Caregiver Support Line Presentation - Transcript

Series: Care for the Caregiver

Topic: Setting Boundaries: Defining What is Best for You, the Caregiver

The topic for this presentation is, “Setting Boundaries: Defining What is Best for You, the Caregiver.” As we begin our presentation, please take a few moments right now to consider this question “Is there an ongoing situation in your life that has been a source of frustration or upset? Are there people or situations where you over extend or neglect your needs and don’t say no when you need to? Keep this situation in mind as we present today and see if you get some ideas about how you might clearly set healthy boundaries on your own behalf.

To begin, let’s explore what a personal boundary may be. We will discuss both the physical and emotional boundaries that are present when interacting with others. We will look at exactly how a lack of clear boundaries may cause problems in our lives. Then we will discuss how problems may be alleviated or fixed by simply implementing appropriate boundaries. Next, we will discuss potential barriers that may prevent you from setting boundaries. Finally, we will look at the communication steps you can practice that set clear boundaries with others. We recognize setting boundaries may feel difficult as others may not be receptive to a change in your behavior, but with repetition over time and practice you can feel more confident about maintaining your clear boundaries.

What does the title caregiver mean to you and why might boundaries be especially important to a caregiver? A caregiver is someone whose work is protective and frequently nurturing. A caregiver is someone whose focus and energy is on caring for those who cannot care for themselves. Sometimes caregivers are receiving financial compensation, but more often they are family or someone close to the Veteran whose labor is unpaid. The list of tasks for a caregiver can feel endless and there is no universal job description. Your Veteran may need a lot of physical care, prompting reminders, or assistance with taking medication, eating, showering, or may need your emotional support to help to stay grounded and calm during an upsetting episode. Given all the focus on others’ needs, and the demands of caregiving, it is easier to neglect your own needs. That’s where boundaries are critical.

You may be thinking of several reasons why taking time for yourself is just not an option. Maybe you don’t have anyone to care for the Veteran in your absence. Maybe

the Veteran is uncomfortable with a stranger coming into the home to provide care. Perhaps you feel that it is your duty as their caregiver to take care of all their needs and you experience guilt thinking about doing something other than that. Despite all the responsibilities you may have, the important thing to remember is that you are not simply a caregiver. While caregiving may be your most time-consuming role, you are so much more. You have your own identity and interests that deserve some of your time.

So where does your role as a caregiver stop? Where do you, the person, begin? How do you recognize what the Veterans' needs and wants are, while also respecting what matters to you? How do you recognize your own needs and start working towards a better balance in your life? There is one action that can help, boundaries! Establishing healthy boundaries is one of the most powerful tools that resilient caregivers employ to preserve themselves and support their ongoing efforts in caring for another.

So, what exactly is a boundary? A boundary is something that indicates a limit or border. We are familiar with physical boundaries that exist in the world. We know that if we see a sign that says, "No Trespassing!" that we are not to go past a certain point, sometimes for our own safety. The lines on our roads, traffic signs, and lights, tell us how to drive our cars to prevent accidents. When it comes to creating interpersonal boundaries for ourselves, the indicators may not be as clear at first.

Personal boundaries, like our traffic guidelines, help the people in our lives know what makes us feel safe and comfortable in our world. They are meant to protect us. Boundaries are one important way we can take care of ourselves by maintaining a healthy perspective of our own choices and the responsibilities we assume.

Boundaries can be developed to define both physical and emotional limits. When we think about physical boundaries for ourselves, we are defining our unique individual needs for physical space between ourselves and other people. Physical boundaries are usually both easier for us to define and for others to understand, as there may be a visual prompt. Perhaps you might think of this as a fence between your home and your neighbor's home. It is a clear indicator of where your space ends and another person begins. Personal space is a bit different for everyone and may be different among different cultures and different relationships. You may feel comfortable being very physically close to family, but you may need more physical space to feel comfortable around coworkers. If someone moves too close to you during a conversation, you can physically move away to let them know you are uncomfortable. You may also change

your body gestures, such as crossing your arms, to indicate you are setting a boundary between yourself and someone else.

Emotional boundaries can be much more difficult, both to define and to set in place. This is especially difficult for caregivers because many of you are used to frequently setting yourselves aside and focusing the bulk of your attention on others. Emotional boundaries require that you are aware of your own wants and needs and can separate these from the wants and needs of others. Anything, even things we consider positive such as caring for others, when done to the extreme, can cause negative consequences. When you focus so much on the needs of another person and forget your own, it will wear you down over time. Perpetually neglecting your needs may cause you to feel overwhelmed, underappreciated, and resentful.

With emotional boundaries, you must first identify what your needs are and then communicate those needs. When you do not state how you wish to be treated, or when boundaries are too flexible and accommodate everyone else's needs but your own, you are not properly protecting yourself. If you do not choose to set or properly communicate your boundaries, you're sending the message that others can treat you in whatever way they feel is appropriate. Always accommodating others before protecting yourself may result in others always turning to you for help, and may also result in you potentially being taken advantage of or exploited.

While it is important to set clear boundaries to care for your needs, it is also possible to create boundaries that are not flexible enough. If we create rigid boundaries to defend ourselves as the result of being hurt, taken to the extreme, this protectiveness may also result in cutting ourselves off from the opportunity to be connected to those that are not hurtful. Just as we may also put up barriers to others when hurt, we may also put up internal barriers to paying attention to feelings inside that are hurtful. In doing so, we run the risk of not noticing or discounting the important information our feelings provide and may interfere with their proper expression. You may believe that being strong means to hide your feelings from others but, this added pressure to hide or suppress your feelings is one more way you can be worn down and one more way to keep your distance from others.

So how might implementing boundaries benefit you? Setting boundaries will help you to focus on you and will support taking responsibility for addressing your wants and needs. Setting boundaries will also support friends and family in taking responsibility for themselves. If you take responsibility for yourself and you maintain that others are

responsible for themselves, then your interactions are bound to be less stressful because you are not fighting to change something out of your control.

Setting boundaries will help you and your loved one build and maintain a greater level of self-respect. When you can say no and set limits with others they will learn over time that you cannot be coerced against your wishes. If you begin to say yes to requests only when you really choose to, you will often feel more satisfied by your choice to give.

For the Veteran and others in your care, boundaries will help them to build their own self-respect as well. Each Veteran must grapple with their individual challenges and find ways to adjust independently. It is important to recognize that no matter what the Veterans challenges may be, ultimately, their fulfillment and life satisfaction rests in their hands. The caregiver can support this independence but are not in control of it.

For you, boundaries can help to create space in which you can focus on consistently rebuilding your own reserves of energy so that you are productive for yourself and others. If you never take time to step back and take care of yourself, you cannot possibly recharge your own battery. By continuing to try to care for others when you are drained, you have very little to give. You may find that your negative emotions increase, you feel more exhausted, and you notice your health being affected. Time taken for you, however small, can be rejuvenating and can help to negate some of the consequences when you neglect yourself.

Finally, creating and maintaining boundaries is likely to result in an increase in self-esteem. To increase self-esteem, you must be true to yourself. Boundaries allow you to be clearer about what you believe, want, and need. Boundaries allow you to protect yourself and teach others how to treat you. This also allows you to identify those people and situations that may not be serving your best self-interests. As you become more comfortable with boundaries, you will begin to feel better overall.

You may be wondering why people don't jump at beginning to use boundaries. Two different reasons serve as barriers. The first barrier to creating and maintaining boundaries is that, as we all know, change, in and of itself, is hard. It is much easier to continue to do what you know than to put forth the effort to change. You may not be comfortable continuing the behavior but without the knowledge that you can change it and a motivation to do so, you are unlikely to make a change. The second barrier is the beliefs we hold about others and ourselves. Let's focus primarily on the kind of beliefs that may serve as barriers.

First, as a caregiver, your identity may be tied to this role. When you gain your own self-worth from caregiving, it can be particularly difficult to let go of always being the caregiver. Many of you may feel better about yourself because you choose to sacrifice for your loved ones. The appreciation that you receive from them may be one of the main ways that you get positive feedback that you are a good person. The concept of doing something that will change this can be scary.

Another possible barrier is the negative feelings you may hold about yourself. You may feel that you are not good enough to deserve to take some time for yourself. You may feel that you are not worthy of the protection that boundaries may provide you. Because of these feelings, you may question whether it is right for you to ask others to change their behaviors to make you more comfortable. You may even feel that you are selfish if you choose to implement boundaries and take care of yourself rather than focusing on everyone else's needs.

A third reason why people may not choose to implement boundaries is that they may not know exactly what a healthy boundary is. We learn about our world and how to interact from a very early age. Depending on how we were raised, and the behaviors that are modeled for us, we develop our own beliefs and behaviors with which we use to relate to the world. Maybe you grew up in a home where you were expected to take care of a parent or your siblings. In this home, you were put in the role of the caregiver and taught that others' needs were to come first. You may have never learned how to take care of yourself.

The only person who is truly responsible for your feelings, your actions and your life, is you. The only person that is going to have your best interest first, all the time, is you. This is true of other people as well. The only person that is going to make a change for your Veteran is the Veteran. The only person who is truly responsible for their feelings and choices is them. To change your thoughts about roles and responsibilities, you must first recognize who is ultimately responsible for what.

Another driving reason you may choose not to use boundaries is the feeling of guilt. There are many different reasons you may feel guilty about the possibility of taking some of your caregiving time away from the one you care for. Some things you might say to yourself include "I'm his wife. This is what I'm supposed to do." Or, "If I spend time caring for myself, how will I find the time to do everything he needs? If I don't do it, who will? He won't have anyone to help him." When you act out of guilt rather than free

will, there is no true ownership of your actions. When you take ownership for your choices, guilt will no longer burden you, because you own the decisions you make.

Finally, you may feel fearful of the outcome if you set boundaries. You may fear that if you set a boundary, this may lead to a confrontation. You may think that by saying no to something, the Veteran or others that you interact with may become triggered or angry. You may also worry about whether others will think that you are mean or that they may be hurt by a new unwillingness to do certain things. With this fear of confrontation in the background, you may choose to continue the way things have been to keep the peace. You may be afraid of setting boundaries because you believe you will lose people as a result. You may think, "If I set boundaries or say no, they might not like me anymore." This fear of losing people may prevent you from trying new things, no matter how beneficial.

Identifying your barriers to change is the first step in moving towards the change itself. To begin trying to use boundaries, you will want to slow down and think before responding to others' requests. Only you can truly identify your wants and needs. Only you can determine if there is room to add anything more to the responsibilities you carry. If you are constantly reacting to others demands, it is very difficult to take an introspective look to really consider yourself in the mix. By answering a request with a "maybe" or "let me think about that and get back to you," you give yourself the time and space that you need to make a decision that includes you. It is very important to tune into and really listen to yourself prior to making decisions and trying new behaviors. If something feels bad to you, it does not matter what other people may want or believe you should do. Take the time you need to honor your own intuition.

Let's take a moment to talk about intuition. We frequently ignore our own wisdom. Take a moment to think of a time when you had a gut feeling about a circumstance and yet you chose to ignore it. What was the outcome of that circumstance? Did you find that your gut instinct was right after all? In most circumstances, when we have a significant feeling about something, it is wise to take heed.

This is also true when we are feeling stuck in a negative emotion, such as anger or resentment. Do you notice yourself feeling, speaking, or acting out of character? Do you find you are feeling more negative or complaining more? Do you feel completely drained or overwhelmed? If you are noticing a change in yourself, it is wise to take some time to think about what may be contributing, and how a boundary may help.

One additional consideration to take during this time is what your motivation may be for accepting a request. Remember, as a caregiver it is only natural for you to want to help where you can and especially if someone is directly asking you for the help. Maybe feeling needed, gives you a secondary gain when choosing to help. Or, perhaps you simply believe you "should" help when someone asks or appears to need help. Make sure that your motivation to help is your decision not a knee jerk reaction. Take the time to consider your own best interests.

The next consideration to trying this new behavior of setting boundaries is to start small. Trying any new behavior can feel awkward and difficult. If we try to make a major change with no success right away, we are less likely to stick with it, so start small.

As we discussed earlier, it is easier to try something new with people you are less emotionally invested in. Perhaps you will want to try creating better boundaries with a provider rather than family or friends. As an example, let's think about the in-home support of a home health aide. These individuals are providing your Veterans with a service where they come into the home and assist with tasks like dressing and bathing.

With a home health aide entering the home, you might expect that they would complete their tasks, interact with you in a pleasant manner, and then leave until the next appointment. Due to many factors, our expectations may differ from the home health aide's expectations. Previous families they have worked with may have invited them to participate in a meal or sit down and visit with the Veteran. While this is perfectly acceptable with some families, if a behavior makes your family uncomfortable, it is important to create a boundary.

Let us consider the possibility that the home health aide is present around lunchtime and does regularly make the Veteran's lunch. Perhaps one day, they approach you and say, "I just realized that I forgot to bring my own lunch today. Would it be all right for me to eat some of what I am making for the Veteran?" You may be happy to help the aide on a singular occasion. Another person however, may not feel comfortable but yields to the request, as they are not yet prepared to respond in a way to communicate this. You may also be all right with the aide occasionally joining the Veteran in eating the food that they prepared, but feel discomfort if they were to do so regularly.

To prepare yourself to communicate your expectations and set boundaries, you must first spend some time thinking about what has happened, what you are feeling, and why you are feeling that way. It may take some time to work through your thoughts about what has happened. You may find that answering these seemingly simple questions

may be complicated by thoughts of what you "should do." You may find you are arguing with yourself. "We can't afford to feed our aide but what will happen if I set this boundary? What if she is no longer willing to return and we are not able to get a replacement? What if the replacement is worse?" These thoughts are of course reasonable concerns. However, it is important to remember that boundaries are very personal and they are meant to help you to get your needs met. Your boundaries are going to be unique to you and it is your responsibility to communicate them. Many people will appreciate a direct request and be happy to accommodate. On the other hand, if a request is not made, they won't know to change their actions.

So, what is the request that you want to make? You want for the aide to no longer eat the food that you have in your home, because you cannot afford to feed her. Now, how do you communicate this clearly and assertively?

Prior to presenting your message, you will want to make sure that you are in a calm, collected place. If you are still feeling emotional about what has happened, you may be more prone to use a tone or words that indicate that you feel they are in the wrong, which will make the receiver more likely to become defensive. When defensive, we are less likely to be able to truly listen to the request and the interaction itself is more likely to become escalated.

Once you are calm, you will begin to identify what you would like to say and put this into the format of an "I statement." An "I statement" is a commonly used communication technique. You will want to begin by communicating the facts of the situation. You will want to focus on what you have observed and make sure it is a specific problem. It is also important to be specific with the words you choose, being careful to not use sweeping statements such as "you always" or "you never." Instead, try starting your statement with "I noticed when I hear or when I see." With our example, you may want to try "I noticed that when you make lunch for the Veteran, you have some of what you make yourself."

Next, you will want to state how you feel about the situation. Remember, it is your feeling and you want to own it. This means that you will say, "I feel mad," "I feel sad," or "I feel worried." There is no need to offer an explanation with this statement beyond what you have planned to communicate. There is also no need to apologize for your feelings. They are your feelings and a reaction to a need that is not being fulfilled. Communicating directly, is simply taking responsibility for getting your needs met.

Next, you will identify the need that is not being met which is triggering the feeling. This step may feel particularly difficult as we may be very skilled at experiencing an emotion, or reacting emotionally to a situation, but we may not normally give ourselves the time to think about why we are feeling this way. Think about our example again. Our Caregiver and Veteran are living on a fixed income. The Caregiver is worried that she and the Veteran will not have enough food to eat, if the aide continues to join them for lunch. To communicate this clearly, the Caregiver would say, "I feel worried about my husband and I having enough to eat for the month as we are on a fixed income."

Finally, you will want to make a request. Many times, people will be able to state their feeling, and what their need is, but they may neglect to make a specific request. If you want a specific outcome, it is important to be clear and specific in presenting your request. It is also important to remember that it is just that, a request. You will want to ask in a way where the person receiving the request is able to say no. By giving the person the respect that they will make the decision that is right for them, you are also reinforcing the fact that you would like the same respect given to your request. "Could you please plan to bring your lunch unless I offer to have you join us?"

Once you have presented your request, you will receive a response. The home health aide may be accommodating and agree with your request. If this is the case, your request for the aide to respect your boundary has gone well, and this will help you to feel confident in communicating boundaries again in the future. The aide may attempt to argue or say that they cannot meet the request however. Or, they may say that they will follow your request but over time, their actions tell a different story. If this is how they decide to behave, then you will have a new decision to make in how you respond.

Your response may be to decide that the home health aide could use a reminder about the boundary you have set. Remember that this is not going to feel comfortable or easy but the important thing is that you are practicing. Others may not agree with the boundaries you set, or may need you to follow through with reminders once they have been set. If the boundaries that you set are not respected then you may need to set some clear consequences if your wishes are not respected. You will want to think ahead of time about the consequences that you are comfortable putting in place. This may include notifying the aide's supervisor or requesting a new aide. In this scenario, you will want to start by reminding the aide of the boundary you have placed. You may choose to share how you felt about the fact that they have not respected your boundary. Finally, you will tell the aide that if they cross your boundaries again, there will be a consequence. So, in our particular example you might say "I need to talk to you about

your choice to continue to eat with the Veteran. I have asked that you do not do this if you are not invited. If this continues to happen, I will need to ask the company to provide a new aide."

Again, when setting boundaries, you start by noticing and reflecting on yourself, your feelings, and needs. Then identify the boundary that you want to place, calm down and then communicate directly, stating what you observed, what you feel, your need, and the request that you are making.

We have covered a lot of information today. We discussed the definition and types of boundaries. We identified the many benefits of setting boundaries. We also discussed barriers that may prevent you from setting boundaries. Finally, we talked about the steps to set boundaries, communicating them and setting consequences.

We hope that this has been a useful topic for you as caregivers. We encourage you to think about barriers you may personally have that are keeping you from taking care of yourselves. Think about one small area where you might be able to set a boundary to improve your own well-being, which in turn, will only make you more capable of handling your caregiving duties.

We would like to thank you for all that you do, every day. We recognize the great level of caring and commitment that each one of you provides to your Veteran. Remember, we at the Caregiver Support Line are here to help. If you would like to spend some time talking about how you might begin practicing boundaries or if you would like to discuss your experience with your first attempts, please call. One of our social workers is happy to support you with developing these new skills.