

when those limits are exceeded. It is important to decide which behaviours can be ignored.

It may be helpful to have a list of unacceptable behaviours and the actions that will be taken by family members should those behaviours continue.

Limits should be based on reasonable expectations for all family members. The expectations should reflect their age, their role in the family, and their strengths and limitations.

When objecting to unacceptable behaviour, be clear and request specific changes in the individual's behaviour. For instance:

- ◆ Identify problems
- ◆ Work on one problem at a time
- ◆ Avoid making demands or becoming confrontational
- ◆ Clearly state your expectations for the future in a positive, non-judgmental, and non-threatening manner

- ◆ Help the person to understand the consequences of ignoring a boundary or limit on a particular behaviour
- ◆ Be consistent in both limit-setting and following through with consequences
- ◆ Review the limits set on particular behaviours and re-design the plan as necessary

Family members must realize that they do not have absolute control to change things and cannot be responsible for all of their relative's actions.



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Resources for Families

Boundaries and Limit Setting



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Why set limits?

Setting limits is an important part of treatment for people with a mental illness. It not only establishes appropriate expectations for your family member, it allows families the right to say



“no” in order to respect their own right to a decent life.

Family members may feel guilty when they set limits on their mentally ill family members’ behaviours

or insist that he or she follow the rules and guidelines that everyone else in the family is expected to follow. By refusing to set limits, families may believe that they are being helpful in preventing their relative from becoming unnecessarily upset or angry; however by refusing to set limits, families are enabling the behaviours that they are unhappy with.

Examples of enabling behaviours that are best to avoid are:

- ◆ Making excuses
- ◆ Paying their bills
- ◆ Giving extra money, often over and over again, and being surprised when it’s used to buy more alcohol or other drugs
- ◆ Bailing the person out of jail
- ◆ Making excuses for irresponsible behaviour
- ◆ Ignoring problems caused by the person’s substance use
- ◆ Accepting excuses or believing lies

Consistent rules and boundaries can help to create a sense of predictability and security. Setting limits can also help to prevent conflicts from turning into crises. Conflicts can result from interpersonal or intrapersonal problems between the individual who is mentally ill and his or her family members, between the mentally ill individual and other people, or between the mentally ill individual and their internal stimuli.

How to set limits

Setting limits and being able to state expectations clearly and honestly is difficult and involves understanding the difference between supportive and enabling. Setting limits is important for the family, as no one should have to live in a dangerous or disturbing environment. Certain behaviors are not acceptable and should not be tolerated, such as behavior that is:

- ◆ Abusive
- ◆ Self-destructive
- ◆ Harmful to others
- ◆ Damaging to property
- ◆ Severely disruptive
- ◆ Projected rage- yelling, swearing
- ◆ Blaming
- ◆ Dangerous behaviour
- ◆ Stealing from family members or friends
- ◆ Misuse of money that is intended for rent or other basic needs

Families need to decide which behaviours are unacceptable, set clear limits, and impose consequences