



Understanding, Communication and Boundaries: A Guide for Carers

Why This Matters

When someone you care about is struggling — with their mental health, eating concerns, trauma, or big life stressors — it's easy for communication to get tangled. You may feel unsure what to say, worried about saying the wrong thing, or pulled between wanting to help and wanting to protect your own wellbeing.

These moments aren't about perfect words. They're about connection.

Support becomes steadier and more sustainable when conversations feel respectful, gentle, and grounded in understanding. This guide offers simple ways to communicate with care, validate what your loved one is experiencing, and set boundaries without guilt or conflict.

1. Communication

Understanding the Role of Communication in Recovery

Communication builds the bridge between two inner worlds. When someone is overwhelmed, their nervous system often moves into survival mode. They may shut down, become irritable, or struggle to articulate what's happening.

The goal isn't to "fix" or change their emotion — it's to create enough safety that they don't have to face it alone. When communication slows down and becomes clearer, both of you can feel more connected and less alone.

How to Communicate More Clearly

- **Keep it simple.** Short, gentle sentences are easier to take in during stress.
- **Reflect back what you hear.** This shows you're listening, not judging.
- **Stay curious instead of assuming.** Curiosity softens defensiveness.
- **Avoid rushing to solutions.** People need to feel understood before change feels possible. Connection comes first
- **Check in on capacity.** "Is this a good time to talk, or should we pause?"

Helpful Phrases

- "I can hear that this is really hard for you."
- "Help me understand what you're feeling right now."
- "Would you like me to listen, or to help problem-solve?"
- "I'm here. You're not alone in this."

2. Validation

Why Validation Matters

Validation doesn't mean agreement. It simply means acknowledging that what they feel makes sense in the context of their experiences. For people living with anxiety, depression, trauma, or eating disorder recovery, emotions can feel overwhelming or "too much." Validation softens shame, reduces defensiveness, and helps their nervous system settle.

When someone feels seen, they don't need to fight as hard to be understood.

How to Validate Without Overstepping

- Name the emotion you think they're feeling.
- Acknowledge their context — their stress, their history, or the situation.

- Stay non-blaming. Avoid phrases like “you’re overreacting.”
- Avoid minimising. Even well-intentioned reassurance (“it’ll be fine”) can feel dismissive.
- Sit with discomfort. Presence matters more than answers.

Helpful Phrases

- “Given everything you’ve been dealing with, this reaction makes sense.”
- “Anyone in your position would feel something similar.”
- “I’m not here to judge it — I am here just to understand it with you.”
- “You don’t have to explain yourself perfectly for me to care.”

3. Boundary Setting

Why Boundaries Are Essential for Both of You

Caring for someone without boundaries eventually leads to burnout, resentment, or emotional exhaustion — and none of that supports recovery. Boundaries protect your energy, your wellbeing, and the relationship itself. They create clarity about what you can offer, and they give the other person predictability and safety.

A boundary is not a rejection. It is an expression of “I care about you enough to stay honest with you.”

How to Set Boundaries Kindly

- State your limit clearly and simply. No long justifications needed.
- Explain the reason gently. Transparency builds trust.
- Offer what is possible. A boundary doesn’t have to be a full stop.
- Hold the line consistently. Boundaries only work when they’re lived.
- Stay warm. Kindness and clarity can co-exist.

Helpful Boundary Phrases

- “I want to support you, and I need to take a break for now. Let’s check in later.”
- “I care about you, and I don’t have the capacity to talk about this tonight.”
- “I can drive you on Wednesdays, but I can’t do every appointment.”
- “I’m here to help, but I need to look after myself at the same time.”

Putting It All Together

A Simple Conversation Framework

You can think of supportive communication in three steps:

1. Slow down and listen.

“I’m here. Tell me what’s happening.”

2. Validate the feeling.

“That sounds exhausting... it makes sense you feel that way.”

3. Offer a boundary or support option.

“I want to help. What I can offer right now is...”

This keeps connection intact while protecting both people’s wellbeing.