Week 11 – Setting Personal Boundaries

"Setting boundaries and sticking to them is a fundamental part of human existence. How do you feel when someone you don't know (or have only just met) stands too close to you, talking right into your face? What is it like when someone outstays their welcome, borrows something without asking or becomes overly intrusive and passive aggressive in the way they communicate with you on a daily basis?

Generally, we are clear about how we feel when this happens, and we expect other people to abide by such 'rules. But the person who loses the ability to maintain and uphold personal and professional boundaries will rapidly lose sight of what their personal limitations are and will no longer be able to manage their emotions or workload. Clarity of thought and the ability to make good decisions for our personal health fall by the wayside, along with our confidence and integrity. Therefore, we need to be able to understand what our personal limitations should be in order to achieve a healthy work/ life balance. It is imperative that we recognise and connect with the necessity of putting boundaries in place at all times."

– Jonathan Hoban (Author, Psychotherapist & Walking Therapist)

Why boundaries are breached

We are all guilty of letting boundaries drop (or not establishing them at all) when we feel pressured into submission. For example: we've already put in a ten- hour workday and now the boss is asking if we can stay for another couple of hours just to finish some paperwork. It's the last thing we want to do, but we do it anyway. Or we take work home at the weekends because otherwise, I'll be chasing my tail next week. I would rather have a quiet night in but choose to stay out late in the pub because that's what everyone else is doing tonight. All These scenarios can mean that we sacrifice time we set aside for ourselves.

Saying 'Yes' to requests for our time can be life-enhancing if they benefit us, but equally, there must be at times when we say 'No' and mean it. We are all

aware of the terms 'yes-man' or a 'people-pleaser' and the connotations of subservience and gullibility they carry - but even so, we still very often say 'Yes' when 'No' would be more appropriate.

Why do we do this? Because we want to be liked, and to be thought of as a 'good person'. At the root of 'people-pleasing' is fear - the fear of others opinions of us, the fear of being fired, the fear of confrontation or the fear of standing out and being shamed by those around us. We don't like letting people down and being the cause of disappointment. To do so leaves us feeling guilty and ashamed that we 'should' or 'could' have done what was asked of us. We don't want to be thought of as selfish, so we constantly put ourselves last. And when we do this, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the demands of others and under increasing pressure to go the extra mile, even if it's at considerable personal cost. Before we know it, we have slipped into what I call emotional overdraft. This is where we tend to give more and more of ourselves to others, leaving nothing to sustain our own emotional well-being. We strive to meet demands out of a desperate need to 'people-please' and eradicate our feelings of guilt in the process.

Those who do prioritise their well-being, on the other hand, are in emotional credit because they are able to set adequate personal boundaries for themselves and don't feel resentment as they can give freely at no cost to their mental health or wellbeing.

Is the desire to be liked worth sacrificing your happiness, or a reasonable excuse to open yourself up to huge amounts of stress and regret? Are the detrimental effects that stress is having on your mind, body and spirit as a result of people pleasing a justifiable price to pay for being able to declare that you're never selfish?

Trauma occurs not when we are abandoned by others, but when we abandon ourselves, and it's worth reinforcing this in the context of boundary setting. If you cannot set boundaries and you say yes to everything even when your intuition is screaming 'No!' – then you're abandoning yourself by not remaining true to what the authentic part of your being is trying to tell you.

Managers and HR people who face their own stresses and pressures may not be adequately enforcing break times and reasonable working hours in the mistaken belief that it's more important to be 'seen' to be busy, regardless of whether one is actually being productive or not. This leadership style or belief system is out of date and out of keeping with current approaches to mental health within an organisation and productivity. So, it's all the more encouraging to see that companies that do embrace flexible working hours and integrate well-being programs are already seeing positive changes within their teams, contributing towards staff retention rates.

This is why you need to be in charge of creating and setting your own personal boundaries – by scheduling adequate breaks for yourself throughout the day, for example. Waiting for someone else to enforce these boundaries on your behalf, such as your boss, is not the way forward and will not fill you with a feeling of empowerment. In fact, it is the opposite and means handing over your power.

So, let's begin to identify where a boundary has been breached for you on more than one occasion. Think of a time, or several times, when you said 'Yes' but really wanted to say 'No'

Step 1
I say 'Yes' instead of 'No' when:

   1) X
   2) X
   3) X

Step 2
Now ask yourself why you feel you can't say 'No'

I can't say 'No' in the situation because:
   1) X
   2) X
   3) X

Step 3
Lastly, ask yourself what might happen if you did say no? What's the absolute worst-case scenario here? For example, if you told your boss you were no longer working late every night and they subsequently got cross with you, what might happen next? Could you have an open conversation, explaining how it is affecting your health and if that didn't work could you find a job in a less pressurised, more employee friendly company? Will you be courageous enough to prioritise yourself and your happiness? This might feel like catastrophising, but it is seriously worth some thought. You only have one life after all.

If I do say 'No', what's the worst that can happen?
   1) X
   2) X
   3) X

And if it does happen, what can I do about it?
   1) X
   2) X
   3) X

By using this questioning worse-case scenario approach, hopefully you'll see that the perceived difficulties that prevent you from raising boundaries and saying 'No' almost always have solutions. If you are clear and confident about the boundaries you set, and you communicate these in an equally clear, confident and non-confrontational way, you will be respected. Even better, if you set clear boundaries at work, you will be much more confident about setting them in your personal life too.

– Jonathan Hoban (Author, Psychotherapist & Walking Therapist)