



# **Boundaries Without Guilt**

What's helpful, what's  
not, and how to tell the  
difference

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No Disclosures

# *Learning objectives*

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Differentiate “True Guilt” from “Not Guilt” and recognize triggers for each (goal: Free up any energy hijacked by unnecessary guilt)



Set and honor boundaries (goal: connect instead of resent)



Create boundaries that expand your capacity, not limit it (goal: ensure boundaries serve you, rather than hold you back)

# BETTER TOGETHER COACHING



### Ask For Coaching

On this page, you can get UNLIMITED coaching on absolutely any topic. As you work through the monthly workbooks, or as things come up in your thought downloads, write in here for coaching from us. (Uniqueness that is unique to you) in the title line, these posts are anonymous. This is a confidential place for you to be coached and gain perspective observing the coaching of others.

Question Title \*

Ask Question \*



### Transitions

This week we will be unpacking why times of change and transition are so challenging to wrap our brains around. In the Model, a **CHANGE** is a circumstance.

- PGY1-->PGY2
- Incorporating telehealth visits
- New job
- End of a relationship
- Beginning of a relationship
- Moving to a new apartment

What changes are on the horizon for you?

## Group Coaching

2-5 weekly group coaching calls in webinar format, including access to a private podcast with all previously recorded coaching sessions.

## Written Coaching

Unlimited entries in our Ask-For-Coaching online forum on our Members-Only website.

## Individual Sessions

Schedule up to 4 1:1 calls with one of our certified coaches.

## Self-Guided Coaching

16 weeks of Work at Your Own Pace (W@YOP) webinars, worksheets, and self-coaching tools.

2 mins:

Think of the last time you  
felt guilty about work

Jot down the scenario around this feeling on a piece of paper

# TRUE GUILT

- Feeling when you act outside of your values
- Arises from a thought about something you wish you hadn't done.
  - Ex: I realized I forgot my best friend's birthday.



Brene Brown, 2019

Rebecca Kennedy, 2022

# PSUEDO-GUILT

- Feeling you get when you act outside of someone else's expectations or cultural norm
- Arises from a thought about what someone might think or feel because of you
  - Ex: My kids sobbing about me going out for dinner with a friend.

# TRUE GUILT IS GOOD\* FOR YOU

- Signal/data re: values
- If you become aware of and process the feeling, it can lead to positive action (course correction, apologizing, connecting to another person or yourself)

\*Unless it slides into shame....





# PROCESSING TRUE GUILT

- Name it
- Describe the physical sensation, like you would when taking a history with a patient.
- Watch it until it passes
- Find the value it is pointing to (Trustworthiness? Honesty? Friendship?)
- Decide if you truly like and want to keep that value
- Decide your next best step

# Pitfalls of true guilt:

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- Sometimes we slip from the helpful guilt (“I’ve done something bad”) to the unhelpful shame (“I am bad”)
- Shame is so uncomfortable, that we may try to escape it.
  - Hide
  - Blame
  - Justify
  - Disconnect



# PSEUDO-GUILT IS (USUALLY) NOT HELPFUL

- Internalize the other person's (imagined or real) distress
- Try to fix it (usually at your expense)
- Apologize, vacillate, be wishy-washy, etc. further signaling to others that it's ok or even right for you to cross your boundary
- Often resent the other person
- Lash out now or later
- Continue the cycle



# Case:

You are a junior faculty member at an academic institution. Your chair asked if you would teach the first-year medical student PEx longitudinal course, from 5-7pm on Wed. You love teaching, but no part of you wants this role (Wed are busy clinically, and you have 2 small kids at home). You feel mad at the system for "voluntelling" you, but also, you are hoping to go up for promotion next year and want to be on your chair's good side.

You keep thinking "*I know I should be a good citizen*" which creates "work guilt"... and also "*I know I should be home with the kids*" which creates "parent guilt"



# What is your initial knee-jerk reaction to this ask?

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If I don't do this, my chair will be disappointed in me.

UGHGHGGGGGG.... if I don't do this those poor medical students will have no one...

How dare my chair ask this of me?! I'm tired, busy, and have a family at home, why don't they do it?

Ok fine, I guess I'll just do it.

# Pseudo-Guilt or Guilt?

In this scenario, a few good Qs may be:

- What are the values at stake here?
- Is there a personal value being violated here if you don't take the volunteer position? Or is it just discomfort with the possibility of disappointing someone?



Watch out for BLAME....



## PAIR and SHARE

1

Take turns  
sharing your  
hought download  
from a time you  
felt guilty

2

Identify whether  
your “guilt” was  
true-guilt or not  
guilt

3

Discuss with your  
partner what  
makes it one or  
the other

# Helpful tool: The Thought Model

Circumstance (Neutral fact. 100% true, everyone would agree on this.)

↓ Triggers your

Thoughts (Sentence about the circumstance. You choose this.).

↓ Cause your

Feelings (1 word emotion that is always caused by a thought).

↓ Fuel your

Actions (What ever you do or don't do that is fueled by your F)

↓ Create your

Result (Proves the thought)



## Case 2:

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You are seeing patients in clinic. You made plans with a friend at 6. A new pt on your schedule at 2 arrives at 2:13. The patient is quite complex, has traveled far to see you and brings a lot of outside records. The patient also brings several family members, all with their own agendas for what you will accomplish today.

You do your best and by the end of the visit are running about 30 minutes late. As you try to leave, the patient brings up 3 more complaints that you haven't addressed. You have 5 more patients to see after this one.

# THE (UNINTENTIONAL) THOUGHT MODEL: FOLLOW ALONG

Circumstance: You are a doctor seeing a new patient scheduled from 2:00-2:20 who has many issues and complaints and has traveled far to see you. You are running late.

↓  
Triggers

Thought: “If I don’t address it all, he might feel uncared for. His family may be disappointed. A good doctor would take the extra time.”

↓  
Cause

Feeling: Pseudo-Guilt

↓  
Fuels

Actions: stay late, be late to your other 5 pts, run your staff late, and ultimately yourself and your home life. Slightly resent the patient. Start to dread future visits. Dread/resent your job a little more.

↓  
Creates

Result: You don’t care for yourself, or connect with the pt well. Fast train to burnout.

# CYCLE BREAKING: THE WAY THROUGH

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Q: "How do you live with more compassion?" (hint: it's not being everything to everyone.)

A: Learning how to set clear boundaries.

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Boundaries are a prerequisite for compassion and empathy.

We can't connect with someone unless we're clear about where we end and they begin. If there's no autonomy between people, then there's no compassion or empathy, just enmeshment.<sup>18</sup>

Brené Brown | ATLAS OF THE HEART



# SETTING (AND HONORING) BOUNDARIES IS UNCOMFORTABLE

- Because we care more about what people think
- We want to be liked
- We are people pleasers
- We base our own worthiness on other people's approval

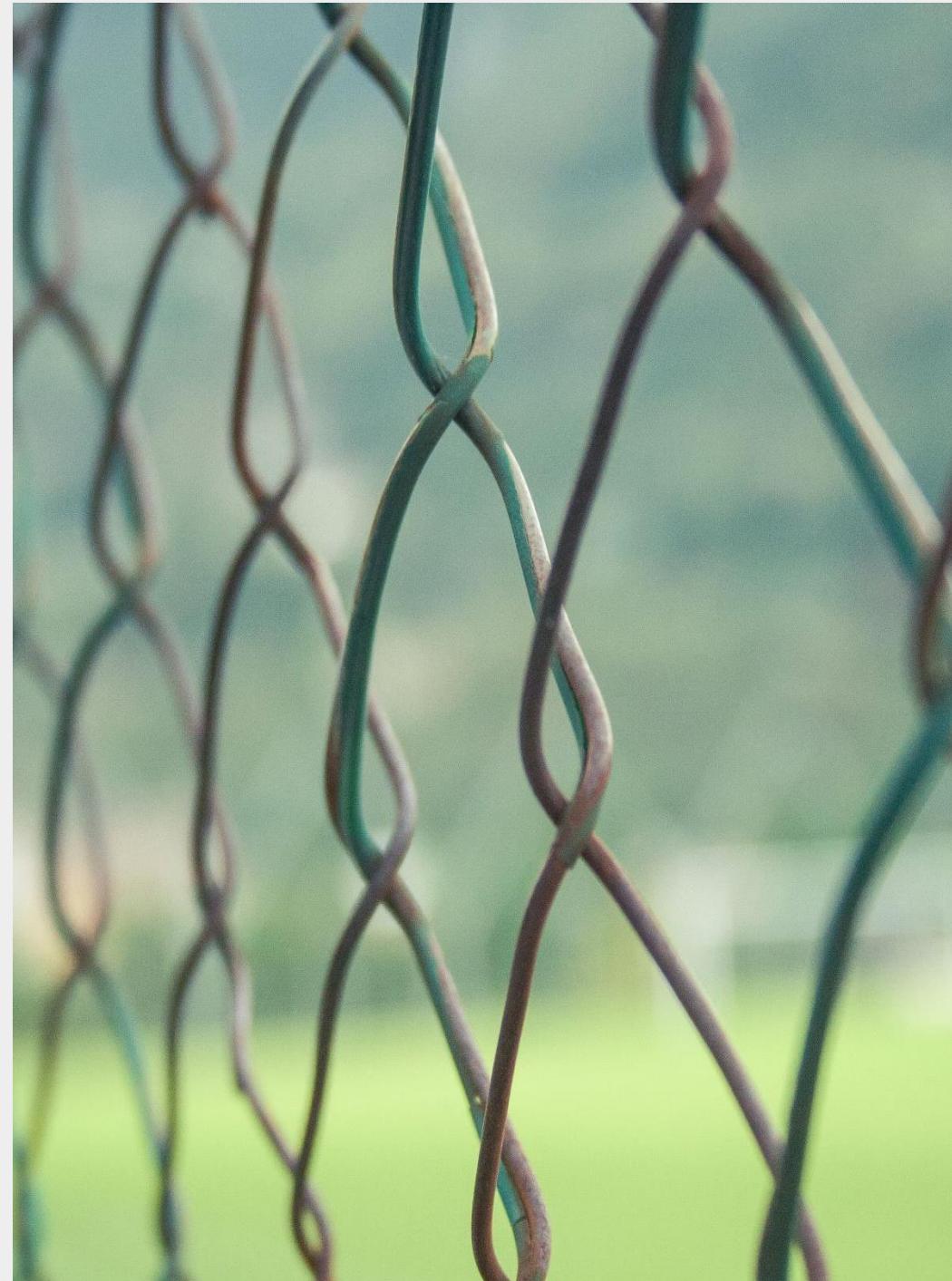


# BOUNDARY DEFINITION

What's not okay + what YOU will do about it.

Not what you expect the other person to do  
(that is a request).

→ “If you yell, I will leave.” (Not: “please  
don’t yell”)



# HONORING A BOUNDARY

## 1. Forecast the threat & rehearse your reaction

Ex: I do not spend >10 mins past the visit time unless a patient is critically ill. If the pt is still talking, I offer another visit, and politely leave. The boundary allows them to react however they please.

## 2. Have a “go-to” thought for hard moments.

ex: “I choose discomfort over resentment.” “I want to be in this for the long run.”



# THE (INTENTIONAL) THOUGHT MODEL

Circumstance: patient scheduled from 2:00-2:20 who has many issues and complaints and has traveled far to see you. You are running late.



Triggers your

Thought: “This patient is going to be disappointed with me since I don’t have more time to spend. I get that, and wish it were different for them.”



Cause your

Feeling: Empathy (connection, disappointment, compassion)



Fuel your

Actions: hold boundary WITH COMPASSION. Let pt feel disappointed, without blaming yourself. “Shoot, I wish we had more time. There never feels like enough— can you come back to see me?”



Create your

Result: You care for yourself and connect with the patient well. Fulfillment.



## A word on rigid boundaries and consequences:

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- If you limit yourself to 5 pts a day, you may get paid less
- If you block everyone out from your life that makes you mad, you may have much less people in your life. Maybe, none.
- If you do not work >12 hours in a day, you may not be able to complete residency training.

→ If you find yourself angry about the consequences, it's possible that your brain believes it can't handle struggle, "hard" or complex situations.



Boundaries should be rooted in values.



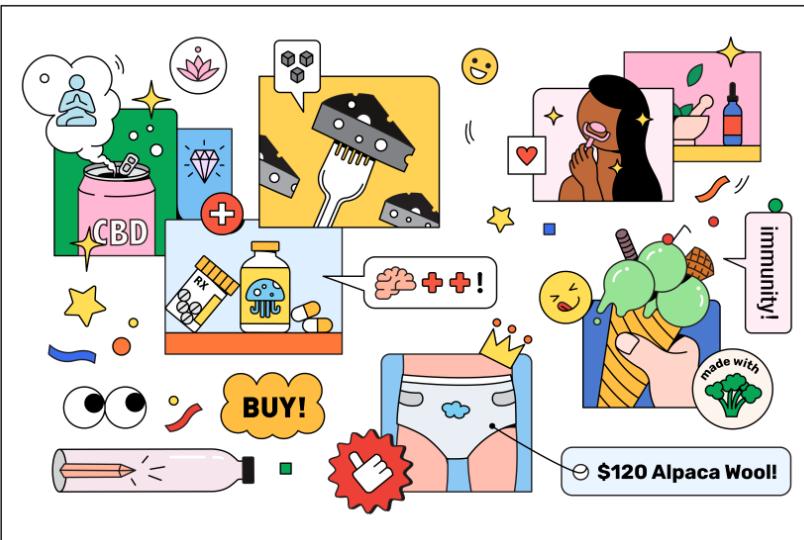
Boundaries should not be used to avoid discomfort.

If you use a boundary to avoid "true guilt" you will also avoid your values.

# When Boundaries Keep us Small: unhelpful “self-care” advice

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IN MY  
PROTECTING MY PEACE  
era



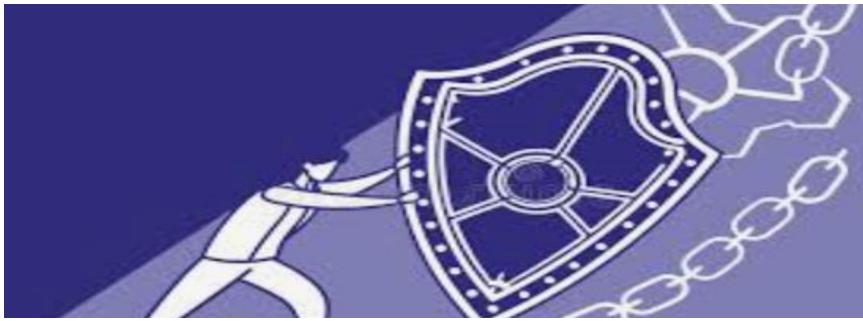
If everything that feels hard becomes a boundary, you will become small.

Sometimes, boundaries mask insecurities, inability to handle conflict, or lack of self-trust.

When your goal is to avoid a hard feeling – the boundary will limit you.

## Case 3:

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Some of my colleagues keep asking me questions in clinic.

Sometimes, the same person asks the same question several times, even when I am clearly very busy. I feel frustrated because I have my own patients! Also, when I help others and it slows me down, and I have to stay late.

I feel like it would be more efficient for them to look on uptodate first. I should not be shamed for saying no when I have my own work to do. It also really frustrates me when I say no, and they keep asking the same question.

Also, when colleagues expect me to drop my work for things that are not emergencies, I feel like they are prioritizing their work over mine.

The colleague who asks for help the most says I should take it as a compliment. He asked for examples of when he interrupted my work, I gave him examples, he apologized, but also said things didn't happen that way and I should let things go.

**Please help me set a better boundary with him so he stops this!!!**

## THOUGHT MODEL

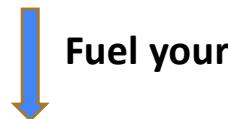
Circumstance: Colleagues, particularly colleague X, ask me non-urgent Qs about their own pts, and I have my own pts.



Thought: “This is unsustainable!! Can't he see that I can't focus? He shouldn't be asking me questions.”



Feeling: Frustrated



Actions: "try" saying no (?). Talk to colleague X and others about this a lot. Worry, stress, JUDGE, build narrative “they are out to sabotage” you. Create story about how you are "shamed" if you say no. Stay late, at expense of self.



Result: Disconnect from colleagues. Dread work. Focus on this issue over clinical care.

# Defense → Capacity

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- Instead of boundary shielding against **pain**, can it build emotional capacity and self-trust.
- Goal is confidence to handle discomfort, conflict, or rejection w/out constant external validation or for others to comply w/ your rules.
- True well-being = ability to regulate and adapt, **not rely on the world to change for you**.

ALL VIBES  
WELCOME



# True boundary



Acknowledges that colleagues still might not honor your request. Boundary includes how you protect yourself without them having to change.

Value = getting home on time.

*"I'm sorry, I don't have time to chat. It's a huge priority of mine to get out of here on time."*

*Then.... If they continue...*

*"If you do ask me those questions, I will turn around and leave the room without speaking to you."*

*"If you do ask me those questions, I will politely decline to answer"*

*"Wow- how flattering that you really value my opinion! I get it, I'm awesome! But I don't have bandwidth. If you ask me those questions, I will change the subject to corndogs."*

In emotional adulthood, you take responsibility for your feelings and let others oversee theirs.

## Creating your own boundary: from your experience of pseudo-guilt:

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- What values are most important to you to live in this situation?
- What is a boundary you can set for yourself for this and similar situations?



# Challenge: Give your future self a gift

Dear Future Tyra,

**Value or quality that you love about yourself or your life and will protect with a boundary:**

**Why is this value or quality important to you?**

**Boundary you will set to protect this value:**

**What will you do if the boundary is pushed, threatened or broken?  
(What is the “consequence” you will enforce?)**

Love, Present Tyra

- Time dedicated to a hobby



- It's fun, mindful, and I just truly enjoy it
- Schedule a 4-hour block of time once a month, tell my husband, put on shared calendar and follow through.
- Biggest threat is my thoughts about my family viewing this as selfish. I can have a touchstone to go to (“it could be more selfish to ignore my creative side”). Other threats: social engagements, kid activities, etc.—I will block on my calendar as if it's as immovable as a work activity.

# *Learning objectives*

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Differentiate “True Guilt” from “Not Guilt” and recognize triggers for each (goal: Free up any energy hijacked by unnecessary guilt)



Set and honor boundaries (goal: connect instead of resent)



Use metacognition to create boundaries that expand your capacity, not limit discomfort

**“The cure for burnout is not self-care; it is all of us caring for each other. We can’t do it alone. We need each other.”**

**AMELIA NAGOSKI**  
CONDUCTOR & AUTHOR

**Thank you! Questions?**

