

# Caring for someone who is dependent on alcohol or another drug



## What are emotional boundaries?

Boundaries are our ideas about what we find acceptable and unacceptable in our relationships. We establish these rules in order to protect ourselves physically and emotionally. For example, you might be comfortable with a friend borrowing your car but not your clothes. We all have some lines that we do not allow others to cross.

Healthy boundaries are important in all relationships, but for carers it can be even more essential to have clear ideas and expectations of what is permissible to you.

One carer explained, *"I told him, I can't talk to you when you are drinking, don't contact me unless you are sober"* - carer for his brother who is dependent on alcohol.

This carer eventually decided that, for his own mental health, he needed to stop having contact with his brother.

*"He would keep calling at all hours, not sober, I've blocked his number."*

Boundary setting is an important part of self-care. But first you need to have a clear understanding of what limits you need. What request is too much for you? What can't you give? What are you currently doing that is harmful to you? Or harmful to the person you are caring for?

Another carer told us: *"he phones up all the time, asking for money, he always has a reason. But I have to keep on saying 'no' "* - carer for her son who uses ice and has a mental illness.

It is important for this carer to set a firm boundary around giving her son money. She told us that often is harder to say “no” but her son may use the money for drugs and that will be harmful for both of them.

## Setting boundaries

It can be difficult to set and then enforce boundaries with a person that you are caring for.

Barriers to setting boundaries might include:

- Carers are reluctant to put their own needs first
- They may feel guilty about, or responsible for, the person that they are supporting, this make it harder to say “no”
- Carers can be so tired and overwhelmed that giving in and allowing unacceptable behaviour may seem easier than standing their ground
- Carers can be afraid that if they are firm this will damage the relationship with the person they are caring for
- Some carers believe that by giving endlessly they are doing the right thing, they may not realise the importance of setting limits.

## Communication

Setting boundaries with a person that you love and support is not easy. It requires you to have difficult conversations about your own needs and requirements. Maintaining boundaries is hard work and requires frequent reinforcement and sometimes direct challenges.

One carer told us:

*“you try to stay calm and just keep repeating the message - I know it is hard for you but I can't give you any more money”* - carer for her son who uses ice and has a mental illness.

Most carers find that they cannot do this without help. A specialised support group or counsellor can be an essential resource in setting and maintaining boundaries.

Family alcohol and drug services can assist carers with education and support for themselves. Some services run groups for carers, family and friends, they will spend time addressing communication and boundary setting.



Carers can benefit from professional assistance, one-to-one counselling and attending peer support groups.

More information is available through Carers NSW [www.carersnsw.org.au](http://www.carersnsw.org.au) and Carer Gateway [www.carergateway.gov.au](http://www.carergateway.gov.au) or call 1800 422 737

Proudly funded by



Carers NSW thanks the many carers involved in the development of this information for sharing their experiences and suggestions for the benefit of other carers.