Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves even when we risk disappointing others.

- Brene Brown

A co-worker just asked you to do him a favor and cover his shift this weekend. You’ve worked seven days in a row; you are exhausted, but you feel bad saying no.

It’s 9:30 p.m. on Friday, and a friend going through a divorce is calling. He’s called every night this week needing support. You just had an argument with your spouse, and are struggling to manage your own stress. But you feel guilty if you don’t take the call.

Do either of these scenarios feel familiar? In a culture that is increasingly promoting self-care, we hear a lot about the concept of setting boundaries or saying no. It sounds good, but when it comes time to answer your friend, can make you a bit uncomfortable. Read on for tips on how to set boundaries in your personal life and at work.

For most people, setting boundaries at work can feel challenging because we want to succeed at work, so we should be as agreeable as possible, right? Not exactly. Setting boundaries at work can help decrease work-related stress and prevent burnout. And since most employers want happy, productive employees, it is a win-win for everyone when you set boundaries. Try saying no to a task or asking for help if you are overwhelmed. Communicate clearly and set limits; if you don’t want your team to contact you after 5 p.m., let them know. If you don’t want to receive work-related text messages on your personal phone, speak up!

Setting boundaries in our personal lives can feel equally challenging. Experts note that a primary obstacle in setting boundaries is guilt. People are afraid of disappointing others and afraid of not being liked. Most of us have been socialized to put others first, so boundary-setting can feel counterintuitive. Remember that your needs are important, too, and that you will be a better friend/family member if you are feeling good! Try not to assume how someone may respond to a boundary. Remember that saying “no” or “not right now” does not have to be forever. Stay connected with people who encourage you to take care of yourself.

Ask the Expert
Every Thursday, noon–12:30 p.m.
Join a 30-minute Ask the Expert session with Alyssa Toran, L.C.S.W.-C., mySupport on-site clinician at Johns Hopkins, to talk about setting boundaries and what this can look like in our personal and professional lives.
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