



A roll of yellow tape is positioned diagonally from the top left towards the center. A roll of blue tape is positioned diagonally from the bottom left towards the center. The background is a solid, light pink color.

What Ever Happened to Boundaries?

Your office = the dining room. A tutor peers at your messy home over Zoom. Friends post mortifying photos of you online. Privacy, please!

BY STEPHANIE EMMA PFEFFER

MY LIFE FELT like it was in a blender. It was a Tuesday morning, a remote learning day for my daughter with no preschool for my son.

I tried to work at my desk while keeping an ear on my daughter's lessons. Late for a Zoom meeting, I rushed into the other room to set up the iPad for my son, slamming my toe on the coffee table and crumpling to the floor.

By 4 p.m. I still couldn't pull leggings over my swollen foot. I heard my daughter talking to her remote piano teacher, a college student 850 miles away whose face was peering into our home. "My mom is still in her pajamas!"

Mom-shamed, I hobbled back to my bedroom, which also was

my office, which was littered with clean unfolded laundry.

I had to face the truth: My boundaries had disappeared.

I'm not alone in feeling this way. Research conducted by software company Oracle and human resources research firm Workplace Intelligence found that 2020 was the most stressful year people have experienced in their working lives. Some 78 percent of people surveyed said that the pandemic had negatively affected their mental health.

One lasting repercussion of the pandemic is that the way we work and live seems to have been permanently altered. Everything feels...blurred.

"Boundaries define our limits of personal space, dignity, and

safety,” says Mariana Bockarova, PhD, a principal consultant at MBMD Consulting, a behavioral science firm in Toronto. During stressful and chaotic times we can no longer set our own limits, which makes us unhappy, she notes. “It’s natural to feel agitated and exhausted simply because we can’t enjoy the freedom of imposing our own boundaries.”

The most basic boundary is physical, a sense of comfort and security in our own personal space. The ability to choose how we spend our time—working, with family or friends, or alone, exploring hobbies—also provides an important boundary. And just as significant are emotional boundaries—those details about our lives or emotions we may not feel comfortable sharing.

All three types are being pushed to the max in our everything-at-once world. Between the aftermath of the pandemic and our heavy mental load, it’s no wonder we feel scrambled. But experts say it’s essential to carve out some private space on all fronts.

What balance?

Technology has played a major role in the blurring of boundaries, says Ellen Ernst Kossek, PhD, a professor of management at Purdue University’s Krannert School of

Management. Cellphones and laptops make work portable, so we work during personal time and in “third places” other than work or home, like on a park bench, in a restaurant, or on vacation, according to Kossek.

Plus, let’s face it, we’re on tech for everything at all times. We answer school emails, book hair appointments through apps, check and reply to social media posts at all hours. We jump from texting a kid’s coach to say we’re running late to ordering a book for a birthday present to peeking at photos of a frenemy’s perfect night out.

And we’re working longer hours than ever. The workday has increased by an average of 48.5 minutes compared with before the pandemic, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Even if you enjoy the freedom that comes with being able to multitask, you want to do it on your own terms. These are ways to reclaim your breathing room.

Mark your territory

During the pandemic, physical boundaries collapsed (see: desk in the baby’s nursery). Even though times are shifting back to normal, remote work is here to stay, experts predict.

“When you’re physically located in the same place for work and home, you have to actively do things to keep those boundaries separate,” says Kristen Shockley, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Georgia. Designate a work area, even if it’s just a corner of your bedroom.

If you don’t have an office door to close, use a visual signal like headphones to let other family members know you need to focus. If your desk is in an open common area, like the living room, try to schedule video calls when the family won’t be rummaging for afterschool snacks.

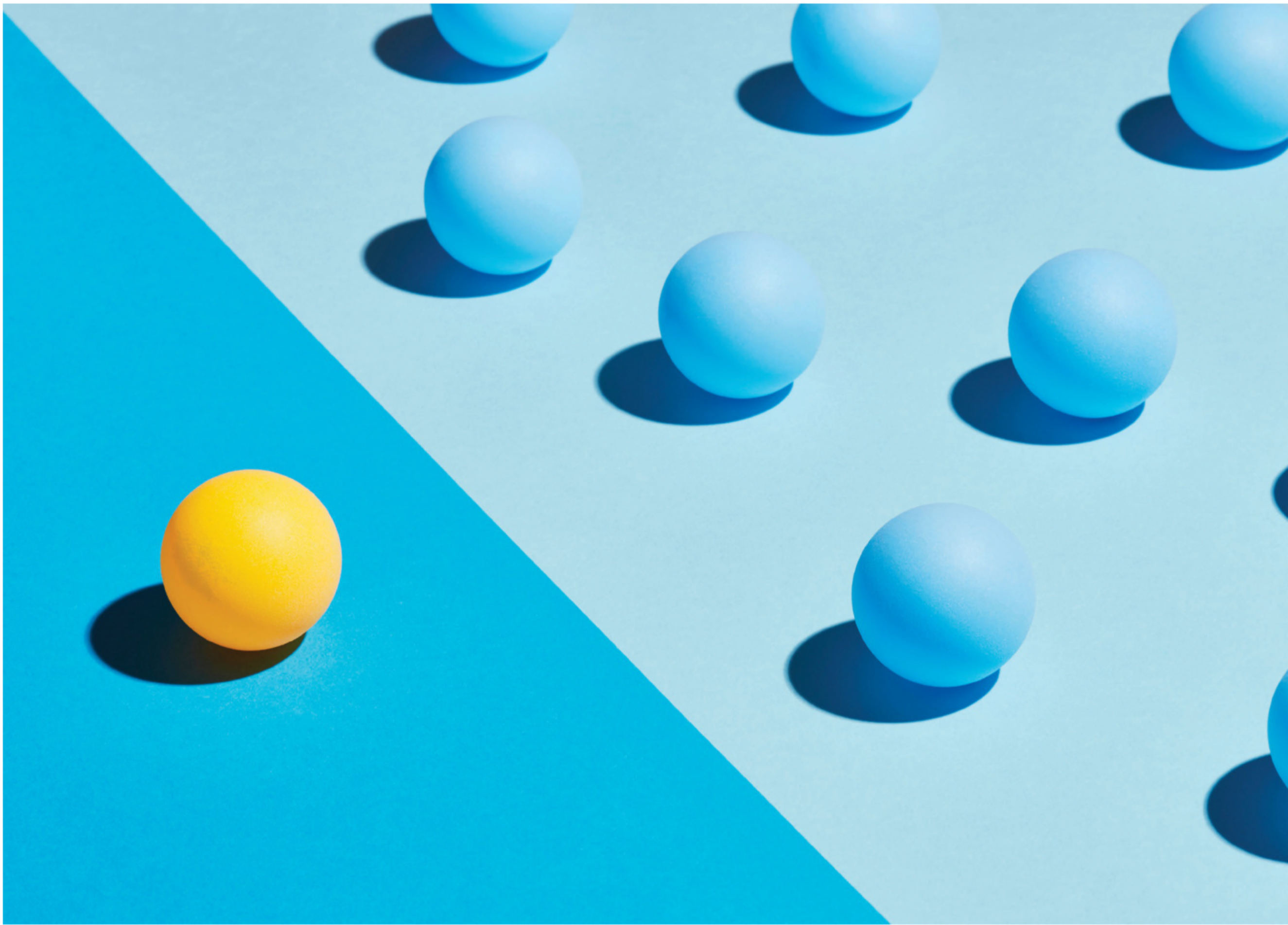
It also helps to build in transitions to separate the various parts of your day. It could be as simple as going for a run before you log on to your work computer or first thing when you log off. Consider a “fake commute” like a short walk around the block to clear your head. “These transition times help keep worlds separate, which totally goes away when you’re like, ‘OK, I finished work, and two seconds later I’m back with my family,’” says Shockley.

At night, adds Kossek, always close your laptop and don’t sleep with your cellphone by your bed (to quash the temptation to check work email or Twitter at 3 a.m. when you can’t sleep).

Take your time

How we spend our time is integral to our sense of self. People with more free time

We’re on the clock more than ever: The workday has increased by almost an hour compared with before the pandemic.



are happier, healthier, and more productive than people who work more and make more money, according to a 2019 study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

You need to shield your personal time from work spillage. Block out your calendar during lunchtime and after-hours so that meetings won't be scheduled then, recommends Bockarova. Clarify expectations with your supervisor about evening and weekend emails. "Ask about the norms around response times—do you really need to reply to an email that comes in

at 9 p.m.?" says Shockley. Similarly, consider when you *send* emails. "Some places even suggest using a signature line like 'I may have sent this email off-hours, but I do not expect a response until business hours,'" she says. That way you let colleagues and clients know you don't mean to barge into their leisure time to get an answer on a work issue that could definitely wait.

Breathing room

If there are two of you working from home, it's worth discussing what you each need in terms of private space.

"People whose partners respect their boundaries say they are more satisfied with their work-life balance,"

Shockley says. In fact, some couples' relationships actually benefitted during the pandemic because they were forced to constantly coordinate and communicate, she says. They had to make an effort not to schedule big meetings at the same time. They had to decide in advance who was going to take care of household chores and kids.

Hopefully our newfound ability to talk it out will usher in changes that relieve women from having to shoulder much of the mental load of running a household. In a recent survey of more than 1,000 women in the fields of academic science, engineering, and medicine,

Kossek learned that the loss of work-family separation in heterosexual two-parent households was most acute for women. “We found that even if dad was home, the children would go right by him to the mom if they wanted something,” she says. “The gender roles were still very strong even with two-professional couples—only about 10 percent of men really shared the cooking, cleaning, and child care, and that left some women feeling stressed.”

That’s why it’s so important to renegotiate domestic tasks and establish new routines, Kossek says.

What if your kids constantly interrupt you while you are working? Let them know when they can come to you, says Shockley. “You need to say, ‘Here’s the time—emergencies aside—that we can talk about these things.’” Explain that just because you are home, it doesn’t mean you are available. Now that most kids aren’t in Zoom school anymore, this should be easier to implement than during peak pandemic.

Essentially, emphasizing boundaries can help preserve family time. Make rules like no cellphones at the table, or no iPads before 8 a.m. “It can be hard for everyone, says Kossek. “Technology is addictive.”

Share with intention

Having clear emotional boundaries regarding what and how much we’re willing to share makes us feel valued and respected. But for partners who

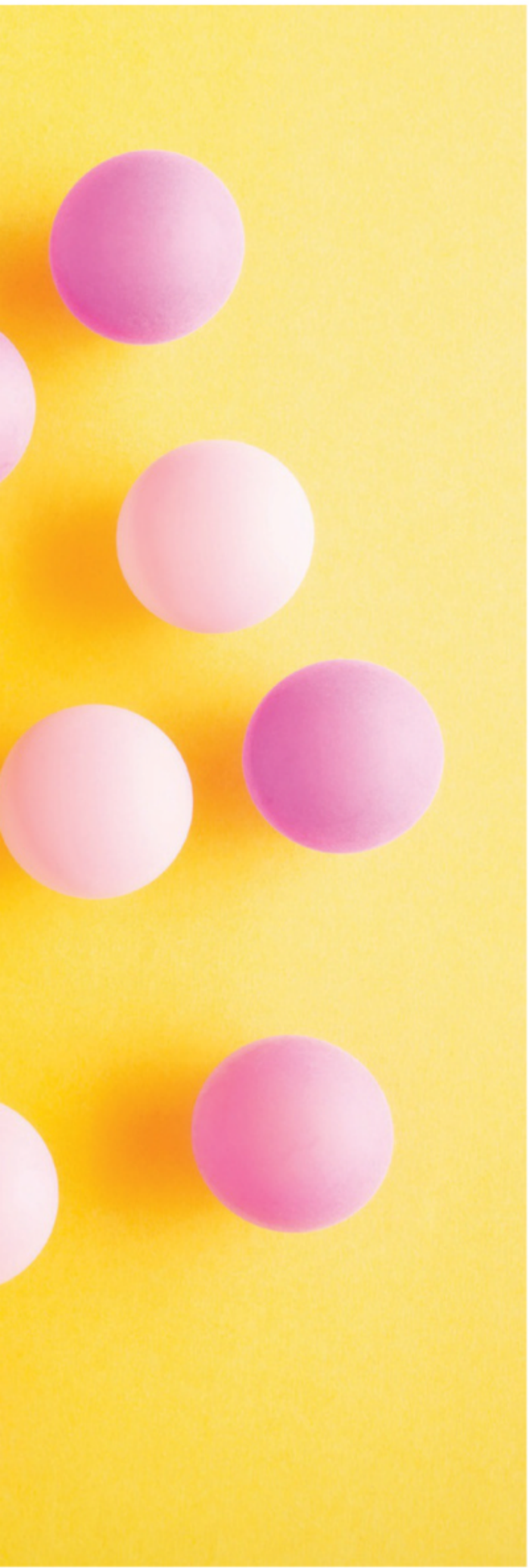
spend a ton of time together, preserving that separation is tricky. “If you’re taking all your breaks together and having breakfast and lunch, do you really have anything to talk about at dinner?” asks Kossek. Consider structuring days like when you worked separately, agreeing to stick to work obligations and urgent home matters during the day and leaving household stuff and more intimate conversations for after-hours.

Regardless of how close you are, it’s absolutely OK to crave some space. “If you need a few moments alone, explain why that’s important to you,” says

Bockarova. “Does it make you a better partner to spend some time alone and reflect?” Communicate so your partner knows what’s going on and to avoid misinterpretation and hurt feelings, she says.

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But the real Wild West when it comes to emotional boundaries is social media. Unless you decide to not participate at all, a lot of it feels out of your control.

Instagram for personal acquaintances and LinkedIn for work friends, for example. “If you’re segmenting, you’re more cognizant of managing what you say and where you say it,” Shockley points out. You might need to spend an hour cutting down your list of social media “friends” until just true pals remain. Does your junior-high boyfriend really need to know where you took your mom for Mother’s Day brunch? Probably not.

Sometimes a colleague or acquaintance might want to connect with you online but you don’t feel the same. Trust yourself. There’s a tactful way to sidestep this admittedly tricky situation. “If you don’t feel comfortable having someone on your social media,” says Bockarova, “decline the invitation, noting that your online presence is something you reserve only for family or close friends.”

Of course, complicated issues will still come up, like when your great-aunt posts photos of your son’s birthday party on Facebook. The reason it’s so upsetting is we know we are in charge of protecting our brood. “We want to have control over what we disclose about ourselves, and our kids are an extension of ourselves,” Shockley says. “When somebody does that without your permission—even if you don’t really care on the surface—you feel like, ‘They

should have asked me.’”

Why do we like to have control over these seemingly insignificant things, like a happy photo? Because when we don’t, life feels unpredictable. And that just creates more stress. “You wonder what will be shared online next, and it makes you uneasy,” Shockley says. The solution is to be upfront. Tell the family member who overstepped: “Most of the time I am fine with you posting whatever you want regarding our family, but I’d appreciate if you would give me a heads-up beforehand, especially if it involves the children.”

And remember to exert control where you can: Facebook has a setting that lets you review a photo in which you are tagged before it posts to your timeline. You can also limit who sees it once it’s up.

Stick to your limits

A healthy separation between parts of our life gives us a sense of comfort and space. While the exact outlines look different for each person, in my case it means closing my door during work interviews, not bringing my phone to the dinner table—and staying far away from my daughter’s piano lessons. ■

college roommate posts an embarrassing old spring-break photo of you...and while you frantically try to untag yourself, your boss weighs in with a “wow face” emoji.

Oh, for the days when those worlds could never collide! One tip from Shockley: Decide what kind of social media user you want to be. Are you going to be someone who puts everything out there, or do you prefer to decide who sees what? If it’s the latter case, reserve Facebook and