

Work-Life Boundaries



Introduction

Many people in caring professions, including healthcare professionals, struggle to set boundaries between work and personal life. The need for services does not end at 5pm and it is not possible to resolve every difficult situation a caring professional encounters. It can feel natural to work long hours or to continue thinking about work after returning home. Many people in caring professions do this type of work because they feel it is a calling or a mission and the work gives their life purpose. This sense of meaning can be an important contributor to our feeling of compassion satisfaction. However, without good boundaries that give our bodies and minds a chance to rest, the resulting overwork and boundless emotional investment can impact our bodies, minds and relationships negatively.

The purpose of setting boundaries is to achieve balance between our commitments to work, to our family and friends, and to ourselves. By keeping our social support networks and our personal resources healthy, like a fully-charged battery, this allows us to be our most focused, energetic selves at work and enables us to provide consistent, quality care without burning out. There are 168 hours in the week: we need to determine how we divide this time between work, social and personal needs so that we can remain healthy. Your healthy life balance may change over the course of your life, as your roles at work change, and as your family status and commitments change. Personal events, such as an illness or the loss of a close other, may also temporarily change your balance, as you may need to devote more time to taking care of yourself and have less energy to direct at work. This is normal. Professional events may also shift our balance temporarily, such as a crisis or disaster which increases the workload. It is important to be aware of our balance and how it is being affected, so that we can be mindful of the need to return to our healthy boundaries once the acute event has resolved.

By keeping our social support networks and our personal resources healthy, like a fully-charged battery, this allows us to be our most focused, energetic selves at work and enables us to provide consistent, quality care without burning out.



Steps

Boundaries at work

It can be difficult to set boundaries within the workplace, especially when you see your colleagues not doing this well. There may even be a culture of “heroism,” or self-sacrifice and pushing yourself to the limit to gain attention and respect. It takes courage to advocate for yourself, and it may feel selfish or even weak. It is important to remember that a lamp that burns moderately but constantly is more useful and effective than one that burns brightly and then goes out. Self-care is the opposite of selfishness or weakness: You can do your best service to your organization, your colleagues and those you care for if you set good boundaries and take care of yourself so that you are able to do your work consistently and sustainably. To do this, it is necessary to say no when you need to. This could take the form of saying no to additional work or duties that will overload you, or setting clear times of the day/week when you will not be checking your email or phone (you can even turn on an automated response during these times). This could also take the form of actually using your vacation time and

making sure that you completely disconnect from work during this period so that you can return to work re-energized.

It is important to remember that a lamp that burns moderately but constantly is more useful and effective than one that burns brightly and then goes out.

Boundaries at home

It may not be possible to be the healthcare professional you want to be AND be the spouse/parent/child/sibling/friend you want to be all the time. There will be times when more of your energy and mental and emotional capacity need to go to work, and times when it needs to be more directed in your personal life. When you have to put more focus on work, communicate this clearly to your loved ones and your social network. Make a plan for what duties you have at home that you will need help with at this time, and, if possible, give your loved ones a timeline for when they can expect your balance to shift back to what it normally is. It can be helpful to plan leave days following the end of your intensive work period, if this is predictable, so that you can spend quality time with your loved ones to regain balance. It is also important that you get personal time to have your own needs met in order to be an effective healthcare worker and family member. This means recognizing, accepting and making time for your physiological needs: sufficient sleep, nutritious food and regular exercise. It also means recognizing, accepting and making time for your emotional and spiritual needs: activities that enrich your life, spending time outside in nature, following your spiritual practice (if you have one), and connecting to a creative outlet such as listening to or playing music, reading or writing, drawing, building, gardening, etc. It is important to prioritize yourself and your own needs sometimes; this is a key part of staying healthy.

Boundaries between work and home

Our healthcare professional mode (efficient, focused, non-emotional) serves us well at work, but it is often not as useful in our personal life and can even cause tension in our relationships. To help your mind and body shift from “work mode” to “personal mode” it is important to create symbolic boundaries between work and home. This is like building a switch in your brain: you can imagine a light switch, where you can turn your healthcare professional self “on” at the beginning of your work day and “off” at the end of your work day when you reach home. These symbolic actions send subconscious signals to your brain and body that it is time to make a shift. To do this it is helpful to build a ritual that you do as you begin work and another ritual that you do at the end. It is important to practice these rituals regularly to calibrate your mind and body.

Important factors in a boundary ritual are:

Use as many of your senses as possible, particularly sound, touch/movement and smell

oAn example might be listening to a particular song while you are traveling between work and home or as soon as you arrive home, changing clothes or even taking a shower when you get home, and using a particular soap or cologne or incense that has a relaxing or comforting smell for you.

Develop a “trigger” habit

oA trigger habit is an action or behavior you do each time you leave work or come into your home. This could be as simple as locking your office or unlocking the door to your home or it could be more complex like walking/driving the same route home each day or having a cup of coffee or tea or juice as soon as you arrive.





Practice with intention




oPay attention while practicing your boundary ritual and do each action with a clear intention to let go of work. For example, as you lock your office, imagine safely storing your healthcare professional self inside until you need it the next day. Or when you change your clothes, imagine taking off your healthcare professional self and putting it away, then putting on your personal self. Or as you shower, imagining all the experiences of the day washing off of your body and flowing away.

Boundaries when working from home

Working from home presents some challenges to maintaining boundaries between work and personal life. You are now working in the same space that you live in, and you may have to switch back and forth between work-mode and personal-mode more frequently throughout the day.

The following actions are helpful to establishing healthy boundaries in a work-from-home environment:

	Designate a dedicated working space	It is better if this is a separate room in your house, but if that is not possible, set up a corner where you have all of your work materials and where you do the majority of your work. This helps to set a spatial boundary between work and personal life.
	Try to dress for work	Changing your clothes helps you enter the mindset of working and changing again at the end of the day helps you enter the mindset of home. This helps to set a psychological boundary between work and personal life.
	Establish a routine	Organize your day into chunks of hours designated for work and other home activities. Set limits to your work hours so that you are not working 24 hours per day. Plan breaks, including meals (away from your desk), with both social time and personal time. This helps to set a time boundary between work and personal life.
	Practice Boundary Rituals	It may not be practical to practice a boundary ritual every time, but have little habits or things you say to yourself as you switch, for example: “I am a parent now” as you move from your workspace to your personal space, or “I am a healthcare professional now” as you move from your personal space back to your work space. This helps

	to set a psychological boundary between work and personal life.
 Establish clear, shared rules	If you live with others, discuss and establish clear, shared rules for your work time and space to prevent disruption. This helps to set a social boundary between work and personal life.
 Establish a routine for home task sharing with others in your household	This will help to ensure that your responsibilities are clear and you can schedule them appropriately. Plan your work time when there are fewer household tasks, and your household tasks when you do not have urgent work activities. This helps to set a time boundary between work and personal life.
 Set realistic goals for yourself	Small, achievable goals with respect to your work as well as small, achievable goals for your personal life focused on the question “what can I achieve today?” helps to build a sense of accomplishment. Separate goals in each domain (work, social, personal fulfillment) helps to set a psychological boundary between work and personal life.



Tips

- ✓ Remember that setting and keeping your work and personal life boundaries is a process. There are times this will be easier and times it will be harder, and that is completely normal.
- ✓ Prioritize the things that you value and plan for them.
- ✓ Give yourself time just to be present in the moment; not busy with any task or running from one place to another.
- ✓ Practice self-care, using small actionable steps so that you are able to do them regularly.



References & Further Reading

1. How to Set Healthy Boundaries: 10 Examples + PDF Worksheets. Joaquín Selva, Bc.S., Psychologist. <https://positivepsychology.com/great-self-care-setting-healthy-boundaries/>
2. Work and Personal Life Boundary Management: Boundary Strength, Work/Personal Life Balance, and the Segmentation-Integration Continuum. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, November, 2007. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5893241>