



FAMILY

A Separate Peace

Of course you adore your loved ones—but you're allowed to catch a moment to yourself. Here's how to set boundaries with compassion.

BY LISA ARBETTER

“I DON’T HAVE TIME to do anything for myself!” Therapist Nedra Glover Tawwab hears this complaint on heavy rotation from patients who are stressed out, burned out, and worn out—women who resent their families because they’ve sacrificed their own mental, physical, and emotional well-being to tend to everyone else’s needs. If this sounds like your life, there’s a solution—and it’s not changing your identity and escaping to the Seychelles. It’s setting boundaries. “Boundaries are clearly expressed expectations and needs that help you feel safe and comfortable in your relationships,” says Tawwab, author of *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*.

After seemingly endless months of pandemic pods, working from your couch, and homeschooling, you may not even remember what it feels like to be a separate person with time and space to do what fulfills you (or to do nothing at all). But boundary setting is a form of self-care that’s just as important as eating well and getting enough sleep. “We treat self-care as an optional practice,” Tawwab says. “It’s what we do after everything else, but it should be what we do *before* anything else.” By saying no to something in order to say yes to your own needs, she explains, you might avoid the burnout, depression, and anxiety she sees in many of her patients.

There are a lot of complicated emotions swirling around caregiving roles, but we’ll tackle them one at a time.

What if I seem rude?

Setting boundaries can be uncomfortable, partially because of the way women are often socialized—to be agreeable and nurturing. “As a woman, you’re not supposed to need much. ‘Hey, I’m low-maintenance.’ ‘Thanks, I’m fine,’” says Kasia Urbaniak, author of *Unbound: A Woman’s Guide to Power*. One way to cope with the uneasiness of setting limits: Reframe how you think about them. “The intention of establishing a boundary is to make your relationships much better,” Urbaniak says. It’s not a reprimand, but an appeal for cooperation from people you love. You’re asking your family for help with your happiness, which in turn will make you a more patient and present partner, sibling, or parent.

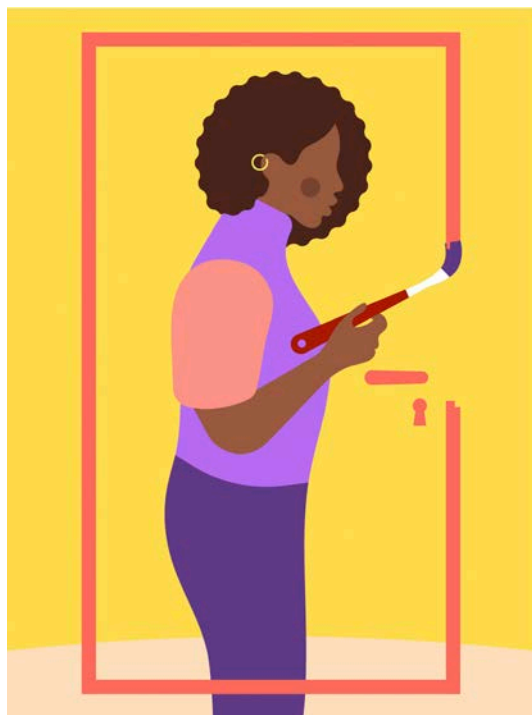
So how do I get started?

First set boundaries with yourself. Choose a few nonnegotiables, such as “I take a walk every day at lunch” or “I set aside time to sit in silence every morning.” Assert them without apology, and schedule them into your calendar if you need to. Self-care practices are most effective when done daily—but every bit counts.

What’s the best way to express my boundaries?

Communicate clearly and follow up diligently. Tawwab advises keeping your message short and to the point. “State your boundary in one or two sentences,” she says. “Stick to ‘This is my solution for this issue.’” For instance: “I’m happy to travel to your family’s house on Thanksgiving, but I don’t want to stay the entire weekend. I need some time to decompress.” Don’t bring up the past (“That time you made us stay 10 days was miserable!”), which may cause an unnecessary argument and derail your conversation. And don’t tack on too many details (“I have a big meeting that next week and I haven’t been sleeping well and I’d have to cancel my hair appointment”), which may obscure your point entirely.

Once the boundary is set, you need to reinforce it, which may mean repeating yourself several times. To help manage your impatience at having to say the same thing over and over, Tawwab suggests thinking about the last time you tried to change a habit. Chances are you had a few false starts before the new routine took hold. When setting a boundary, you are essentially asking your family members to break a habit—one they’re not even that invested in breaking—so cut them some slack and expect a little backsliding.



I feel like my family should just know I need time alone.

You can't assume your family members know what you want. If you go to another room and close the door, you might think they understand you need some space—until someone knocks or, worse, bursts in and starts talking. Instead of getting angry, take it as a sign that your boundary needs to be made explicit. “Clarity saves relationships,” Tawwab says. Tell them, “Hey, I’m in here trying to relax for about 30 minutes. I’ll be out soon.”

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Being needed is kind of my thing. I can't seem to say no when my family asks for my help.

“Those of us who are people pleasers assume others won't like us when we advocate for what we want,” Tawwab says. “But people tend to appreciate honesty and don't abandon us if we say no.” The key is to strike a balance between your needs and the needs of others. The next time you get a request, buy yourself time so you can think about your decision instead of giving a knee-jerk yes you'll have to weasel out of later. Urbaniak suggests a very effective technique to avoid automatically committing to something: Slow down the conversation by asking questions. “What exactly will this entail?” “How long do you expect this to take?” “Have you asked anyone else?” This gives you a moment to collect your thoughts (and more information). “It's harder to backtrack on an automatic yes than to not deliver one in the first place,” Urbaniak says. And renegeing may leave the other person even more disappointed.

Boundary setting can feel mean. How do I tell my constantly complaining sister that she drains me?

You can try changing the subject or leading by example and not complaining yourself. But if that doesn't work, Tawwab suggests saying something like “I don't want to contribute by saying anything negative about the situation” or “Tell me something good that happened today.” If you still find the conversations depleting, limit the length and frequency of your chats. You could set a time for a weekly or monthly catch-up, which will assure her she'll have your ear (for a little while) and might stop the incessant calls.

What if I get pushback?

Yes, people may question or simply ignore your boundaries. Instead of shutting down or lashing out, Urbaniak recommends asking them what's fueling their need for you. Once you know their concerns, collaborate on a solution. You might need to explain how this boundary will make you happier, which benefits you both. “You know my mood improves a million times when I sneak in even a 20-minute walk,” you can say, “so I'll be a much better dinner companion.” ■