Requests and Boundaries: Finding the Words

What are you asking for, and what is yours to decide?

It can be hard to say what you need without feeling either too harsh or too vague. Sometimes the first helpful step is noticing what you are trying to say.

Are you asking someone to do something differently, describing a limit of your own, or hoping to agree on a plan together? These are different conversations, and you may need more than one.

You'll need: A pen and one everyday situation you would like to put into words.

1. Start with what matters. What is happening, and what would you like to be different? Try to name the concern before choosing a label for it.

2. A request asks for something. Say what you would like the other person to do. They may agree, decline, or suggest something else.

3. A personal limit describes your part. What are you available for or willing to take part in? Think about what you can follow through on, including any responsibilities you already have.

4. An agreement is something you decide together. Ask whether the other person is willing to make a shared plan. Be clear about what each of you is agreeing to.

For example

A friend often drops by after work without checking first. A request could be, "Would you text before coming over?" A personal limit could be, "I'm not available for visits unless we've made plans." An agreement could be, "Let's check that the time works for both of us before either of us comes over." The request asks for their help; the limit describes your availability; the agreement needs a yes from both of you.

A helpful reminder

Even a clear request may get an answer you did not want. You can listen to that answer and still take your own needs seriously. If saying no brings threats or makes you afraid, confidential support may be more helpful than trying to find better wording.

Learn more: CCI: What is Assertiveness? | love is respect: What are my boundaries?

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Your planning page

Use this page to make a few notes. You do not need to fill every space.

1. What would I like to be different?

Choose one situation and name what matters to you.

2. What am I asking, limiting or hoping to agree on?

You may need more than one sentence.

3. What do I need to take into account?

Earlier promises, responsibilities, what I can follow through on and the other person’s answer.

4. How could I say this in my own words?

Write a sentence you could actually imagine saying. What might come next?