

the *bliss* of setting boundaries

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When you can't say "no," it's easy to burn out. The secret?

Listen to your body to find your natural limits—along with core power, strength, and inner peace.

HAVE YOU EVER PLANNED the setting of a boundary down to the tiniest detail—how you'd leave a dinner date with that emotional-vampire friend at 8 p.m. on the dot, say "no" to the boss who asks you to do just one more thing, or finally make time to tap into your creative wisdom—only to find yourself veering off course yet again? Most people have: It's part of our common humanity. But when we allow our boundaries to be undermined or overturned too often, our well-being suffers. We feel stressed, disconnected, even ill. The good news is that with practice, and using yoga and mindfulness as guides, we can learn to develop strong boundaries. What's more, they can bring better health, emotional balance, creative fulfillment, stronger relationships, and an evolved sense of compassion.

Blogs and books devoted to boundaries often make it sound simple: If you feel depleted, just say "no." They define boundaries as the outer limits of what we should do for others or tolerate in their behavior. When we've crossed that line by saying "yes," we feel taken advantage of and burnt out. This is a good start, but to truly understand the process and to set *healthy* boundaries, it helps to think of boundaries as a system.

Our boundary system

Imagine an apple with three layers. The outermost layer (the apple's skin) is the easiest to see and relates to behavior: the time you give to help a friend or partner, or how much you pile onto your own plate. Do you pour creative energy into someone else's career plan and neglect your own? When setting boundaries on this level, we often face overwhelming guilt, thinking that we're letting others down. Rather than giving in, think of this guilt as an affirmation that you're on the right track.

The middle layer (the flesh of the apple) is interpersonal: To what extent do others' moods influence your own? Do you ever come home in a good mood, for instance, only to have your partner's black cloud of bitterness blanket the rest of your day? When you feel someone's emotions as though they were your own, you may be filled with the urge to relieve their suffering now, no matter the emotional cost to yourself. The key is to feel compassion without taking on their suffering.

The innermost layer of boundaries (the apple core) is *intrapersonal*: It involves your connection with your deepest self. How linked are you with your body in each moment? When you meet someone whom all your friends like, do you disregard your body's signals—the clenching in your abdomen or the tightness in your throat—that tell you that this person isn't safe for *you*? When we lack boundaries at this level, we often have nervous system imbalance (think anxiety and depression). The trick to forging these innermost boundaries is to cultivate deep embodiment: the ability to be present with sensations as they change from one moment to the next.

Many people fear that setting strong boundaries will make them seem or become uncaring. Paradoxically, however, it actually helps us be empathic in a healthy way. Social scientist Brené Brown, PhD, who has researched boundaries for years, has found that setting limits allows us to be more, not less, compassionate.

Try the yoga sequence and meditations on the following pages to help find your natural boundaries. You'll start to recognize and trust your gut feelings and radiate truth, affecting you and others in a positive way!



Our body's natural boundary systems

Our physical body has its own barrier systems that are essential to optimum health and can serve as a barometer for setting limits. Here are just a few:

» **The autonomic nervous system (ANS)** controls respiration and heart rate, among other things. It constantly scans our inner and outer environments to decide what's safe and when to sound the alarm. When it's out of balance, we become vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

» **The immune system** assesses what's "me" and what isn't; if it detects something foreign, it mounts a response to fight it. When this system is out of balance, we get sick often or suffer from autoimmune conditions.

» **The enteric nervous system (ENS)**, often called our "second brain," determines what's nourishing and what causes inflammation. This system not only controls our digestion, it also plays a key role in immune response. And it helps regulate mood. When it's out of whack, we get gut disorders, bacterial and mood imbalances, and more.

Build boundaries *from the inside out*

As a psychologist and yoga teacher who helps people set healthy boundaries, I've learned that to have true staying power, boundaries need to happen from the innermost layer out. There are three components to this—and the yoga sequence that begins on this page incorporates them all.

Step 1: *Regulate your autonomic nervous system (ANS).* When it's on overdrive, everything seems to trigger a fight-or-flight response, making it difficult to tune into your body's boundary-related red flags, such as physical discomfort when you've mistakenly said "yes." Effective ways to calm your ANS include nasal breathing with a longer exhale (which slows the heart), restorative poses, and mindfulness.

Step 2: *Cultivate embodiment.* Once your ANS is settled, you can practice embodiment, or present-moment awareness that's felt in the body. Emerging research in neuroscience shows that when we practice embodiment, we can

turn down the volume on negative narratives and build a more solid sense of self. This body-based mindfulness helps us stay rooted in our own experience, know more quickly when a boundary has been violated, and feel strong enough to honor our truth. The best ways to create embodiment? Meditation that focuses on the body and mindful movement.

Step 3: *Develop energy and awareness in your enteric nervous system (ENS).* Think of your ENS as the epicenter of your inner boundaries—your "gut check," literally. Practices that develop core strength, release tight connective tissue, and promote awareness of sensations (e.g., satiety and inflammation) help you connect with your gut intelligence.

As you work through these elements, you'll feel, and set, your boundaries with greater clarity. And other people in turn will read your inner strength and challenge you less strongly and less often.



1. BODY AND MIND CHECK-IN

Tap into your bodily sensations and emotions to become aware of them and to better understand how the following yogic practices and the people you interact with will affect you.

Lie on your back with your knees bent, one hand on your heart and one on your abdomen. Close your eyes and breathe slowly through your nose as you explore the following self-inquiry:

- » Are you present in your body in this moment? Can you feel the sensations of your breath? The ease or discomfort in your muscles and tissues? (It's OK if you can't; asking is the first step.)
- » Notice the depth of your breath. Rapid breathing can signal nervous system overdrive. Slower breathing indicates rest-and-

digest mode, which is conducive to setting healthy boundaries.

» Notice the speed of your mind. Do your thoughts channel-surf? A speeding mind often means rising anxiety.

» Note any tension in your abdomen, home to your ENS, or "belly brain." Tension here can change your gut microbiome, increase anxiety, and make it hard to set boundaries.

» Then notice the level of energy in your body. This will help you recognize when you are depleted and need deeper self-care.

» Bring awareness to your emotions: Are sadness, anger, or anxiety present? If so, do they feel like yours, or do they come from someone with whom you've recently interacted?

When you're done, slowly open your eyes.

2. TABLETOP, WITH KNEE CIRCLES

This pose helps develop core awareness and strength—helpful for setting boundaries.

Come to Tabletop, with your wrists under your shoulders, and knees under your hips. Put slightly more weight into your left knee, and bring the right knee an inch or so off the ground. Hover here for 3 breaths, drawing your lower abdominal muscles toward your heart. Then, keeping your hips as level as possible, use your core muscles to circle your right knee several times to the right, and then the left. After several circles in each direction, hover the knee one inch above the mat again for 3 breaths. Exhale to release; repeat on the left side.



3. PLANK POSE, WITH A BLOCK

This core-strengthening pose connects you with your center, which is where you'll feel your limits and start to reset your boundaries.

From Tabletop, walk your hands forward and come to Plank Pose on your knees. Exhale and draw your deep abdominal muscles up toward your heart to help engage Uddiyana Bandha, or an abdominal lift. You can add Mula Bandha—or a pelvic-floor lift—as well, if you practice it. If you can coordinate the breath and *bandhas*, practice straightening one leg into full Plank Pose, and then both legs. Stay in your version of Plank for 8–12 breaths. Then, place a block the long way between your upper thighs. Exhale, engage your *bandhas*, and squeeze the block. Repeat for another 8–12 breaths.



5 signs you need a little boundary CPR

1 Symptoms of nervous system hyper-arousal: Feelings of anxiety, increased heart rate, shallow and rapid breathing, and tight muscles and connective tissue.

2 You are often exhausted, even after a good night's sleep. Your energy reserves are depleted, and self-care seems elusive.

3 Negative stories are on repeat in your head, or you tell them to anyone who will listen. These stories are often about the selfishness of others, and reflect resentment about the people you are helping. You feel like a victim, while others are to blame.

4 You feel intense emotions that seem disconnected from your own experience and more linked to other people's feelings. This is called "emotional contagion"—you catch others' emotions the way you would the flu.

5 You feel out-of-body, ungrounded, and almost ethereal—despite a regular yoga practice—and find it hard to connect with your inner truth, detect your needs, or even figure out what you want for dinner.



4. CORE-CHALLENGE LUNGE

This pose strengthens your core and helps you feel grounded and centered. The freedom and deeper embodiment of this pose are an added bonus when you feel forced to calibrate your emotions to others' expectations.

Begin in Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose). Hold this position and draw your right knee to your chest. On an exhalation, engage your bandhas and draw your shoulders forward over your wrists, with the knee moving toward your right elbow; you're now in Hanging Plank (*pictured*). On your next exhale, place your right foot on the mat, halfway to your hands. Hold here for several breaths. Then balance your weight on the base of your left fingers (rather than your left wrist). Grab your right ankle with your right hand; inhale and lift your right foot an inch off the mat. Hover here for a few extra breaths, if you wish. Then exhale to engage your core again, and bring your right foot between your hands. On your next exhalation, return to Down Dog. Repeat on the left side.

OUR PROS Teacher **Bo Forbes, PsyD**, unites yoga, mindfulness, neuroscience, and psychology. She is the founder of Embodied Awareness, an online education company whose mission is "wellness through embodiment." Forbes is also the author of *Yoga for Emotional Balance: Simple Practices to Relieve Anxiety and Depression*. Learn more at boforbes.com. Model **Newsha Rostampour** is a Colorado-based vinyasa yoga instructor and DJ.

Are you an empath?

While many of us are affected by emotional contagion, some people feel others' emotions to the nth degree. If this sounds familiar, you might be an **empath**, and your wonderful qualities, when left unchecked, can compromise your health.

Here are four telltale characteristics of empaths:

☑ **It's tough to know where you leave off** and others begin, or which emotional experiences are yours and which come from others.

☑ **You're often not in your body.** For empaths, all that "feeling into" the experiences of others can mean that you dissociate.

☑ **You're prone to nervous system overdrive.** It doesn't take much—sometimes just a crowded, loud party sends your nervous system into alarm.

☑ **You have trouble with intimacy.** Your relationships are filled with intense interactions. You get so entangled that making a clean break from someone is often the only way to get the space you need.

5. **UTTHITA PARSVAKONASANA (EXTENDED SIDE ANGLE POSE), WITH CRANIAL-SACRAL TRACTION**

This pose offers grounding and stability. The occipital traction stimulates the vagus nerve, which runs from your brain to your abdomen and helps calm the nervous system.

From a lunge, pivot and plant your back foot in a Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II) stance. Rest your right forearm on your right thigh. Try to stack your left shoulder over your right shoulder, and gaze straight ahead. Bring your left hand to the ridge of your occiput (where your head meets your neck) and place your thumb and pointer finger on either side of the back of the head just under the occipital ridge. Isometrically draw your occiput and cranium away from your sacrum, just below your lumbar curve, and root down through your back heel. Engage the bandhas, if you practice them. Hold for 12–20 breaths. Exhale to return to Down Dog. Repeat on the left.



6. **CROSS-LEGGED NAVASANA (BOAT POSE), ON A BLOCK**

This pose combines a core body challenge, a drawing-in of energy toward your center, and balancing—all beneficial for developing internal awareness.

Sit on a block with your knees bent. Place your hands around the tops of your shins. Pull your knees toward your chest, and your feet toward the block. Lift through your torso and the top of your head. You have the option to practice the bandhas on each exhale. If you can breathe deeply and engage your core, lift your heels off the mat. To add even more of a challenge, place your hands at your heart in Anjali Mudra. Keep your neck and face relaxed, and continue to draw your lower abdomen up toward your heart. Hold for 12–20 breaths.



7. **BALASANA (CHILD'S POSE), WITH A BLOCK (A.K.A. THE ENERGY SEAL)**

This variation of Child's Pose is relaxing after activating the core body. It also stimulates the vagus nerve, calms your nervous system, and brings energy into the body.

Come into Child's Pose, with your forehead on a block. This stimulates your vagus nerve and signals your nervous system to relax. Bring your thumbs to the front edge of the block, palms facing down, with the rest of your fingers to the sides of the block. Pin your knees with your elbows. Feel your energy draw inward and replenish you. If your thoughts are active, lengthen your breath to further slow your heart and balance your nervous system. Stay here for 1–2 minutes, or longer if possible.



8. QUADRATUS LUMBORUM (QL) RELEASE, WITH THERAPY BALLS

Therapeutic ball work (or self-bodywork) is a bridge to embodiment. It releases muscle and tissue tension, soothes the nervous system, and helps us better sense our physical boundaries.

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place a block under your head. Place two tennis or yoga-therapy balls on the right side of your body, between the bottom of your back ribs and the top of your hip. Breathe deeply. If you end up holding your breath or resisting the stimulation, it may be too much—pad the balls with socks or use a folded washcloth instead. Setting limits on the right level of stimulation for you directly relates to boundaries off the mat. Slowly tilt your body to the right. You can also gently draw your right knee toward your chest to intensify the sensation. Breathe for a couple minutes, moving gently in order to access different parts of your right QL, a deep core muscle. When your body feels satiated, remove the balls and rest. Feel the connective tissue on your right side “fluff” toward the mat. Repeat on the left; each side may need a different level of stimulation.



9. FACE-DOWN SAVASANA (CORPSE POSE)

This pose helps release abdominal tension.

Fold your blanket 3 times the long way so it forms a long and narrow fold, with some amount of thickness. Kneel on your mat. Wrap the blanket around your body like a cummerbund, with the rounded edge just beneath your lower rib band and the non-uniform edge just above your pubic bone. Place an extra mat or a folded or rolled blanket under your ankles to raise them off the mat. Lie face down and wrap the ends of the blanket across your back in an X shape. Place an eye pillow under your eyes or forehead, or make a pillow with your arms, and rest your head. You can also place your arms alongside your body.



10. BOLSTER MOUNTAIN, WITH AN EMBODIED SELF-COMPASSION PRACTICE

Self-compassion has been shown to reduce stress hormones, anxiety, and depression, and to increase emotional resilience.

Lie on your back with a bolster underneath your knees. Place at least one bolster on top of your body the long way. Wrap yourself and the bolsters in a blanket. Place an eye pillow over your eyes: This stimulates your oculo-cardiac reflex, which slows the heart and activates your parasympathetic system, or rest-and-digest response. Then, practice my embodied version of a self-compassion practice, derived from the work of Kristin Neff, PhD, a professor in the educational psychology department at the University of Texas at Austin:

- » *If you are going through difficulty, acknowledge that this is a moment of suffering... only a moment.*
- » *Remember that all beings have these moments of challenge or difficulty. Everyone has them; you are not alone.*
- » *Inquire where in your body difficulty might be living in this moment: Which part or parts of your body house this suffering right now?*
- » *If it's accessible, bring your hands to that part or parts of your body. Direct the breath to where your hands are.*



EXPERIENCE BLISS IN PERSON

Join Bo Forbes at YJ LIVE! in Estes Park, Colorado, September 22–25, for workshops on boundaries, mindfulness, neuroscience, self-compassion, and more.



Learn to ID whose emotions you're feeling

This practice, the Empathic Differentiation Exercise, is the icing on the cake, and is particularly useful for empathaths. It is most effective when you've just had an experience of emotional contagion—when you've been “infected” by someone else's emotions and can't figure out how you feel.

» **Directly following an intense interaction** with someone, begin the Body and Mind Check-In (page 66). You already know what it feels like when your own emotions are present in your body, and where they are present. Now ask yourself the same questions, adding the following: *Is there a “humming” in my nervous system, or a vigilance that indicates it's turned on at full volume? After the charged interaction I've had, is anything different from what I typically feel during my Check-Ins?*

» **If the emotions you have** in this moment of contagion feel markedly different in nature, or you feel them in a different place in your body from where your own emotions normally live, they likely belong to the person in question. Once you identify this, it's immediately empowering. You can use your breath to release emotions that are not native to you. As you inhale, feel their intensity and where they are located. As you exhale, cultivate a willingness to let these emotions go, without forcing them out of your body. Do this as long as necessary; you'll find that once you've identified emotions as not belonging to you, they're easier to release than you might imagine.

» **Practice often.** Try to find a quiet space for this practice whenever you are triggered by another person. Practice for as often and as long as you need in order to feel calmer and more embodied. 🧘