

Stress Reduction for Work-Life Balance

What to do: Reflect on your areas of frustration — the ones where there are conflicts or you feel powerless to act. Look at the five types of boundaries described in the first table below and the list of things you can and can't control in the second table. Decide which boundary types and spheres of influence apply to your frustrations and, consider how to manage them. Mark statements that stand out. Then, write yourself a script to have a discussion with the appropriate person or people involved — or with yourself!

Why it matters: Boundaries are emotional and physical guidelines, norms, or limits that define what's appropriate, safe, and permissible behavior for yourself and others. When others don't know about and respect individual and shared boundaries, stress can affect everyone's health and well-being. Likewise, when you understand what you can and can't control, you can let go of issues that cause frustration and focus on areas where you can have an impact.

Five Types of Boundaries

	What They Are	Scenario	What to Say	How to Do It
Physical Boundaries	Physical boundaries protect your personal space and physical needs.	<p>A student you've been working with for several months gives you a hug without asking. When you say, "That's enough," the student squeezes you tighter.</p> <p>Limited staffing has kept you engaged in several activities without a break. When you finally get a couple of minutes to</p>	<p>"I'd appreciate it if you ask me first."</p> <p>"I'd be happy to continue to help, but I desperately need a</p>	<p>Do use confident body language: face the person, make eye contact, and use a steady tone of voice at an appropriate volume.</p> <p>Do clearly explain what you want in easy-to-understand language.</p> <p>Do suggest holding a group meeting to share perspectives and discuss ways to better manage time.</p>



	What They Are	Scenario	What to Say	How to Do It
		yourself, the site coordinator asks you to delay your break to help with yet another activity.	break. I need to get some fresh air.”	<i>Don’t</i> assume other people can understand your needs or desires through nonverbal communication. <i>Don’t</i> assume that all people have the same boundaries.
Emotional Boundaries	Emotional boundaries separate your personal feelings from another’s feelings. This boundary requires a strong sense of self.	You’ve been working with your co-instructor for years. Lately, the two of you have often disagreed about what to prioritize during a program activity. Your co-instructor makes the final decision without you. You’re upset that you weren’t consulted, although the activity went well.	“I appreciate your taking the lead on the decision. But moving forward, can we discuss these things ahead of time so I can better understand your reasoning?”	<i>Do</i> be honest and respectful. It’s OK to be firm, but your message will be better received if you deliver it professionally.
				<i>Don’t</i> ignore your emotional needs: They may eventually come out in inappropriate ways, such as yelling, put-downs, or the silent treatment.
Work Boundaries	These boundaries include the physical, emotional, and mental limits you create between your personal life and professional commitments.	During your second week in your afterschool role, the program lead asks you to take over another activity located at the elementary school site. You’re hesitant to say “yes” because you have no background in the topic, nor do you have experience working with younger students.	“I’m not comfortable doing that task. I don’t know enough to do this well.”	<i>Do</i> share your expertise and knowledge to improve program quality. <i>Do</i> suggest ways to share the load with others. <i>Do</i> look for resources and technologies that can make work go more smoothly.



	What They Are	Scenario	What to Say	How to Do It
		You're at home and your site coordinator calls you about an email they just sent you. In the email, the site coordinator asks that you respond at your earliest convenience.	"I'll do that as soon as I get to the program tomorrow."	<p>Don't take on responsibilities that are outside your area of knowledge or scope of practice.</p> <p>Don't commit to unnecessary tasks that increase your stress or anxiety.</p> <p>Don't habitually devote nonwork hours to job responsibilities. Work is just one part of life.</p>
Mental Boundaries	Mental boundaries are limits involving thoughts, values, and opinions. These boundaries also help you distinguish your emotions from someone else's.	Your activity isn't going as planned. The students have lost focus and are no longer engaged in the task. As you feel your patience wearing thin, the activity instructor across the hall asks to combine her class with yours so she can take a break.	<p>"Let's meet halfway. How about we each take a 10-minute break and then work together?"</p> <p>Think to yourself: <i>This is just one activity. I can try again tomorrow.</i></p>	<p>Do plan ahead. Think about what you want to say, and how to say it, before starting a difficult discussion.</p> <p>Do consider other peoples' needs.</p>
				<p>Don't skip chances to compromise. Give-and-take is part of any healthy relationship.</p>
Time Boundaries	Time boundaries establish how you manage your time for things such as relationships,	To increase family engagement and a strong sense of community, the program director strongly encourages all staff to attend the boys basketball game on		<p>Do reserve your evenings or time off for personal and family time. Shut down your laptop or computer.</p> <p>Do communicate with your superior(s) about your availability.</p>



	What They Are	Scenario	What to Say	How to Do It
	family, work, and so on.	<p>Saturday. This isn't part of your employment agreement, and you already have plans for Saturday.</p> <p>You've worked long days for five months straight. You hide your irritability at work. Many nights, you dream about your students' hardships. On a planned day off, your site coordinator asks you to come in because the afterschool program is short staffed.</p>	<p>"That sounds exciting, but I'm not available."</p> <p>"Unfortunately, I'm not available. Is there another way I can help?"</p>	<p><i>Don't</i> ignore your personal needs when you work with or serve others.</p> <p><i>Don't</i> work for extended periods without breaks.</p>



What You Can and Can't Control

Here are examples of things you can and can't control. At work, what you can and can't control depends partly on your role in the out-of-school time. For example, a frontline staff member may not have control over program policies, but a program director does.

Sphere of Influence	What I CAN'T Control	What I CAN Control
Students	Thoughts Past educational experiences Behaviors History of trauma Growth patterns Developmental or learning impairments Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)	My relationships and rapport with students Responses to student behaviors De-escalation techniques My expectations for student learning Student group agreements Positive environment My behavior
Family and Peers	Students' home lives Economic status Family dynamics Friend groups Religious or societal beliefs Parent responses/reactions	Family engagement activities Communication with families Family empowerment and partnerships Building rapport between families and the program Boundaries Ground rules and social norms
Program and School	All decisions about program policies/procedures School-day curriculum Discipline policies School-day culture School district policies Out-of-school time staffing shortages	Communication with program leaders How I implement program activities Time allocated to work and program responsibilities Program culture and climate Promoting social skills and self-regulation Communication with school-day staff
Community	Presence and activities of community and social service organizations Social safety net	Forming community partnerships My presence in the community Engagement with support networks
Laws	Federal and State requirements, rules, laws, and guidelines	Compliance with regulations Voting or advocating for certain policies



Use this space to list actions you'll take to reduce stress and improve your work-life balance:

Use this space to write a script for a discussion you need to have with someone to follow through on your planned actions.

For example, if you're frequently asked to work extra hours because your program is understaffed, you might want to speak with your supervisor about possible solutions, like partnering with a nearby college or university to create opportunities for their education majors to get work experience in your program.

This resource was developed in 2024 by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at 21stcclcntac.org. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

