

love & life

missing PBOS and also
the small shadow should
be removed, please

The ball is in your court:
Setting smart limits is a
total game changer.

Build Better Boundaries

Finding work-life-*everything* balance is tough, but hey, the most rewarding changes take some effort. Get ready to draw lines.



By Perri O. Blumberg



You're not alone if you hear the word *boundaries* and think of basketball and tennis courts rather than strategic lines you sketch to protect yourself. In fact, the concept is likely not even on your mind right now as you're busy, you know, doing life: Women log 2.6 times more unpaid domestic and emotional work than men and spend three hours longer on childcare per week, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey. And that was *pre-pandemic*. Covid made it all worse, "heightening existing issues in society like the unequal distribution of labor in the home," says psychologist Cathy Sullivan-Windt, PhD, owner of New Connections Counseling Center in Baltimore.

It's not just mamas who are struggling. We've all been affected by the blurred lines between professional and home life. One survey shows that 45 percent of people work more than they did before COVID-19 hit, and almost 70 percent said they now put in time on the weekends. And when Harvard Business School researchers analyzed emails sent during the pandemic, they found that employees sent 5.2 percent more per day and about 8.3 percent more after hours. The outcome? We feel pulled in *all* directions while selling ourselves short.

That's why drawing lines is so important, if difficult. "Boundaries establish healthy relationships and a strong sense of identity," says Brian Wind, PhD, chief clinical officer at JourneyPure addiction centers. "They boost your self-esteem and reduce resentment and anger toward others." While some boundaries are tangible (like sticking to a reasonable work schedule) and others are more emotional (say, with friends who overstep), both conserve your emotional energy, so you feel less drained and more empowered. Sounds wonderful, right? Read on for methods to take back the reins.

Set Tangible Limits

MAKE A *REALISTIC* CALENDAR

If your company is dealing with pivot after pivot, it might not be realistic to sign out at 5 p.m. on the dot, as you used to. Write down a sched that takes your entire situation into account, along with what's most important. Maybe you miss your morning workout routine; post your plan on the fridge so everyone in the fam sees it. Or maybe you need a healthy lunch to recharge before a hectic afternoon; create a standing meeting with yourself so others can't book you during that window. You might not be able to swing both, but "the point is to design a structure you are happy with and can stick with," says Gail Saltz, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at the NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital Weill-Cornell School of Medicine.

SEND A CONSISTENT MESSAGE

"Set the tone that work hours are work hours, and nonwork hours are nonwork hours," says Saltz. "If you answer some emails but not others, you'll be on the slippery slope to all." If a "no Slack after 6 p.m." policy becomes your norm, your team knows to expect a reply in the morning. You can set a status if needed: "Back online at 9 a.m."

PERSONIFY YOUR LINE IN THE SAND

Since it can be easy to break promises you've made to yourself, think of your boundary as another person. "I call my financial health Prosperity, and I take excellent care of her," says psychotherapist Joyce Marter, LCPC, author of *The Financial Mindset Fix*. BTW, money boundaries are critical, she says, since they "demonstrate self-care and protect well-being." So name that limit!

Protect Your Vibes

•• KNOW WHEN SOMEONE GOES OVERBOARD

It can be tricky to ID when an emotional boundary has been breached, but it probably feels as if you just spoke to an energy vampire. “Discomfort, anger, nerves, or a tightness in your body can indicate that your boundaries are being crossed,” says Wind.

•• CLARIFY YOUR STANCE

Ultimately, deciding on a boundary of this nature means separating your own feelings from the feelings of others and giving yourself permission to have your own thoughts about a situation or a person. So if a pal tries to define your emotions about, say, a mutual friend, poli-

tics, or whatever, say, “This is how I feel about X, and please trust that I can make the right decision,” offers Wind. If she still pushes her point, try, “I’m overwhelmed and need space to process my feelings. Let’s talk about this when I’m ready.” Think: calm and clear.

•• EMBRACE “NO”

Rather than saying yes to something you don’t want to do and harboring resentment, politely decline...without overexplaining yourself. “Learn to turn down things you don’t want to do and people you don’t want to spend time with,” Wind says. “You don’t need to justify it.” In fact, overexplaining can weaken your boundary, leaving it open for debate. Keep it short and sweet!

The Flexibility Factor

It’s okay to tweak your rules. “Unlike geographical boundaries, personal ones depend on the situation,” says Mary McNaughton-Cassill, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Which means you might need to adjust them when...

1

You Know It Won’t Become a Habit

Need to stay a little late at work? It happens. If logging more hours is a temporary thing—perhaps it’s an emergency or one-off project—it’s okay to bend your usual habits. The key is to make sure it doesn’t become permanent.

2

Your Future Self Won’t Mind

Adding to your full plate can interfere with quality sleep, mental health, and focus. So if you can anticipate a “quick favor” leading to a headache, then just say no quickly, says Erlanger Turner, PhD, a psychology professor at Pepperdine University. Otherwise, if it’ll make you happy (and feels doable), go for it.

3

It’s Good for Your Relationships

If a friend who never asks for anything presents you with a boundary breaker (like seeking your late-night advice), then you’re in the clear. The issue is when someone takes regular advantage of your continued kindness. —Madeline Howard

