

THE WELLNESS HUB

BOUNDARIES MENTAL WELLNESS EVERY DAY



BOUNDARIES

Unlike approaching traffic lights, boundaries are not as obvious as a red light- do not go beyond this boundary. Nonetheless, they are essential for wellbeing and personal safety. They are often confused with being a mechanism for keeping others out but more so, it enables us to protect our energy and enhances our self-esteem.

Boundaries will change over the course of a lifetime and will be determined by many factors including life experiences, culture, moral reasoning, family dynamics and personality. Thus we all hold different boundaries.

Following the pandemic, employers provided work phones and laptops/ devices to enable staff to work from home. This flexibility can enable some employees to function more efficiently as it offers an opportunity to structure work *around* life, whether this relates to location, times or scheduling (1)

However, research indicates that it has also had a negative impact. Unfortunately, for some the work-home distinction has become less obvious and increased accessibility. A recent study also found that 75% of parents were struggling to find time for their children and partner. From the analysis, it was also evident that women, in particular, held caregiving responsibilities across generations (2). Furthermore, on average people are working an additional 3 hours per day as we struggle to disconnect the real world from a digital one (3).

Flexibility should not compromise boundaries but rather effective boundaries can help to reduce work-life conflict, burnout and physical and mental health difficulties. It also helps retention of staff, increases productivity and reduces sickness absence. So whilst it may initially feel uncomfortable particularly when dealing with feelings of overwhelm, there are a multitude of benefits to be gained (4).

There are numerous reasons for boundaries to be part of your work and personal life (5). They include:

- manage responsibilities
- increase productivity
- enhance relationships
- improve confidence and wellbeing
- define how you wish to be treated

BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are therefore a guide regarding what is important to us, and from this, we create rules of engagement. Furthermore, it helps you to invest your energy and fosters intimacy with the right people, at the right time. This section will help to identify boundaries and behaviours to safeguard wellbeing. The worksheets support reflective practice but can also be used in discussions with peers to promote a cohesive and beneficial work culture.

Here are some suggestions to create boundaries irrespective of location.

- *Conduct a personal audit:*

Using the worksheets below, take a moment to identify situations or individuals that create anxious feelings or make you feel stressed. This may indicate that you either need to create or reset a boundary.

- *Limits:*

Once you have a better understanding of where boundaries are needed or have been compromised, set about creating a new limitation. This could be as simple as turning off devices and putting them away at 5 pm or ensuring that you take a lunch break.

- *communication:*

Once identified, communicate these to others as they are not mindreaders. It is helpful to focus your communication on what you are able to do rather than what you are not prepared to do (the mind does not respond favourably to negatives). For example, I will respond to emails before 4 pm or I will be available between 10-2 pm.

- *Think about it:*

Boundaries can become blurred when we have a desire to please others or are aware of the urgency of the request. Before saying "yes", particularly if you are being put 'on the spot', gift yourself the time to 'check in' with yourself. If 'no' feels strong- a simple 'can I check my diary or speak to the team and get back to you?'

- *The No muscle:*

This small but mighty word can be difficult for some. The discomfort is a result of the neural pathway not existing, so take some time to rehearse it to embed it. Practise saying it without being obliged to provide an explanation, to prevent erosion of boundaries through discussions.

BOUNDARIES

- *Stick to the routine:*

Create and stick to a routine. This will make it easier to maintain boundaries. This may include time blocked out to solely focus on specific tasks to increase productivity. Also, use the electronic diary to communicate to others your unavailability (6). For example, blocking out your lunch break.

- *Model behaviour:*

When you are part of a team, there is a work culture that we all contribute to, including modelling good boundaries and self-compassion. Colleagues will feel empowered to implement and maintain boundaries if they see it as the norm.

- *Protect your space*

Take the time to implement small changes that will support the maintenance of boundaries. This could be environmental (using a specific space in the home when remote working), time (use out of the office tool), physical (get up every hour and take a 5-minute stretch) and social (schedule time to speak to loved ones) (7).

- *Mental agility*

There may be exceptional circumstances requiring boundary flexibility. Provided there is mutual respect and you are given the same courtesy when requested, the willingness to be agile can strengthen relationships. For example, offering to work an additional 30 minutes for a colleague to deal with a family emergency. Flexible boundaries are still important provide it is understood by all concerned that it is exceptional and there is a 'bottom line'.

The following worksheet is an opportunity to consider events or situations in which boundaries could be compromised. This visualisation and mental preparation enabling the mind to recognise it as a legitimate response without activating the limbic system's stress response.

Respectful communication is key. Choosing to respond in anger or using hurtful comments is indicative of the limbic system being in control. Whether these are loved ones or colleagues, mutually respectful interaction is important. Also be mindful of non-verbal cues that may indicate that colleagues are struggling, such as lowered voice and inability to maintain eye contact. Equally, practise using a firm but medium-pitched tone.



WORKSHEET - BOUNDARIES

Take a few moments to identify circumstances in which you felt a boundary was compromised resulting in a negative impact (for example, additional pressure and energy or a loss of time/ money). Consider your preferred response should the situation arise in the future. The response should clearly communicate what you are able to do. An example has been provided.

Situation: You are asked to provide some childcare on a Saturday afternoon when you already have plans

Preferred response: Not this Saturday but I am available to look after the children on

Situation:

Preferred response:

BOUNDARIES

References

- 1) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adigaskell/2020/05/11/is-a-blurred-work-life-balance-the-new-normal/?sh=37a9acc18130>
- 2) <https://core.ac.uk/reader/82147160>
- 3) <https://blog.trello.com/work-life-boundaries-as-a-remote-worker>
- 4) <https://www.carolynspring.com/blog/boundaries/>
- 5) <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/06/200625122734.htm>
- 6) <https://blog.trello.com/deep-work-productivity-interview-with-cal-newport>
- 7) <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/set-boundaries>