



SENIOR SAFETY ADVICE

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Setting Boundaries With Difficult Elderly Parents

A Workbook for Adult Children

How to decide what you can give, say it out loud, and hold the line — without walking away and without burning out.

This workbook belongs to:

Date started:

Companion piece: *Setting Boundaries With Difficult Elderly Parents — Checklist*

PART ONE

How to Use This Workbook

Read this page first. It will save you time and frustration.

You did not sign up for this. Nobody hands you a manual when your mother starts calling eight times a day, or when your father decides that only you can drive him to every appointment, or when a request you cannot possibly meet arrives with the words *after everything I did for you* attached to it.

Saying no to a parent is one of the hardest things an adult child ever has to do — because they are your parent. But every time you agree to something unreasonable, you set a precedent: ask, and you will receive. Over time that pattern hollows you out. Nearly 40% of caregivers report high levels of emotional stress, and unclear boundaries are a major reason why.

This workbook is not about pulling away from your parent. It is about building a version of this relationship you can actually sustain — for years, not months.

“Boundaries are not walls; they are guidelines that help navigate a relationship with love and respect.”

— Nedra Glover Tawwab, therapist and author

A few ground rules

- **Write in it.** Thinking about a boundary and writing it down are not the same thing. The writing is what makes it real enough to say out loud.
- **Go in order, but go slowly.** Parts Two and Three are private preparation. Do not skip them to get to the scripts.
- **Nobody else has to read this.** Be honest on these pages, including about the resentment. Resentment is information.
- **Use the checklist alongside it.** The companion checklist is the short action list. This workbook is where you figure out *what* to put on that list.
- **Come back to it.** Your parent's needs will change. Re-do Parts Three and Five every few months.

PART ONE

What Is Inside

Fourteen parts. Some are five minutes; some deserve an afternoon.

Part Two	Where you are right now — a 10-question self-assessment
Part Three	Clarifying your own needs and limits
Part Four	Naming the specific areas that need a boundary
Part Five	Writing boundary statements you can actually say
Part Six	Starting small — your boundary ladder
Part Seven	Offering alternatives and compromises
Part Eight	Anticipating resistance and preparing your responses
Part Nine	Scenario practice — what would you do if...
Part Ten	When memory loss is part of the picture
Part Eleven	Staying consistent — a four-week tracker
Part Twelve	Your support network
Part Thirteen	Your self-care plan
Part Fourteen	Resources and next steps

What this workbook will not do

- It will not make your parent agreeable. It will make your own position clear and steady, which is the only half of this you control.
- It will not settle who was right about the past. That is worth working on — with a counselor, not in the middle of a conversation about Saturday's ride to the pharmacy.
- It is not medical, legal, or financial advice. When a decision touches your parent's health, money, or legal authority, bring in the professional who handles that.

One more thing before you start

If you are reading this at the end of a long day, having already decided that you are a bad son or daughter — you are not. The fact that you are looking for a way to keep doing this well is the evidence against that verdict. Set the guilt down long enough to fill in the next few pages.

PART TWO

Where You Are Right Now

Check every box that is true for you. There is no passing score — this is a picture of your situation today.

-
- ☐ I dread seeing my parent's name come up on my phone.
 - ☐ I have canceled my own plans, appointments, or work more than once in the last month for a request that was not an emergency.
 - ☐ I say yes to things I do not have the time, money, or energy to do.
 - ☐ I have been told, in one way or another, that I do not do enough.
 - ☐ My parent contacts me at hours I have asked them not to.
 - ☐ I feel guilty when I am not with my parent, and resentful when I am.
 - ☐ Requests come to me first — or only to me — even when siblings or paid help are available.
 - ☐ My parent refuses help from anyone except me.
 - ☐ I have given money I could not really spare, or I am afraid to say no to a money request.
 - ☐ I have lost sleep, skipped my own medical care, or let my own household slide because of caregiving.
 - ☐ Conversations about care turn into arguments about the past.
 - ☐ I have thought "I cannot keep doing this" in the last two weeks.

What your answers mean

0–2 boxes checked. Things are mostly workable. Use this workbook to protect what is already going well before a crisis changes it.

3–6 boxes checked. A pattern has formed. One or two clear boundaries now will prevent a much harder conversation later.

7 or more boxes checked. You are carrying more than one person can carry. Start with Part Three today, and read Part Twelve before you do anything else — you need support in place, not just better wording.

The one box that was hardest to check, and why:

PART THREE

Clarify Your Own Needs and Limits

Before you set a boundary with anyone else, you have to know where the line is. Fill this in honestly — not generously.

Time

Look at an actual week, not an ideal one. Count the hours you truly have.

	Hours per week I can give	Which days / times
Phone calls and check-ins		
Visits		
Errands, shopping, transportation		
Appointments and medical coordination		
Paperwork, bills, insurance		
Hands-on care		
Total		

Tasks

I am willing to do	I am not willing to do

PART THREE

Clarify Your Own Needs and Limits (continued)

Money: the most I can contribute, and how often. Write an actual number.

What I need to protect for my own health and household (sleep, my own appointments, time with my spouse or children, work hours):

Hours or days that are off-limits for calls and visits:

What I am most afraid will happen if I set a limit:

If a friend described my exact situation to me, what would I tell her to do?

Before you go on

Read back what you wrote. If your limits still look like more than a full-time job on top of your real life, they are not limits yet. Cross something out and try again. The goal is a number you can still meet on a bad week — not a good one.

PART FOUR

Name the Specific Areas That Need a Boundary

A vague sense that things are too much cannot be fixed. A specific behavior can. Describe the behavior, not your parent's character.

The situation	How often it happens, and how it affects me
Phone calls — how many, what times	
Drop-in visits or demands for immediate visits	
Unsolicited advice, criticism, or comments about my life	
Money requests or financial expectations	
Hands-on care I am not able to provide	
Guilt trips and comparisons to other people's children	
Being pulled into conflict between family members	
Refusing help from anyone but me	

PART FOUR

Name the Specific Areas (continued)

Anything else not listed on the previous page:

Now choose your starting point

You cannot fix all of it at once, and trying to will make you give up. Circle the one or two situations above that cost you the most sleep. Write them here.

Priority 1:

Priority 2:

Describe the behavior, not the person

Instead of: "She is impossible."

Write: "She calls six times before noon and gets angry if I do not pick up on the first ring."

Instead of: "He guilts me constantly."

Write: "When I say I cannot come Saturday, he says my sister would have come."

A specific behavior is something you can set a boundary around. A character judgment is something you can only argue about.

PART FIVE

Write Boundary Statements You Can Actually Say

A boundary you cannot say out loud in one breath is not finished yet.

The formula

1. **The warmth** — "I love you and I am not going anywhere."
2. **What you CAN do** — "I can call you every evening at 6."
3. **What you cannot do** — "I am not able to answer calls during my work day."
4. **The alternative** — "If something urgent comes up, call Karen next door and she will reach me."

Use "I" statements. "I am not able to..." invites far less argument than "You always..." Say the reason once, then stop explaining — a long justification sounds like an opening for negotiation.

Examples

Too many calls. "Mom, I love talking to you. I can call every night at 7 and we can talk as long as you want. During the work day I have to keep my phone off."

Last-minute demands. "I can plan things with you ahead of time. I am not able to change my schedule the same day unless it is an emergency."

Money. "I am not able to send money this month. What I can do is sit down with you Sunday and go through the bills together."

Criticism of your family. "I want to keep visiting. If the conversation turns to how I raise my kids, I am going to go home early that day."

Care you cannot provide. "I can manage your appointments and your medications. Bathing is something I am not able to do, so I would like us to bring in an aide two mornings a week."

PART FIVE

Write Boundary Statements (continued)

Now write your own. Use the formula on the previous page. Then read each one out loud — actually out loud — and cross out any words you would not really say.

Boundary 1

The situation:

What I will say, word for word:

Boundary 2

The situation:

What I will say, word for word:

Boundary 3

The situation:

What I will say, word for word:

PART SIX

Start Small — Your Boundary Ladder

Do not change eight things at once. Introduce boundaries one rung at a time and give each one room to become normal.

Rung	The boundary	Start date	Review date
First			
Second			
Third			
Later			

Rules for the ladder

- Give each boundary two to four weeks before you decide whether it is working.
- Tell your parent the start date. A boundary that arrives without warning feels like a punishment.
- Adjust the details if they are genuinely unworkable — but do not abandon the limit itself.
- Move to the next rung only when the current one feels routine, even if that takes months.

What will tell me a boundary is working?

PART SEVEN

Offer Alternatives and Compromises

A limit lands very differently when it comes with a door instead of just a wall. For each need, find at least one answer that is not you.

What my parent actually needs	Who or what else could meet it? (person, service, schedule, device)
Company and conversation	
Transportation to appointments and errands	
Meals and groceries	
Help with bathing, dressing, or mobility	
Housekeeping and laundry	
Bills, mail, and paperwork	
Reassurance in the middle of the night	
Something to look forward to during the week	

PART SEVEN

Offer Alternatives (continued)

Options worth looking into

- **Your local Area Agency on Aging** — the single best starting point. They know what exists in your parent's county, including things that are free or income-based.
- **In-home aides** for a few hours a week, often through a home care agency.
- **Adult day programs** — social time, meals, and activities during the day.
- **Meal delivery** through a senior nutrition program or a grocery delivery service.
- **Senior transportation** services, dial-a-ride programs, or a standing account with a rideshare service set up by you.
- **Respite care** so you can take a weekend without the phone.
- **Faith community volunteers**, neighbors, or a friendly-visitor program.
- **A geriatric care manager** to coordinate the whole picture if you are far away or stretched thin.

Three calls I will make this month, and by when:

If your parent refuses outside help

That is extremely common, and it is usually about control and dignity rather than the help itself. Try starting with the least personal task — housekeeping or driving rather than bathing. Frame it as help for *you* ("it would take a load off me"). Ask for a two-week trial instead of a permanent arrangement. And let the same person come each time, so they become familiar rather than a stranger in the house.

PART EIGHT

Anticipate Resistance and Prepare Your Responses

The pushback is not a sign you did something wrong. Expect it, and decide now what you will say — because you will not think clearly in the moment.

What my parent is likely to say	My calm, prepared response (write it word for word)
"After everything I did for you."	
"Your sister would never say no to me."	
"I guess I am just a burden to you now."	
"Fine. Do not bother coming at all then."	
"I will just do it myself and if I fall, I fall."	
Tears, or the silent treatment	
Anger, or hanging up on me	
Calling my sibling to complain about me	

PART EIGHT

Anticipate Resistance (continued)

How to hold the line without escalating

- **Repeat, do not re-argue.** Say the same sentence calmly a second and third time. Each new explanation gives a new thing to argue with.
- **Do not answer a guilt trip in the moment.** "Let me think about that and I will call you tomorrow" is a complete answer, and tomorrow you will be steadier.
- **Let the feelings be real without changing the limit.** "I know this is hard, and I am sorry it is. Tuesday and Saturday are what I can do."
- **Be firm, not harsh.** Warm voice, unchanged answer.
- **Keep the boundary identical on good days and bad days.** A boundary that bends when your parent is upset teaches that being upset works.
- **Watch for the "just this once."** That is the moment the boundary is actually decided.
- **End it if it turns cruel.** "I am going to hang up now and I will call you tomorrow." Then call tomorrow, exactly as promised.

"No" is a complete sentence

You do not owe a justification for a limit. Practice these until they feel ordinary in your mouth. Read them aloud. Notice the urge to add "because..." and leave it out.

"No, I am not able to do that."
"That does not work for me."
"I wish I could, and I cannot."
"Not this time."
"I have already given you my answer."

Two more, in my own words:

PART NINE

Scenario Practice

Read each situation and write what you would actually say or do. Practicing on paper is how you find the words before you need them.

Scenario 1 — The workday calls

You have told your mother you cannot take calls between 9 and 5. On Tuesday she calls four times before 11 a.m. None of it is urgent — she wants to tell you about a neighbor. At noon you see the missed calls and a text that says, *I guess you are too busy for me*. What do you do, and what do you say when you call her back?

Scenario 2 — The money request

Your father asks you for \$600 to cover a bill. You have given him money twice in the last four months and you cannot spare it this time. He says, *I have never asked you for anything*. Write your answer, including one thing you can offer instead.

PART NINE

Scenario Practice (continued)

Scenario 3 — The sibling comparison

You tell your mother you can visit Saturday instead of Friday. She says your brother, who lives three states away and visits twice a year, *would have found a way*. What do you say — and what do you deliberately not say?

Scenario 4 — The refused aide

You have arranged for an aide to come two mornings a week so you can go back to work full time. Your mother sends her away at the door and calls you to come instead. How do you respond in the moment, and what do you set up before the next visit?

PART NINE

Scenario Practice (continued)

Scenario 5 — The holiday

It is two days before a family holiday. Your father announces he is not coming unless you pick him up at 7 a.m., drive him to two other stops, and take him home right after dinner — a five-hour round trip on top of hosting. What is your answer?

Scenario 6 — The middle-of-the-night call

Your mother calls at 2 a.m. She is not hurt and nothing has happened; she is frightened and wants company. This is the third time this month. You are exhausted and you have work in five hours. What do you do tonight, and what do you put in place for next week?

PART NINE

Scenario Practice (continued)

Scenario 7 — The one you are actually dreading

Write out the situation you know is coming — the conversation you have been putting off. Describe it in the first box. In the second, write exactly how you want it to go.

THE SITUATION

WHAT I WILL SAY

Who could I practice this conversation with first?

PART TEN

When Memory Loss Is Part of the Picture

Dementia changes how you set a boundary. It does not remove your right to have one.

Behavior that looks manipulative is often something else. Repeating a request twenty times may mean your parent genuinely does not remember asking. Sharp accusations often come from fear, pain, or the loss of control over their own life. Refusing help from anyone but you may be because you are the one person they still reliably recognize.

None of that obligates you to be available around the clock. It changes your method, not your limit.

What changes

- **Do not rely on an agreement being remembered.** Put the boundary in the environment instead: a large-print note by the phone, a whiteboard with the day's plan, a clock that shows the day and date.
- **Stop explaining and start redirecting.** Reasoning works less and less as memory loss progresses. Acknowledge the feeling, then change the activity.
- **Repeat the same short phrase, in the same tone, every time.** Consistency does more than logic here.
- **Do not argue with the accusation.** "I hear you. Let's have a cup of tea and I will look into it" ends more of these than any defense will.
- **Expect to re-set the same boundary many times.** That is the illness, not failure on your part.
- **Get an evaluation if behavior changes suddenly.** A sharp change can signal an infection, pain, a medication problem, or a new medical issue — those are for a clinician, not a boundary conversation.

Which of my parent's behaviors might be driven by memory loss rather than choice?

What could I put in the environment instead of relying on them remembering?

PART ELEVEN

Staying Consistent — Four-Week Tracker

A boundary becomes real through repetition. Track the first four weeks: what was tested, whether you held it, and what you would do differently.

Week	Was the boundary tested? How?	Did I hold it?	What I would change
1			
2			
3			
4			

If you gave in

You have not ruined anything. Boundaries get re-set all the time. Notice what the pressure was — tears, an accusation, a genuine emergency, plain exhaustion — and prepare specifically for that one before next week. A boundary that gets re-stated calmly after a slip still teaches the pattern.

PART TWELVE

Your Support Network

Boundaries almost never hold in isolation. Fill this in before you need it, not during the next crisis.

Role	Name	Phone / how to reach
The person I can vent to honestly		
Sibling or relative who shares the load		
My parent's doctor's office		
Neighbor or friend near my parent		
Home care agency or aide		
Area Agency on Aging		
Caregiver support group (when / where)		
Therapist or counselor		
Geriatric care manager		
Backup for when I am away		

Who have I not told what is really going on? What would I say to them?

PART THIRTEEN

Your Self-Care Plan

Setting boundaries is not selfish. It is the only way this lasts. Treat what follows as maintenance, not indulgence.

My non-negotiables

Three things that stay on my calendar no matter what happens this week.

What	When	Who else knows about it

My burnout warning signs

Check the ones you already recognize in yourself.

- ☐ Exhaustion that sleep does not fix
- ☐ Dread before visits or calls
- ☐ Snapping at people who did nothing wrong
- ☐ Skipping my own medical appointments
- ☐ Eating badly, drinking more, or moving less than usual
- ☐ Crying without an obvious reason
- ☐ Feeling numb, or feeling nothing at all
- ☐ Thinking about how much easier things would be if this were over

If three or more of these are true, what is my first move — and who do I call?

PART FOURTEEN

Resources and Next Steps

Where to find help that is not you. Phone numbers and services change — confirm details when you call.

Start here

Eldercare Locator. A free national service that connects you to the Area Agency on Aging for your parent's zip code — the gateway to local transportation, meals, in-home services, respite, and caregiver support. 1-800-677-1116, or eldercare.acl.gov.

Your parent's Area Agency on Aging. The single most useful call you can make. Ask specifically about respite care, caregiver support programs, and anything income-based.

Alzheimer's Association Helpline. Free, 24 hours a day, for anyone dealing with dementia — including behavior questions and caregiver strain. 1-800-272-3900.

Family Caregiver Alliance. Practical guides, state-by-state service listings, and caregiver support programs. caregiver.org.

National Alliance for Caregiving / local caregiver support groups. Ask your Area Agency on Aging, your parent's hospital social worker, or a nearby senior center about groups that meet in person, by phone, or online.

A geriatric care manager (aging life care professional). A paid professional who assesses the situation, coordinates services, and can be the buffer between you and your parent. Useful if you are long-distance or stretched thin.

A therapist or family counselor. Especially worth it when the conflict is decades old and the caregiving is just the newest chapter of it.

Also ask about

Adult day programs • Home-delivered and congregate meals • Senior transportation and dial-a-ride • Respite care (in-home and short-stay) • Personal emergency response systems • Medicaid home and community-based waiver programs • Veterans benefits, if your parent or their spouse served • Volunteer friendly-visitor and telephone-reassurance programs

PART FOURTEEN

Your Next 30 Days

Small and specific beats ambitious and abandoned. Fill in dates you will actually keep.

By when	What I will do	Done
This week	Finish Parts Three and Four	
This week		
Week 2	Say boundary #1 out loud to my parent	
Week 2		
Week 3	Make one call about outside help	
Week 3		
Week 4	Attend or find a caregiver support group	
Week 4	Review the four-week tracker in Part Eleven	
Day 30	Re-take the self-assessment in Part Two	

An agreement with myself

I am setting these boundaries so that I can keep loving and caring for my parent without losing myself. I am not abandoning them. I will be patient, I will be kind, and I will be consistent — including with myself when I slip.

Signed:

Date:

Use the companion checklist, [Setting Boundaries With Difficult Elderly Parents](#), alongside this workbook — print it and keep it where you will see it.