over employee well-being (Clark et al., 2022; Milligan & Cross, 2023; Zhang & Richards, 2024). Employees often struggle to assert boundaries for fear of being perceived as uncooperative or lacking commitment, which can intensify stress and reduce job satisfaction (Clark, 2000; Johnson & Lee, 2021). The rise of an “always-on” culture, driven by constant connectivity through digital devices, has made it increasingly challenging for employees to disengage after work hours, contributing to work–life conflict, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2020; Kim & Park, 2022; Tawwab, 2021).

Furthermore, cultural norms significantly shape boundary-setting behaviours; for example, collectivist cultures often emphasise group harmony and may discourage direct boundary assertion, whereas individualist cultures tend to promote personal autonomy and assertiveness in maintaining boundaries (Hofstede, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2023; Lee & Kim, 2023). These factors together underscore the complexity of boundary management in contemporary organisational contexts and the need for supportive policies to safeguard employee well-being.

### 6.3 Boundaries in Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are founded on emotional intimacy, trust, communication, and mutual respect. In this intricate dynamic, boundaries play a vital role in preserving individual autonomy while fostering relational closeness. Boundaries in romantic partnerships encompass the emotional, physical, mental, and digital limits that partners set to delineate acceptable behaviours, expectations, and responsibilities (Tawwab, 2021). As contemporary couples face challenges such as cohabitation, digital intimacy, and evolving gender roles, the establishment of clear boundaries has become increasingly critical for relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being.

Boundaries in romantic settings can be classified into several dimensions: emotional, physical, sexual, digital, financial, and time related.

- Emotional boundaries assist individuals in maintaining their sense of self and preventing excessive dependence. For instance, acknowledging a partner's need for emotional space during conflicts can diminish reactivity and improve self-regulation (Verywell Mind, 2023).
- Physical and sexual boundaries pertain to comfort levels regarding touch, personal space, and consensual sexual activities. Upholding consent and bodily autonomy is fundamental to ethical intimacy (Lehmiller, 2020).
- Digital boundaries encompass norms related to social media, device access, and online communication with others. In light of the widespread use of technology, couples are increasingly negotiating boundaries such as privacy in text messages or acceptable interactions on social media platforms (Luetke et al., 2021).
- Financial boundaries outline spending behaviours, budgeting practices, and resource sharing. These boundaries are particularly significant in long-term partnerships or cohabiting relationships.
- Time boundaries safeguard individual schedules, self-care, and social independence, enabling partners to sustain lives outside of the relationship (Tashiro, 2023).

Healthy boundaries play several essential roles in romantic relationships. They cultivate mutual respect, clarify expectations, minimise conflict, and enhance emotional safety. Hall and Fincham (2023) assert that partners who effectively communicate and honour personal boundaries experience greater relationship satisfaction, reduced levels of co-dependency, and increased emotional intimacy.

In the absence of boundaries, or when they are unclear or breached, the romantic relationship may face dysfunction. A lack of boundaries can result in emotional fusion, where personal identities are sacrificed for the relationship's sake. This often leads to feelings of resentment, anxiety, or burnout, particularly when one partner feels overwhelmed by the other's demands or expectations (Tawwab, 2021).

Indicators of unhealthy boundaries often include compliance driven by guilt, jealousy, control issues, and an inability to say "no" (Curtis et al., 2022). For example, a partner who demands unrestricted access to the other's phone without permission may be displaying controlling behaviour disguised as transparency. Such breaches can undermine trust and result in relational dissatisfaction or emotional abuse (Simmons & Barber, 2023).

#### **6.4 Boundaries in Friendships**

Friendships are crucial for providing emotional support and fostering social connections; however, their maintenance necessitates the establishment of clear boundaries that safeguard individual autonomy and promote mutual respect. Boundaries within friendships delineate acceptable behaviours, emotional exchanges, and communication styles. When these boundaries are honoured, friendships flourish based on trust and intimacy; conversely, ambiguous or breached boundaries can lead to conflict and emotional turmoil.

Boundaries serve to balance intimacy with independence, elucidating expectations regarding privacy, emotional sharing, and time commitments (Petronio, 2020). For instance, one friend may prefer regular communication, while another may prioritise personal space. As per Gottman and Silver (2015), acknowledging and respecting these preferences enhances the relationship.

Establishing boundaries within friendships can prove challenging due to fears regarding rejection or potential conflict. Individuals might refrain from asserting their limits in an effort to maintain harmony, which can lead to feelings of resentment. Furthermore, cultural and gender norms play a significant role in shaping the perception and maintenance of boundaries (Nguyen & Chen, 2020). Effective boundary-setting necessitates transparent communication, self-awareness, and empathy. Friends ought to articulate their needs early on and reassess boundaries as the relationship develops (Petronio, 2020; Kawamura et al., 2021).

## 7. The Role of Boundaries in Psychological Well-Being

In pursuance with Rozenberg (2020), contraventions of boundaries can lead to a persistent feeling of stress and overload, the emergence of emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression, anger, conflicts in interactions with other individuals, loss of self-identification and psychosomatic manifestations such as insomnia, decreased immunity and overall deterioration of health. Thus, having clearly established and well-articulated boundaries play a vital role in an individual's psychological well-being. To be more specific, an individual's well-being is positively affected through stress reduction, emotional regulation, enhanced self-esteem, and enhanced interpersonal relationships, as illustrated in the following figure:

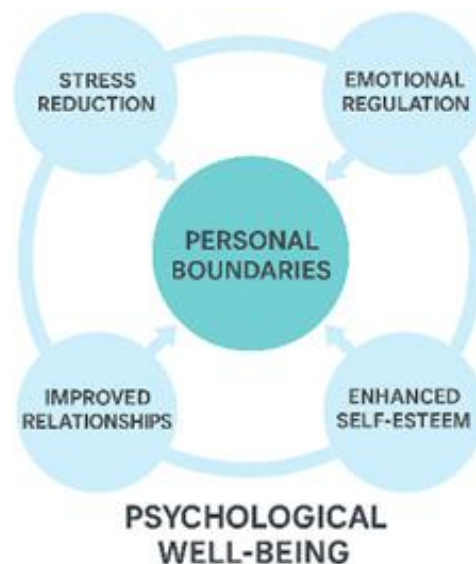


Figure 2: Establishing personal boundaries as a pathway to psychological well-being

### 7.1 Stress Reduction

Effective boundary-setting allows individuals to manage demands and expectations efficiently, thus avoiding overcommitment and emotional exhaustion. When individuals clearly express their parameters, they reduce the likelihood of role overload and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Research shows that those with stronger boundary-setting skills experience lower levels of chronic stress, particularly in high-pressure environments (Glaser et al., 2015). By reducing unwanted obligations, boundaries serve as a shielding measure against the negative effects of stress (Hobfoll, 2011).

### 7.2 Emotional Regulation

Boundaries are crucial for emotional regulation as they help individuals recognise and address their emotional needs more effectively. When boundaries are respected, individuals can better manage emotional triggers and avoid overwhelming interpersonal situations (Gross, 2015). Research indicates that individuals with well-defined boundaries demonstrate greater

emotional clarity, reduced emotional reactivity, and an improved capacity to utilise adaptive coping strategies (Aldao et al., 2010). This ability for emotional self-regulation enhances overall psychological resilience and decreases vulnerability to mood disorders (Berking & Whitley, 2014).

### **7.3 Enhanced Self-Esteem**

Establishing healthy boundaries is closely linked to nurturing a positive sense of self-worth. When individuals articulate their needs and protect their emotional and physical space, they emphasise the internal belief that their feelings, values, and overall well-being hold significance (Brown, 2012). Ongoing experiences of affirming boundaries can boost self-confidence and reduce tendencies towards people-pleasing or self-neglect (Neff & Germer, 2017).

### **7.4 Improved Interpersonal Relationships**

Boundaries play a crucial role in fostering healthy, respectful, and mutually satisfying relationships. Clearly defined boundaries improve communication, reduce conflict, and create predictability in social interactions (Hall & Fincham, 2005). When individuals are able to assert their limits while respecting the boundaries of others, it cultivates relational trust and emotional safety (Tatkin, 2012). Furthermore, research suggests that the practice of establishing boundaries encourages healthier attachment styles and lessens co-dependency in both intimate and family relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). As a result, this contributes to a more supportive and balanced social environment that enhances psychological well-being.

## **8. The Costs of Avoidance of Boundary-Setting and Its Effect on Psychological Well-Being**

Personal boundaries are essential for maintaining psychological well-being, yet many individuals struggle to define or uphold them. The absence of healthy boundaries can lead to significant psychological costs, particularly in the domains of stress, emotional exhaustion, identity confusion, low self-esteem, and interpersonal dysfunction.

One of the most immediate consequences of poor boundary-setting is chronic stress. When individuals fail to assert limits in their personal or professional lives, they often become overextended and overwhelmed by the demands of others (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This can result in burnout, particularly in caregiving or high-demand roles, where emotional labour is intensified by an inability to say no (Glaser et al., 2015). The ongoing stress associated with boundary violations contributes to physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and sleep disturbances, which further diminish well-being (Hobfoll, 2011).

In addition to stress, emotional dysregulation is a common outcome of blurred or absent boundaries. When individuals are unable to protect themselves from emotional intrusions, such as criticism, manipulation, or excessive demands, they may experience heightened emotional reactivity and internal conflict (Gross, 2015). Over time, this can contribute to anxiety, irritability, and depressive symptoms, as emotional energy is depleted without adequate replenishment (Berking & Whitley, 2014).

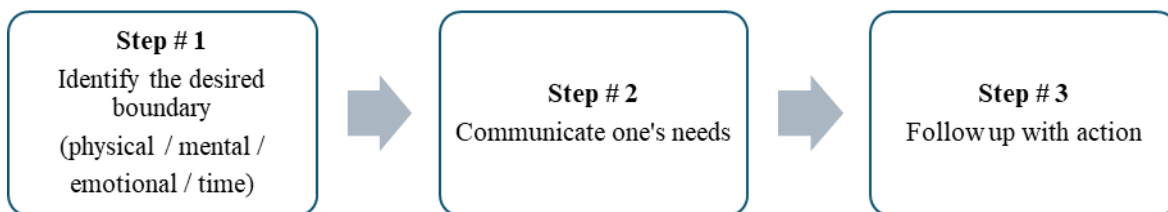
The lack of boundaries also undermines self-esteem. People who constantly prioritise the needs of others at the expense of their own well-being may internalise the belief that their value is dependent on external validation or compliance (Brown, 2012). This self-neglect fosters feelings of resentment, guilt, and self-doubt, leading to a fragile sense of self-worth. Neff and

Germer (2017) emphasise that individuals who do not protect their emotional space often struggle to develop self-compassion and confidence.

Furthermore, interpersonal relationships can suffer significantly when boundaries are not maintained. Without clear limits, relationships may become enmeshed, codependent, or marked by imbalance and conflict (Hall & Fincham, 2005). The absence of boundaries impedes open communication and mutual respect, often resulting in emotional strain and disconnection. Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) note that insecure attachment patterns, which are commonly associated with poor boundary-setting, contribute to relational distress and reduced psychological security.

## 9. Steps for Setting and Enforcing Boundaries

Whenever individuals would like to establish and implement a boundary – whether it be a physical, emotional, mental or time boundary, they need to be cognisant of three essential processes, namely (1) *identification*, (2) *communication* and (3) *action*. These processes are simply illustrated in the following schematic:



**Figure 3: Processes involved in establishing and implementing boundaries**

**Step # 1** – In order to establish healthy boundaries, individuals firstly need to identify the desired boundary which they would like to establish – be it physical, emotional, mental, or time.

**Step # 2** – People cannot accurately assume one’s boundaries based on one’s body language or unspoken expectations. When one explicitly states what one expects, there is little room for others to misinterpret what works for one (Tawwab, 2021). Assertive yet respectful statements are the best way to communicate (Huckabee, 2025). Nash (2018) argues that setting healthy boundaries require communication skills that convey assertiveness and clarity. Moore (2022) agrees with the latter scholar by arguing that when setting limits with other individuals, one can calmly and assertively state what one will and will not tolerate by enforcing one’s boundaries. When trying to set better boundaries, being assertive and direct helps convey your message respectfully. When making assertive statements, using “I” statements can be extremely beneficial, as these do not automatically make the other person feel defensive (Moore, 2022).

**Step # 3** - When it comes to taking action, individuals who establish healthy boundaries must demonstrate their commitments through their behaviour. Upholding your boundaries through your actions is the most effective way for others to recognise your seriousness, which in turn encourages those around you to take your boundaries seriously as well (Tawwab, 2021).

## 10. Common Responses When Sharing Boundaries

Common ways in which people respond when one shares one's boundaries may include any of the following: pushback, limit testing, ignoring, rationalising and questioning, defensiveness, ghosting, silent treatment, and acceptance, in accordance with one of the leading experts in the field of boundaries. Nedra Glover Tawwab has written a contemporary book entitled *Set boundaries; find peace: A guide to reclaiming yourself*. In the aforementioned book, she speaks extensively on the topic of common responses which may occur when individuals share boundaries (Tawwab, 2021). The initial seven responses delineate unhealthy and immature responses that individuals may display when other people have communicated their boundaries. Acceptance is the healthiest way to respond to boundaries and is a sign of a functional mutual relationship.

**Pushback** – In accordance with the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2025), pushback refers to the action of forcing an object backward, or the resistance of opposition in response to a policy or regulation especially by those affected. Therefore, within the context of boundaries, pushback refers to the resistance, questioning, or opposition expressed by others when a boundary is communicated or enforced, as delineated by various scholars (Petronio, 2020). The aforementioned scholars argue that this type of response often stems from a perception of restricted autonomy, loss of control, or a mismatch in expectations about the relationship. Moreover, pushback may manifest as verbal objections, attempts to renegotiate or test the boundary, emotional reactions such as anger and defensiveness, or indirect resistance such as withdrawal (Steindl et al., 2015). Tawwab (2021) argues that the aforementioned ways of expressing pushback are quite typical within interpersonal relationships, however, if someone respects another person, they will respect when a boundary is set.

**Limit testing** – Within the context of personal and relational boundaries, various scholars have described limit testing as the behaviour in which individuals deliberately challenge or probe established rules, restrictions, or expectations to assess their firmness, flexibility, or the likelihood of enforcement (Petronio, 2020; Steindl et al., 2015). Furthermore, it is noted that limit testing often occurs when a boundary is newly introduced, inconsistently applied, or perceived as negotiable (Petronio, 2020; Steindl et al., 2015). It can therefore be argued that limit testing is a common interpersonal strategy where individuals deliberately pushes boundaries to see how other people will respond.

**Ignoring** – Based on the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2025) ignoring refers to the deliberate act of disregarding or paying no attention to the personal limits or needs expressed by another individual. In relationships, ignoring established boundaries can undermine trust and contribute to psychological distress. As mentioned by Tawwab (2021) people tend to ignore boundaries as a passive aggressive way of pretending that they did not hear them. If an individual evidently ignores someone when a boundary is clearly communicated, Tawwab (2021) recommends that the boundary is restated assertively. It is advised that the person underscores the importance of the change moving forward.

**Rationalising and Questioning** – As noted by Tawwab (2021), when an individual starts to establish boundaries regarding behaviours they once tolerated, others might react by justifying their own actions as acceptable and by questioning the newly set limits. For instance, if a person has already indicated that they are unable to assist a friend with moving, the friend might challenge this boundary by inquiring, "Why can't you help me move? I would help you move." To effectively handle such rationalising or questioning, it is advisable for individuals to refrain

from excessive explanations. Responses should be concise and assertive, as offering too much detail can result in unnecessary back-and-forth discussions (Tawwab, 2021).

**Defensiveness** – In the context of interpersonal boundaries, defensiveness refers to psychological stance where an individual exhibits resistance or sensitivity to perceived criticism or challenges, often as a means of protecting themselves from emotional discomfort or perceived threats (OpenAI, 2025). In accordance with Tawwab (2021), defensive people are not listening while an individual speaks; they are personalising what one says and crafting a response.

**Ghosting** - The phenomenon of ghosting has garnered extensive attention in recent times. Psychology Today (2019) describes ghosting as ending communication with someone else without explanation. Lefebvre et al. (2019) adds that ghosting typically can occur in dating contexts, friendships, and professional settings. Some people see ghosting as an extreme form of boundary enforcement. As stated by Koessle et al. (2019). Certain individuals would prefer to simply deliberately *disappear* rather than putting clear boundaries in place. Petronio (2020) points out that ghosting can be seen as unilateral withdrawal from a relationship. As per Child and Petronio (2020), the ghoster regains full control by ending communication, oftentimes suddenly. Furthermore, other academics argue that by disengaging abruptly, individuals seek to protect their autonomy or avoid conflict (Steinl et al., 2015). Ghosting may lead to emotions such as feelings such as confusion, hurt, rejection, and also lowered self-esteem (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Thus, it can be argued that while ghosting may serve the needs of the initiator, it often leaves the recipient in a state of boundary ambiguity (OpenAI, 2025). The lack of closure in the relationship increases the likelihood of psychological distress (Koessle et al., 2019).

**Silent treatment** – As demonstrated by Tawwab (2021), an individual may be noticeably distant after a person has assert their need/s. Silent treatment may appear as going for hours or days without talking or providing short responses to passive-aggressively express upset.

**Acceptance** - Acceptance refers to the acknowledgement and respect of another person's limits and autonomy within a relationship (Klussman et al., 2022). As indicated by Tawwab (2021), acceptance is the healthy way to respond to boundaries and is a sign of a functional mutual relationship.

When an individual articulates their boundaries, the reactions from others can vary significantly, ranging from unhealthy to healthy responses. Common negative reactions encompass pushback, limit testing, ignoring, rationalising, questioning, defensiveness, ghosting, and the silent treatment. Each of these behaviours signifies a form of resistance, disrespect, or avoidance of the established boundary. Such responses can undermine trust and inflict emotional distress. Conversely, acceptance represents the most constructive response and signifies a functional, respectful relationship (Tawwab, 2021; Klussman et al., 2022).

## 11. Conclusion

In summary, personal boundaries play an essential role in promoting well-being, healthy relationships, and effective self-regulation. This discourse has demonstrated that clearly articulated boundaries permits people to direct interpersonal and professional interactions with greater clarity, confidence, and resilience. Conversely, ineffectively established or breached boundaries can result in adverse effects such as chronic stress, emotional instability, diminished self-worth, and dysfunctional relationships.

Ultimately, personal boundaries form the foundation of psychological well-being; they protect what is significant, define acceptable conduct, and enable individuals to thrive both autonomously and within relationships. Therefore, promoting an understanding of boundaries should be a fundamental focus in psychological education, therapeutic practices, and wider mental health conversations.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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