

HEALTH

SET YOUR BOUNDARIES

That's the key to maintain a healthy mind



MINU BUDHIA

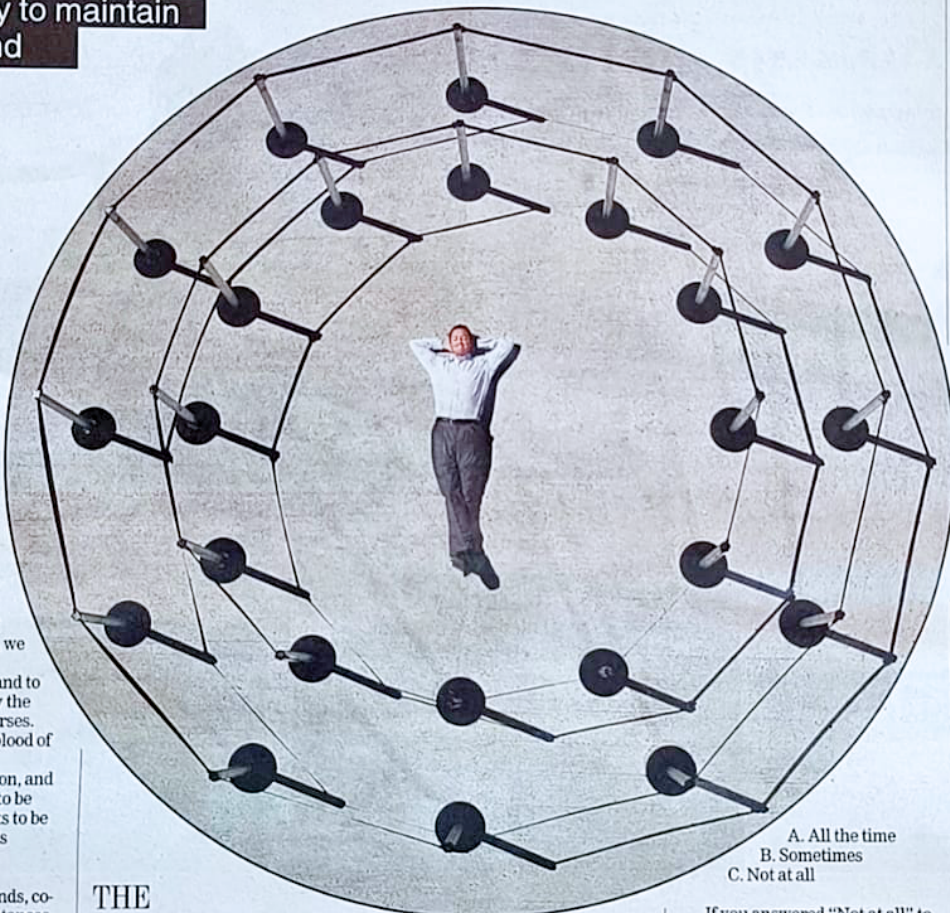
With October being the month for mental health awareness, I wanted to write on a theme that would inspire each and every one of us — irrespective of age, location, socio-economic background — to take positive action and make mental healthcare a part of our everyday lives. What is it that we all want? At our core, we all want to be loved, to be understood, to be respected, and to be accepted for who we are by the people in our own little universes.

Relationships are the lifeblood of human lives. We thrive on interaction and communication, and however much we may want to be alone sometimes, no one wants to be lonely. Thus we do whatever is necessary to nurture our relationships — with parents, spouses, children, family, friends, co-workers, neighbours, acquaintances — the list goes on. However, one relationship we often forget about is the one with ourselves. And to keep our relationships alive, more often than not, we make sacrifices — big and small — on a daily basis.

We've all been told that the key to any healthy relationship is communication. What to say, what not to say, how to say it, when to say it — it has all been discussed. But something that's fallen through the cracks is communication with ourselves. While we've adopted mindfulness, gratitude, yoga, journaling, as part of our self-care, there's one important thing that we're apprehensive about, and that's setting boundaries.

As a part of our culture and our upbringing we are taught to put ourselves last, but it's time to change this narrative. If someone's behaviour is toxic and affecting your well-being, you have every right to set boundaries. In fact, not creating boundaries is a type of slow, emotional self-harm.

In today's column, I wanted to try something new — to bring the feel of a self-guided workshop so you not only read, but actively participate while going through this article. Let's get started!



A. All the time
B. Sometimes
C. Not at all

THE HEALTHY BOUNDARY TEST

The first thing we're going to do is to figure out your current comfort level with setting boundaries.

1. Do you have trouble saying "no" and feel guilty when you say "no" to requests you don't want to do?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

2. Do you over-explain yourself when you say "no" to something you don't want to do?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

3. How often do you give in and say "yes" when someone ignores your boundary and guilt-trips you?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

4. When someone gets upset with you because of your boundaries, do you feel scared you'll lose

them?

- A. All the time
- B. Sometimes
- C. Not at all

5. Do you base your self-worth on how people treat you?

As a part of our culture and our upbringing, we are taught to put ourselves last, but it's time to change this narrative. If someone's behaviour is toxic and affecting your well-being, you have every right to set boundaries. In fact, not creating boundaries is a type of slow, emotional self-harm

If you answered "Not at all" to more than three of the questions, congratulations! You're already prioritising your mental health and are comfortable setting and maintaining boundaries.

If you answered "Sometimes" to more than 3 of the questions, you're trying to set boundaries, but need help with tools for sticking to them and not feeling guilty.

If you answered "All the time" to more than 3 of the questions, your self-worth and self-esteem seem to be low, so that's the first thing to work on.

DEBUNKING MYTHS

Now that we know your comfort level with setting healthy boundaries, we're going to bust some myths before we start learning how to set them. Why? Because till we change our mindset about boundaries from negative to positive, you're going to keep feeling guilty, and the chance of sticking to your boundaries will be less. Think of this as stretching your muscles before you start your workout.

MYTH: Setting boundaries is selfish.

REALITY: Boundaries are the most important and the most underrated tool for taking care of your mental health. And self-care is not selfish. If you feel overwhelmed, anxious, unappreciated, unloved, disrespected, taken for granted, etc., it is your right to make positive changes to your life to feel better. An excellent example for explaining why boundaries are important is this — setting boundaries is similar to putting on your own oxygen mask in an aeroplane before you do it for others — after all, if you can't help yourself, how will you help the relationship? A simple exercise to know whether you need to set a boundary is this — would you let your best friend or your child put up with the behaviour you are accepting? If not, you probably need to set a boundary.

MYTH: Setting boundaries means you don't care about the person/relationship.

REALITY: In reality, boundaries save relationships from unexpressed resentment. It is actually easy for people to cut-off relationships actively (no contact/ghosting) or passively (absolute bare minimum contact) rather than work on making it better. If someone is communicating a boundary, it means they care enough about both the people and the relationship to help nurture and grow rather than wither and die a natural death. Don't be hurt when someone tries to say your boundary means you don't care about them. If they respect you, then they'll respect your boundaries.

MYTH: Setting boundaries is about telling other people what to do.

REALITY: It's often a common misconception that boundaries are about getting other people to change their behaviour. It's about communicating a change you are making in your life. So when you're setting your boundary, use I-statements rather than You-statements. For example, instead of saying "You should stop yelling and screaming during arguments — it's rude and tacky behaviour" rephrase it to "I feel disrespected, unloved, and unsafe when I'm shouted or yelled at. If that happens in our conversation, I will remove myself and get back when both of us can talk calmly."

MYTH: You can't change your boundaries.

REALITY: As you evolve, your boundaries are constantly evolving with you. If up until a year back you were a night-owl, but now you've been waking up early for better health, it is absolutely okay to tell people to not call you after 10pm. If you were babysitting your nieces/nephews every Sunday out of love, but no longer want to do so because you feel like it's being taken for granted, it's okay to not continue.

FROM P40

If you used to be a workaholic working beyond office hours, always available on call, but now your priorities have changed to focussing on work-life balance, it's okay to communicate that. If you realise someone you were close friends with is actually a "frenemy" or bullies you into doing what they want, it's okay to communicate that and put some distance between yourselves.

DO AND DON'T OF SETTING BOUNDARIES

Two things as equally important as setting boundaries is how you communicate them and how you honour them. Let's take a look at what to do and what to avoid.

DO

→ Do set your boundary when you are calm. Speak in a neutral tone. Stating your boundary in the heat of an argument or when either party is extremely upset will take away its gravity.

→ Communicate your boundary in simple language, short sentences. If you feel nervous, write it down beforehand and practice what you'll say.

→ State the consequences of not respecting the boundary. Clearly, politely and again briefly, state what will happen when the boundary is not respected.

→ Stick to your boundaries. When you state a boundary, you need to stick to it no matter what. Have the courage to be disliked — don't give in the moment someone pushes back or tries to manipulate you with emotions.

→ Give the other person some space after setting the boundary. Since the boundary is new and potentially upsetting information for them, they may need some time to process too.

DON'T

→ Don't overexplain your boundaries. You can set the context for it, but you don't need to justify, give too many details to convince the other person to respect your boundary.

→ Don't apologise for setting boundaries. Since this is essential for your mental health, you should not feel guilty or ashamed for taking care of yourself.

→ Don't expect the other person to immediately respect your boundary. Expect people to react negatively — prepare to deal with anger, hurt sentiments, denial.

→ Don't tolerate people violating your boundaries over and over again.

Depending on the type of boundary, it may take people a short while to get used to it. However, you should not have to restate the boundary more than thrice.

→ Don't do this alone if you have tried but it feels too overwhelming. Setting boundaries, especially if you have been a people-pleaser and

One of the main reasons we do not want to set boundaries is because we think others will leave us. The people who have the best intentions for you will not go anywhere. The ones who will leave are the manipulative people who were profiting from your lack of boundaries. These people are the ones who only care about how you and others meet their needs. So the moment you talk about your needs and the status quo changes, they disappear

thrive on validation, can be difficult on your own. You can always connect with a therapist for a few sessions to get the right guidance and support.

EFFECTIVE MICRO-BOUNDARIES FOR EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

One of the main reasons we do not want to set boundaries is because we think others will leave us. The people who have the best intentions for you will not go anywhere. The ones who will leave are the manipulative people who were profiting from your lack of boundaries. These people are the ones who only care about how you and others meet their needs. So the moment you talk about your needs and the status quo changes, they disappear. But not before they try to guilt-trip or shame you into thinking you

are a bad, uncaring person. Don't fall into this trap. Sometimes, people disappearing from our lives is a blessing in disguise. Let's take a look at some common situations and how we can respond with boundaries.

Situation 1: When a friend/family member/co-worker confuses you with Instant Noodles

They think you are available at their beck and call 24x7 and expect their messages and calls to be answered immediately, even if you have to drop everything you are doing. These people call a number of times in a row, or repeatedly send message after message, and then ask "why aren't you answering?", often followed with "?????????". Some things you can say here are:

"If I don't answer, know that I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"I'm on a digital detox and have reduced my digital device usage hours. Hence it may take more time than earlier for me to respond."

"I'm on vacation and won't be responding to calls and texts. Will revert when I'm back."

Situation 2: A colleague often stops by your desk for long chats at your busiest hour or constantly keeps asking you for help.

Whether it's the office gossip king/queen, your work bestie, or just a talkative colleague, it's important to maintain a rapport without letting it affect your work schedule. And for that one person who seems to need help all the time, it's time to point them in another direction — sometime's corporate jargon can be a blessing too.

"Can't talk right now as I've got to concentrate on this assignment. Let's do a quick catch up at lunch instead."

"Hey, I'm at my mental capacity today and need to get done with work first. I'll check in with you once I'm finished."

"I'm quite tied up with my current project and have no bandwidth at all. You could check in with _____ to see how to get the additional support required."

Situation 3: A mild argument with your partner is escalating.

What started off as a mild disagreement is beginning to change shape. You can see that they are getting agitated and angrier, their volume is reaching "yelling", the conversation has moved from logical to emotional, and basically nothing good is going to come out of this potential shouting match. State that you are taking a break from the conversation, assure that the issue will be addressed, and add an "us" element.

"Darling, I'm not quite comfortable discussing this anymore right now. We're both getting stressed out. Let's take a short break and talk about it a couple of hours later."

"Honey, I need a pause as it's getting too overwhelming to talk about this right now. We can continue after some time. Let's connect later when we're both not getting angry."

Situation 4: Your child/teen/sibling reacts negatively the moment you make contact in-person or over call.

The moment you say "hi", you're met with a snappy, sarcastic reply and/or irritated body language — eye-rolling, frowns, etc. The best thing to do is to show support, offer an option and then remove yourself from the situation.

"Looks like you're having a rough time right now. Let me know if you want to talk, or call me later at a better time. Take care."

"Hoy, Sounds like I caught

you in a bad mood. Drop me a text or call when it's a good time for you."

SETTING MINI BOUNDARIES FOR YOURSELF

Sometimes the person we need to set boundaries with is none other than "my, myself, and I" — after all, the change begins with us. For a better balanced life, here are some mini boundaries to try out:

● Don't take your phone to bed or to the bathroom — you have enough distractions throughout the day.

● Stop using "maybe" as a response — to reduce stress, a black and white "yes" or "no" is essential.

● Pause before you reply — taking a beat allows you to respond, instead of reacting, thereby giving more control over your communications.

● Make time for literally "nothing" — add 10-20 minutes of absolute free time to just be and think happy thoughts or imagine your ideal future or daydream to your heart's content.

● Notice and respect how your body responds — focusing on whether you feel happy, calm, anxious, or distressed when you speak to different people will help unearth the "why" and help set boundaries with them.

● Make strict deep work time slots — having tunnel vision and ignoring people and notifications for fixed short periods of time throughout your workday helps you work without interruption and thereby perform better.

I completely understand that setting boundaries can be hard. When thinking about setting boundaries it is absolutely normal to feel awkward, or think it's rude, or that you don't want to upset the other person. In fact, the number one reason I've heard from people not setting boundaries is "...but I love them". And it is also perfectly okay to feel anxious after communicating a boundary — intrusive thoughts like "Are they mad at me?", "Will they hate me?", "Am I a bad person?". So how should you cope with this? By building emotional resilience. Firstly, admit that setting boundaries is hard. Secondly, expect to feel guilty. When you do, just remind yourself this is an intrusive thought, not reality, and shoo it away. Thirdly, repeat three self-love affirmations to remind yourself of your self-worth and trust yourself to do the right thing for you.

So here's wishing you all the best on your boundary journey. It's one I'm exploring myself and I look forward to hearing from you all about your experiences too. Write in and do stay tuned for more on this topic as I'll be back with Boundaries 2.0 — focussing specifically on setting boundaries at work and in a relationship.

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