

Declarative Communication and Healthy Boundaries with Veterans who have PTSD

Veterans with PTSD often experience feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy, or diminished self-worth. These emotional states amplify basic survival responses such as fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Often emotions manifest as observable behaviors, including physically running away, shouting, aggression, verbal conflict, withdrawal, or even complete shutdown. Problematic behaviors subsequently become the primary focus, but are just indicators of underlying psychological distress.

Your goal is to help address such behavior problems effectively by managing your feelings, responses, and boundaries. You demonstrate leadership by modeling self-awareness, empathy, and thoughtful interpersonal behavior. Once PTSD is activated and an individual's resilience is diminished, functioning across various aspects of life becomes significantly impaired. Declarative language is a powerful communication tool to assist interactions as it is inviting and supportive.

Setting clear boundaries in relationships is best done with **declarative, "I"-based statements** that express your needs calmly and respectfully. This means straightforwardly stating your feelings and intentions (e.g. "*I feel...*", "*I need...*", "*I will...*"), rather than using imperative language which requires responses or commands. Using the declarative approach helps avoid confusion and defensiveness. In the context of a relationship with a veteran who has PTSD, it's especially important to be sensitive and trauma-informed: speak plainly, validate their feelings, and avoid any language that could be triggering or shaming.

It is essential to acknowledge that not all techniques will be effective for every individual, as each person has a distinct intellectual and communication style. This will take practice and may feel awkward in conversations – stick with it and find what works for you. The following best practices, do's and don'ts, and examples show how to communicate needs and boundaries with clarity, emotional safety, and respect for PTSD triggers.

S.P.E.A.K. – for using Declarative Language effectively

- **S – State, don't demand:** Focus on stating what you observe or think instead of giving direct commands.
Example: "I wonder where that dog went," instead of "Find the dog."
- **P – Promote thinking:** Encourage problem-solving and reflection rather than compliance.
Example: "It looks like the water is spilling," instead of "Clean that up."
- **E – Express observations and emotions:** Share what you notice or feel to model communication.
Example: "I'm feeling a little confused about what to do next."
- **A – Allow space:** Give the other person time to process and respond without pressure.
Pause and wait—don't fill silence immediately.
- **K – Keep it open-ended:** Use language that opens dialogue rather than closes it.
Example: "I notice you're looking at the door. I wonder what's on your mind."

Best Practices for Declarative Communication

- **Use “I” statements:** Frame boundaries from your perspective. For example, say “I feel anxious in large crowds” instead of “You’re making me uncomfortable by dragging me to that party” “I” statements (e.g. *“I need...,” “I feel...,” “I will...”*) **express your feelings and needs without blaming** the other person, which keeps communication clear and kind.
- **Be clear, concrete and specific:** Avoid vague hints or ambiguous language. **Be clear about how you expect to be treated.** Speak plainly about what you need or will do. For example, instead of asking *“Do you want to go out later?”*, say *“Would you like to go for a walk together at 3 PM?”* This direct style prevents misunderstandings and builds trust. When possible, **explain your intentions in advance** (a form of “tactical transparency”: e.g. “I’m going to lock the door now so we can feel secure,” or “I will be home by 8 PM as I will go to the grocery store and will call if I’m running late.”
- **Maintain a calm, respectful tone:** Speak in a gentle, steady voice and keep your body language open. Avoid sarcasm, phony looks, raised voices, jokes, or fake pity, as these can be misinterpreted or triggering. Research shows that people with PTSD (and anxiety) respond much better to calm, empathetic communication than to anger or yelling. Keeping a soothing tone and steady eye contact conveys safety and respect.
- **Validate feelings and express empathy:** Acknowledge their experience and let them know you care. Simple supportive phrases like *“That sounds overwhelming,” “I’m here for you,”* or *“You’re not alone”* show understanding. Avoid using phrases like *“I understand what you are going through”* or *“I know how you are feeling”* as the veteran believes they are protecting you from the bad and horrors they have experienced. Use gentle, affirming language: *“It seems that upset you”* or *“I’m sorry you’re going through this”*. At the same time, you can still hold your boundary. For example: *“I know this is hard for you. I need some quiet time now, but I want you to know I care and I’m here to listen later.”* This builds trust by combining empathy with honesty.
- **Use restraint in contact and body language:** Be mindful of physical contact and nonverbal communication when interacting with individuals who have PTSD, particularly veterans. It is essential to express empathy without inadvertently triggering distress. Avoid initiating physical touch—such as hugging or holding—unless the individual has clearly expressed comfort with such gestures. Physical proximity may evoke fear or discomfort, as it can be a source of emotional or psychological distress. Reassure them that they are loved, worthy, and not alone using phrases such as *“Please know you are valued and deserving of my love”*. Provide a supportive statement that reassures them of a supportive presence like *“You’re safe right now. I’m here with you, and I won’t leave. Take your time—there’s no pressure to talk or do anything until you’re ready.”* Avoid shutting down or keeping your emotions to yourself - Create an environment that reinforces their value and emotional safety. Rather than avoiding difficult moments, be present, approachable, and willing to listen, helping them feel supported and understood

- **Respect their boundaries and triggers:** If they indicate they need space or seem overwhelmed, **pause the conversation**. Don't force them to continue if they're distressed. Ask permission before bringing up potentially triggering topics (e.g. past issues, finances...) You might say, *"Is it okay if we talk about something sensitive?"* or *"Would you feel comfortable discussing what happened earlier?"* Giving them the choice to engage shows respect for their autonomy. Also, avoid known triggers: for example, loud sudden noises references can cause flashbacks. As one example of respecting triggers, if your partner loves war movies but they upset you, you could say: *"I know you enjoy war movies, but they make me very anxious. Would you be open to watching something lighter tonight?"* This both acknowledges their interest and clearly states your boundary.
- **Offer options and collaboration:** Whenever possible, give choices to empower them. For instance, *"I'd like to spend time together. Would you prefer a quiet dinner at home or a short walk in the park?"* This way they feel some control. Providing options can reduce anxiety and shows you respect their needs. Even when you must say "no" to something, you can offer an alternative: *"I can't join the big party tonight. Could I host a small game night for a few friends instead?"*
- **Follow through consistently:** Be reliable. If you say you will do (or not do) something, honor it. Consistency in boundaries and routine builds a sense of safety. For example, if you say *"I will only check work email before 7pm,"* then stick to that time. Unpredictability or broken promises can exacerbate anxiety; predictability in actions reassures them you're trustworthy. In all, **clarity and consistency reinforce trust** in the relationship.
- **Always balance your statements with pauses and silence:** These pauses allow the listener time to process information, reduce cognitive overload, and create space for reflection. In trauma-informed communication, silence can be a powerful tool that conveys respect, fosters a sense of safety, and supports emotional regulation. It also encourages more thoughtful and meaningful dialogue by signaling that the conversation is a shared space, not a one-sided exchange.

Do's for Effective Boundary Setting with Triggered People

- **Do speak calmly and clearly:** Use affirmative statements like *"I need..."*, *"I feel..."*, *"I will..."* in a measured tone. Give your message with kind firmness.
- **Do use person-first, non-blaming language:** Emphasize the person, not their issue. Focus on understanding: ask *"How can I help you?"* or *"Is there anything you would like for me to do for you?"* This shows respect for their dignity.
- **Do validate and empathize:** Acknowledge their emotions with phrases like *"That sounds really tough"* or *"I understand why you'd feel that way"* Let them know you care: *"I'm here for you,"* *"You're not alone"* or *"I am able to sit with you here for awhile"* Being compassionate gives them emotional and physical safety.
- **Do use a calm tone and open body language:** Keep your voice gentle and even. Stand or sit with relaxed posture, maintain comfortable eye contact, and give personal space (avoid looming or sudden touching). This non-threatening approach helps them feel secure. Maintain a positive engagement.
- **Do be direct and specific about boundaries:** Clearly state what you need, without beating around the bush. For example, *"When you raise your voice, I feel unsafe. I need us to speak quietly"*. Being precise (who, what, when, where) reduces confusion.
- **Do offer choices and solutions:** Instead of simply saying no, suggest alternatives that consider both your needs. (*"I can't do X, but I'm willing to try Y."*) This shows collaboration and respect.
- **Do give space when needed:** If they seem triggered or upset, allow them time alone or to calm down. For instance, *"I notice you seem overwhelmed. Let's pause and continue later when we're both calmer."* Allowing breaks avoids escalating the situation.
- **Do be patient and consistent:** Allow time for adjustment. Learning and implementing new boundaries may cause temporary pushback. Stay steady and patient. Over time, consistent enforcement of boundaries builds security.
- **Do ask questions regarding their senses:** When appropriate and based on the individual's current state, consider gently inquiring about their physical sensations. You might ask if they feel hot or cold, or where they may be experiencing pain, pressure, or tension in their body. Encouraging a brief body scan or guiding them through box breathing can help support regulation and reduce activation of the fight-or-flight response.

Don'ts to Avoid with Triggered People

- **Don't use accusing or "you"-centered language:** Avoid phrases like *"You always," "You never,"* or personal attacks. For example, instead of *"You never listen,"* rephrase as *"I feel unheard when this happens."* Blame can trigger defensiveness or shame.
- **Don't raise your voice or yell:** Never shout, argue aggressively, or make threats. These behaviors can trigger a "fight or flight" response. Aggression as an emotion shows, "I want you to see how you made me feel." For example, do not say *"Calm down!"* in frustration. Instead, maintain a low tone: *"Let's both stay calm"* or *"Let's take five and pause this topic"*.
- **Do not take ownership of their triggers:** Respond directly to triggers or bad behaviors in the moment. Tell them immediately how you feel about the behavior. When they say something mean or uncomfortable, respond with *"what you said makes me feel uncomfortable"* or *"I feel offended by what you just said"*.
- **Don't pressure them to talk about trauma or uncomfortable topics:** If they're reluctant, don't push. Do not rush or coax them into disclosure. Ask their permission to talk about the sensitive subject. For instance, *"I'm here if you ever want to talk, but I understand if not right now."* Whenever possible, use neutral language such as *"There seems to be tension between us, and I would like to discuss it when you are ready."*
- **Don't compare stories or advice on trauma:** Avoid matching personal experiences. Each journey is deeply personal and shaped by unique and often unimaginable circumstances. Many veterans choose to remain silent not out of distance, but out of a deep sense of protection for those they care about. They may carry memories they feel are too painful or complex to share, and they often struggle to relate those experiences to civilian life. Always present information or possibilities without urging action. Example of respectful language to use: *"I may not understand what you've been through, but I'm here to support you in any way I can."* or *"There is also the option of..."; "Another possibility is..."*
- **Don't ignore or minimize their feelings:** Never dismiss what they're feeling. Acknowledge that you understand they are emotional. Avoid saying things like *"It's not a big deal,"* or *"You're exaggerating ..."* Instead, affirm their feelings. Ignoring their emotions can increase stress and may even erode trust in the long term.
- **Don't be sarcastic or use a cynical tone:** Even if you think you're lightening the mood, sarcasm, pessimism, and humor often can be deeply hurtful. Keep humor gentle, cautiously light, and never at the expense of their experiences. Do not ever roll your eyes. Try very hard to remain calm, cool, and adult in dealing with their PTSD.
- **Don't violate their boundaries or surprise them:** If you need to do something unexpected (like enter their personal space or change plans), **tell them in advance.** Sudden moves or surprises (e.g. hiding behind doors, abrupt touching) can trigger anxiety. Always communicate your actions and movements.
- **Don't break your own commitments:** If you say you will respect a boundary, follow through. For example, if you promised to keep the house quiet after midnight, do not break that promise. Reliability itself communicates respect and builds emotional safety.

Examples

- **Movie Night Trigger:**

"I know you enjoy war movies, but they can be really difficult for me to watch because of my PTSD. Would you be open to watching a comedy or thriller instead?"

Why it works: This statement uses **"I" language** and empathy ("I know you enjoy..."), clearly links the trigger to your PTSD, and offers an alternative activity. It sets a firm boundary (no war movies) while respecting the other person's interests and suggesting a compromise.

- **Feeling Overwhelmed:**

"I feel really overwhelmed right now and need to step outside for a few minutes. I'll come back when I've had a moment to calm down." Or "I feel really overloaded emotionally, please give me 5 minutes to cool myself off"

Why it works: It declares your emotional state and need plainly. You're not blaming anyone; you simply state your need for space. The other person is informed of what you're doing and why, creating clarity and avoiding confusion.

- **Need for Quiet :**

"When I get home, I usually need about 30 minutes to unwind before talking. I'll read quietly in the living room for a bit. I appreciate it if we can talk after that."

Why it works: This example (based on boundary-setting guidelines) calmly explains your routine ("need...to unwind") and sets a clear expectation. You're proactive and polite, which helps your partner know how to support you.

- **Conflict De-escalation:**

"I am not okay with continuing this conversation when voices are raised. I'm going to step outside until I feel calmer, and then we can talk calmly."

Why it works: You clearly state **what's not okay** (raised voices) and what you will do (step away). You use "I" language about yourself and offer a plan to resume calmly. This sets a boundary about *how* you'll talk.

- **Reassurance After a Trigger:**

"I see that was really loud and scary for you. You're safe here with me. Take your time—I'm right here when you're ready."

Why it works: In the moment of a trigger, this example offers calm reassurance ("You're safe here") and lets them know you won't abandon them. It's declarative ("I see", "I'm here") and grounding, which can help stop panic. Use the [PTSD Challenge to Change](#) document if helpful.

- **Expressing Need for Honesty:**

"I need clarity and honesty in our communication. If you don't want to talk about something right now, it's okay—just let me know when it will be appropriate to discuss it."

Why it works: This declarative statement sets a boundary about communication itself. It emphasizes *your* need for transparency without accusing ("I need..." not "You must..."), and it offers understanding if your partner needs to decline.

Each example uses declarative, respectful language that prioritizes **clarity**, **safety**, and **mutual respect**. By focusing on "I" statements, calm tone, and empathy, these approaches avoid blaming or shaming and help a veteran with PTSD feel understood rather than attacked. Consistency in using such communication builds trust and a sense of security over time.

Sources: www.ptsd.va.gov

<https://www.declarativelanguage.com/>

Tawwab, Nedra Glover. [Set Boundaries, Find Peace](#): A guide to reclaiming yourself. Penguin, 2021.

Declarative Expressions

Wondering

- I'm wondering... if you would like to... if we could
- I wonder if... you mean... you know... you saw... you remember how or when...
- What will happen if...
- Imagine if...
- I would imagine that...
- Wondering why...

Thinking

- I think... now might be a good time to... last time we did...
- I was thinking... of going... of putting... of asking... of inviting...
- I think... I can smell lunch cooking... today might be...
- I'm thinking this will be interesting for us...
- I think it might be time for...
- Thinking we could try a different strategy...
- Thinking you might be right about...

Wishing

- I wish we could...
- I wish it was...
- I wish that were a...
- I wonder if you mean you wish it wasn't...
- Wishing we had
- Wishing I could be there to help you...

Knowing

- I know it's hard when...
- I know it feels difficult to have to...
- I know you are challenged by...
- Knowing X, then Y...

Noticing

- I can see... others are starting to... that must mean...
- I can see that's not ...
- That appears... Those seem..... are...
- I notice it's... getting..
- I see that it's.....
- I can hear you.... I heard that...
- That looks XX to me... I could only do that if I had ...

Let us

- Let's decide when to...
- Let's decide what...
- Let's think of some ideas for when or what...
- Let's... get ready... be... do this or that...

Possibly, maybe, sometimes, not sure...

- Maybe... maybe we should check the weather.
- Might... we might go to the store later... it might be raining tomorrow.
- Possibly... we could possibly consider doing it another time instead.
- Perhaps... there's another way to do to this.
- Sometimes... it can help to do this rather than that...
- I'm not sure about that. What a great thought!
- I don't know... that's a great question.
- I don't know the answer to that yet. (*Follow up with a possibly we could suggestion*)
- We could...

I, me, my...

- I'll need to bring my...
- I need...
- I expect...
- I remember when...
- It is important that... I hold your hand to cross the road...
- I will get hurt if you keep doing that...
- I'm going to do X now.
- My favorite way to do this is...
- My idea is...
- I can't wait to see... who, what, when, why, how...
- I'm worried about this because...
- Here is my... I'm going to use it to....
- I forgot about...
- I realized...

Constructing declarative statements

Emotional Verbs

Used to express feelings or emotional states. They model emotional awareness and regulation.

I feel	I'm unhappy
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I like (or don't like)	I'm excited
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I expect	I'm nervous
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I wish	I'm frustrated
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I hope	I care about
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I'm upset	I admire
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I'm scared	I need
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Cognitive Verbs

Used to express thoughts, beliefs, or mental processes. They support and show perspective-taking.

I think	I suspect	I propose
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I believe	I agree	I recognize
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I know	I disagree	I realize
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I don't know	I understand	I dream of
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I imagine	I propose	I regard
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I admire	I appreciate
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Sensory Verbs

Used to express observations or sensory experiences. These promote mindfulness and attention to the present

I see	It looks (like)
I hear	It sounds (like)
I notice	I observe
I observe	I sense
I'm noticing	I detect
I smell (if contextually appropriate)	It appears
I taste (if contextually appropriate)	

4. Reflective Verbs

Used to express introspection, memory, or growth. These foster self-awareness and learning.

I remember	I reflect	I consider
I'm learning	I'm noticing	I'm contemplating
I'm evaluating	I'm thinking about	I'm reminded
I'm debating over	I recall	I wonder
I'm curious	I enjoyed	I think