

## CLIENT GUIDE

# Understanding & Setting Internal Boundaries

An evidence-based client resource · Mind-Body Care

If external boundaries are the limits we set *with other people*, internal boundaries are the limits and agreements we hold *with ourselves* — the way we relate to our own thoughts, feelings, and impulses, and how much of other people's emotional world we take on. This guide explains what internal boundaries are, why they matter for both mind and body, what happens when they break down, and practical, research-informed ways to strengthen them. Throughout you will find practices for **tuning in** to your inner signals, and **Mind-Body** practices for settling your nervous system.

## 1. What Are Internal Boundaries?

An internal boundary is the line you hold *inside* yourself: the ability to manage your own thoughts, feelings, and urges, and to filter how much of other people's moods and opinions you absorb. Where external boundaries face outward (what you ask of others), internal boundaries face inward — they are how you stay grounded, regulated, and recognisably yourself, even under pressure.

**External boundary:** “I'm not available for calls after 6 p.m.” (a limit with someone else)

**Internal boundary:** “That's their anxiety, not mine,” or “I don't have to act on this feeling,” or “I won't speak to myself that way.” (a limit with yourself)

In Pia Mellody's widely used model, a healthy internal boundary works in **both directions** at once. It keeps you from being flooded or controlled by other people's thoughts and feelings (filtering what comes *in*), and it keeps you from off-loading or imposing your own onto others (containing what goes *out*). This two-way “containment” is what lets you stay close to someone without losing track of where you end and they begin.

### When internal boundaries are...

State	What it tends to look like
<b>Too tight</b>	Feelings are suppressed or judged; rigid self-control and perfectionism; little spontaneity; a harsh, demanding inner voice. Looks composed, but is brittle.
<b>Balanced</b>	Feelings are felt without being ruled by them; thoughts are held as thoughts, not absolute truths; you own your reactions and leave others' with them. Flexible and steady.
<b>Too loose</b>	Emotion floods or hijacks behaviour; impulsive reactions; absorbing others' moods as your own; rumination and unfiltered self-criticism; hard to self-soothe.

## 2. The Many Kinds of Internal Boundaries

Internal boundaries show up wherever your inner world meets your choices. Naming the area makes a vague sense of being overwhelmed much easier to work with.

Area	What it protects
<b>Emotional</b>	Distinguishing your feelings from other people's, and feeling emotions fully without being flooded or ruled by them.
<b>Cognitive</b>	Relating to your thoughts as thoughts — not absolute facts — and choosing where your attention goes rather than being pulled into rumination.
<b>Impulse</b>	The pause between an urge and an action, so you respond from your values rather than reactivity.
<b>Self-talk</b>	How you speak to yourself; setting a limit on the harsh inner critic and on cruel self-judgement.
<b>Responsibility</b>	Sorting what is yours to carry from what belongs to others, so you stop over-functioning or caretaking by default.
<b>Attention &amp; energy</b>	Protecting your focus; not letting every worry, demand, or notification colonise your mind.

## 3. Why Internal Boundaries Matter

- **They are the engine of emotional regulation.** Being able to feel and manage your inner states — rather than suppress them or be flooded by them — is central to wellbeing. Difficulty regulating emotions and a habit of rumination are among the most consistent risk factors found across depression and anxiety (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema & Schweizer, 2010).
- **They build self-trust and a steady identity.** Keeping small commitments to yourself, and staying yourself under emotional pressure — what Murray Bowen called differentiation — strengthens a stable sense of who you are.
- **They reduce overwhelm and reactivity.** A pause between a feeling and a response turns automatic reactions into choices, lowering the sense of being hijacked by emotion.
- **They protect closeness without enmeshment.** When you can contain your own reactions and avoid absorbing everyone else's, you can be deeply connected without losing yourself in the other person.
- **They make empathy sustainable.** Filtering what you take on lets you care about others' pain without drowning in it — the difference between compassion and burnout.

## 4. The Mind-Body Impact of Internal Boundary Violations

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### A harsh inner world keeps the body on alert

Compassion-focused therapy (Paul Gilbert) describes three emotion-regulation systems: a **threat** system (fight-or-flight, fear, anger), a **drive** system (striving, achieving), and a **soothing** system (safeness, calm, connection). Crucially, harsh self-criticism and self-attack switch on the threat system — the very same alarm physiology your body uses for outside danger — so a punishing inner voice keeps you braced and tense from the inside.

When the soothing system is underused (common after stress, trauma, or relentless striving), the body has no reliable “brake.” Self-compassion and warmth help activate that soothing system, which is linked to slower breathing, muscle relaxation, and a felt sense of safety — in other words, it down-regulates the nervous system.

### Rumination keeps the stress response running

When internal boundaries around thought are loose, worry and rumination spin freely. The **perseverative cognition hypothesis** (Brosschot, Gerin & Thayer, 2006) shows that dwelling on stressors prolongs the body's physiological stress response *even when the stressor is no longer present* — the mind keeps the alarm sounding. Over time this feeds **allostatic load** (Bruce McEwen), the cumulative “wear and tear” of chronic stress on the cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune systems. Emotional flooding repeatedly pushes you outside your **window of tolerance** (Dan Siegel), the zone in which you can stay regulated and think clearly.

#### Signs your internal boundaries may be under strain

**Physical:** persistent tension, shallow breathing, fatigue, disrupted sleep, digestive upset, feeling “wired but tired.”

**Mental / emotional:** overthinking and rumination, anxiety, shame, a loud inner critic, emotional flooding or numbness, decision fatigue, losing touch with what you feel or want.

**Behavioural / relational:** impulsive reactions or rigid over-control, soaking up others' moods, over-functioning and caretaking, finding it hard to simply be with your own thoughts.

## 5. How to Set Internal Boundaries

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Internal boundaries are built less by announcing them and more by practising small inner moves, again and again, until they become familiar. The aim is **containment, not suppression** — staying with what you feel while choosing what to do with it.

- 1. Create the pause.** Between an impulse or strong feeling and your response there is a space. Widening it — even by one slow breath — turns reaction into choice. Settle the body first with a Mind-Body practice (see Section 6).
- 2. Name and separate.** Say to yourself, “I’m having the thought (or feeling) that…” Naming an experience this way (a skill from acceptance and commitment therapy) creates distance, so a thought becomes something you have rather than something you are.
- 3. Ask “whose is this?”** Sort what is yours from what belongs to someone else. You can care about another person’s feelings without making them your job to fix or carry.
- 4. Tend your self-talk.** Catch the inner critic and answer it as you would a friend. This is not just nicer — it shifts you out of the threat system and toward soothing.
- 5. Contain rumination.** Set a brief “worry window,” then deliberately redirect attention or move your body. Refocusing interrupts the spiral that keeps the stress response switched on.
- 6. Keep small promises to yourself.** Following through on tiny commitments rebuilds self-trust and strengthens your inner “yes” and “no.”

## 6. Practices to Build the Skill

### Tuning in — attuning to yourself

- **Interoceptive check-in.** A few times a day, pause and notice the sensations in your body, then name the emotion in a word or two. Labelling a feeling tends to lower its intensity.
- **“Whose is this?” sorting.** When a heavy feeling arrives, ask whether it's yours, someone else's, or both — and gently picture handing back what isn't yours to carry.
- **Thought-labelling.** Silently preface a sticky thought with “I'm noticing the thought that...” to step back from it rather than be swept along by it.
- **Self-trust ledger.** Make and keep one small promise to yourself each day, and note it. Self-trust is built from evidence.

### Mind-Body practices — settling your nervous system

- **Regulate, then respond.** Before acting on a strong urge or feeling, take a few breaths with a longer exhale (in for four, out for six to eight) to bring your nervous system back online.
- **The grounding pause / urge-surfing.** Feel your feet, breathe, and look around the room. Let a craving or impulse rise and fall like a wave instead of acting on it immediately.
- **Activate the soothing system.** A hand on the heart, a warm tone of voice, or a brief self-compassion phrase (“This is hard; may I be kind to myself”) helps shift you out of threat and into calm.
- **Worry window plus movement.** Contain rumination to a set time, then walk, stretch, or shake out the tension to discharge the leftover stress activation.
- **Soften the inner critic.** Notice one attacking phrase and replace it with what you would say to someone you love facing the same thing.

**A gentle note.** This guide is for education and reflection and is not a substitute for individual therapy or medical care. If turning inward stirs up painful emotions or memories, that is worth exploring gently with your therapist. Internal boundaries are a skill that strengthens slowly with practice — be patient and kind with yourself as you learn.

### Selected evidence & further reading

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