

## Expressing Love Through Setting Limits

It is vital that caregivers keep themselves in the equation of their own lives. Because caregiving can be difficult and often requires extraordinary commitment, energy, and time, caregivers can ignore their own needs. Over time, as they become absorbed in the care of their recipient, they can cease to care for their own well-being.

One important way that caregivers can take care of their own needs is to establish and maintain loving limits. Loving limits require establishing flexible boundaries. Loving limits require that people honestly give care with open communication.

Caregivers who ignore their own needs eventually burn out. Anger and frustration often accompany this phase. Burnout can develop when boundaries have been ill-defined, and when open and direct communication with the care recipient has not occurred.

Boundaries define emotional and behavioral limits. They act as parameters that define how caregiver–care recipient relationships work. Boundaries delineate what an individual will and will not accept in their own and others' behavior. Ill-defined or nonexistent boundaries set up the caregiver for problems and powerful negative emotional responses.

If boundaries are unclear or nonexistent, it is possible to change the situation and establish clear and reasonable boundaries. These tips can help.

- Explore the situation. Are you comfortable with the boundaries and routines you have established? If so, congratulations. If not, read on.
- Determine the care recipient's authentic needs. Are you meeting his or her needs? Are you meeting your own needs?
- How are you feeling? Are you often angry or frustrated? Do you feel burned out? If so, something in the caregiving routine must change. Caregivers cannot continue indefinitely when they are feeling strong negative emotions. Look at the situations that elicit strong emotions. These are probably areas where you will choose to establish stronger, more consistent boundaries. Remember, boundaries are often *felt out* rather than *figured out*. Listen to your feelings!
- Determine a plan of action for setting boundaries and maintaining them. Have a face-to-face, heart-to-heart conversation with the care recipient to discuss what is and is not working and why things need to change. There are three important aspects of this communication: First, define what is happening; second, describe how you are feeling; and third, define what you need to change to feel better. Explain how the two of you need to openly address issues and problem-solve situations together. Describe your relationship as a partnership.
- Take a personal time-out on a regular basis. Answer these questions: "How am I doing today?" "What do I need to do to improve my well-being?"
- Give yourself permission to change the routine.
- Seek help if you feel overwhelmed and can't see how to make changes.

