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Boundaries: Why are they so hard?

According to author Rachel Havekost, “boundaries are the verbal contracts that you create with yourself and those around you that say, ‘please don’t trespass, I am protecting this part of me¹”.

In this context, we see that boundaries can be understood interpersonally (relationships we have with others) and personally (relationship we have with ourselves).

While there is a growing understanding in the profession that boundaries are important to our overall health and wellbeing, implementing them can be challenging.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO POOR BOUNDARIES

At a macro level, we have been socially and culturally conditioned to develop maladaptive responses to stress which is a major factor impacting our ability to establish clear and direct boundaries. More specifically:

- **Personal, Familial and Social Norms:** Children are subtly taught to focus on the needs of others rather than focussing on their needs through systems such as the family and school. In addition to not teaching children self-awareness and self-regulation, children are often taught to suppress their emotions and needs. These norms if left unaddressed, will translate into poor implementation of boundaries in adult-life.
- **Veterinary Medicine Culture:** Veterinary medicine is a microcosm of broader societal culture. Veterinary medicine is a ‘helping’ profession in that it aims to improve the quality of life for animals and inadvertently, the people associated with the animals. While the giving nature of the profession is both commendable and required, this coupled with an inherent culture that does not promote self-connection or prioritizing one’s needs, can lead to a lack of effective boundaries.

At a micro level, we have learned to cope with stress through maladaptive responses which can have a direct correlation with struggling to establish clear boundaries. According to Pete Walker, M.A., MFT, a ‘fawning’ response, is a “trauma response where a person develops people-pleasing behaviours to avoid conflict and to establish a sense of safety”. This leads to putting the needs of other ahead of our own.

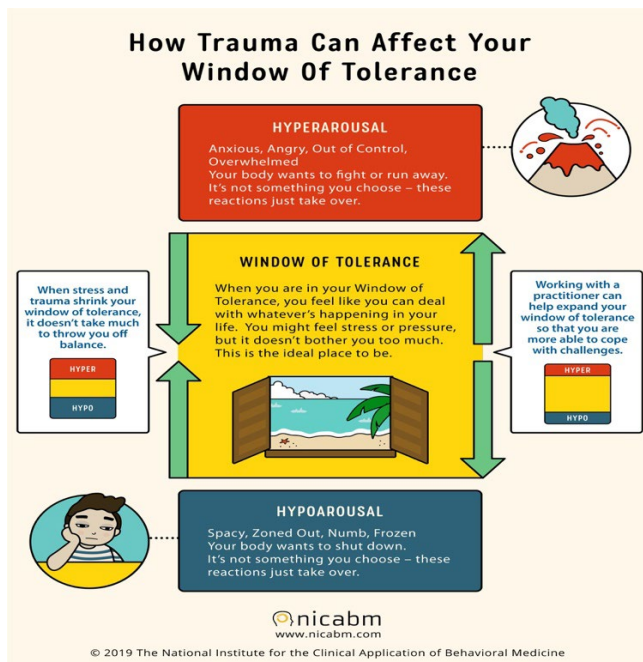
WINDOW OF TOLERANCE AND BOUNDARIES

Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Dan Siegel, developed a framework called the “Window of Tolerance” to describe our stress response². When a person is within their window of tolerance, they can handle daily stressors well while relating effectively to themselves and others.

¹ <https://www.rachelhavekost.com/blog/boundaries-are-hard>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/making-the-whole-beautiful/202205/what-is-the-window-tolerance-and-why-is-it-so-important>

Many factors can impact a person's window of tolerance including everyday factors such as poor sleep quality and hunger as well as deeper-rooted factors such as unresolved trauma. When a stressor occurs and this window of tolerance is not as wide or flexible, a person may go into hyperarousal (fight, flight) where they become anxious, angry, controlling, or overwhelmed. If fight or flight do not feel safe to one's body, they may go into hypoarousal which is often referred to as a freeze state. In this state, a person may experience brain fog and go numb to feelings and emotions. The following image from the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioural Medicine³ depicts this framework in more detail:



This means that establishing effective boundaries will prove challenging for a person in hyperarousal or hypoarousal. Healthy and effective boundaries are more likely to occur when someone can create them while in their window of tolerance.

STRESS RESPONSE AND BOUNDARIES

Knowing which state a person is in allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation for why establishing effective boundaries can be challenging:

- A person who is in the hyperarousal state of *fight* experiences their body protecting them from a perceived threat to safety. During a conflict for example, the person may become overly aggressive when trying to establish a boundary by silencing the other person and leaving little room for discussion, cooperation, or collaboration.
- A person who is in the hyperarousal state of *flee* may avoid establishing an internal or relational boundary to avoid conflict.
- A person who is in the hypoarousal state of *freeze* may struggle to effectively connect with what they need and therefore struggle to verbalize boundaries.
- A person who tends to *fawn* will disconnect from their own needs and overly attach to the needs of others as a way of keeping safe, self-sacrificing their need for boundaries.

³ <https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-to-help-your-clients-understand-their-window-of-tolerance/>

Once a person returns to their window of tolerance, they may experience guilt or shame for not being able to establish a boundary when it was needed because this contextual understanding of one's stress response is lacking.

To improve one's ability to establish more effective boundaries, it is important to develop a deeper understanding of nervous system regulation in addition to effective communication skills.

SELF-REGULATION IS REQUIRED FOR ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE BOUNDARIES

Self-regulation refers to the ability to notice and process your body's sensations, emotions and thoughts when stressed to move from states of reacting to responding. This essential skill is required to establish and implement effective boundaries both externally (with others) and internally (within us). While there are many forms of self-regulation including emotional, physical, and behavioural, the following content will focus primarily on nervous system regulation.

INTRODUCTION TO SELF-REGULATION TOOLS TO ESTABLISH EFFECTIVE BOUNDARIES

While it is encouraged that people work with a nervous system expert or somatic practitioner to build nervous system regulation, the following provides an introductory framework to support acute self-regulation in moments of stress.

Step 1: Identify Activated Response

The first step to in building nervous system regulation is to become aware of which activated state one is in. It is important to note that a person can be in mixed states which often requires more awareness and time to identify. The following chart, adapted from Lindsey Lockett⁴, provides a summary of physical sensations and behavioural responses to look out for:

FIGHT (sympathetic branch, hyperarousal)	Increased heart rate, irritability, dry mouth, flushing, muscle tension, sweating
FLIGHT (sympathetic branch, hyperarousal)	
FREEZE (parasympathetic branch, hypoarousal)	Decreased heart rate, feeling numb or cold, physical stiffness, heaviness in limbs, restricted breathing, holding of breath
FAWN (behavioural modification response)	Disconnecting from self to focus on others (people pleasing)

⁴ <https://lindseylockett.com/>

Step 2: Tune into the Body

Over time as one becomes more comfortable in identifying their states of activation, learning to sit with the discomfort of sensations helps to expand our window of tolerance. Many people benefit from working with a trained somatic practitioner to build this capacity called 'titration'.

Step 3: Discharge or Activate Energy

In situations of acute stress when one must return to a task at hand, building the skills to complete the stress response is paramount for physical, emotional, and mental health. When a person is in a state of fight or flight, energy needs to be discharged from the body. When a person is in freeze state, energy needs to be mobilized back into the body. The following chart, adapted from Lindsay Lockett⁵, provides a few examples on how to complete the stress response:

FIGHT

Discharge: squats, scream into a pillow, clench fists and release, cry, laugh, etc.
Breathwork: exhale needs to be longer than inhale

FLIGHT

Fast Forward Movement: run, walk
Shake: discharge panicky energy
Grounding: Sit outside, visualize energy leaving your body

FREEZE

Conscious Breathwork: e.g. Wim Hoff, Voo Breathing
Focus on one small thing you can do
Co-regulate

This process allows a person to return to their window of tolerance while completing the stress response, so they are more aware of which internal and external boundaries need to be established.

Self-regulation is a slow and lifelong process that is worth the investment.

A Note on the Fawning Response

The fawning response is not a state of nervous system activation but rather a maladaptive response to unprocessed trauma. As a result, addressing the fawning response often involves deeper work of self-awareness to unpack learned behaviours and patterns that impact one's ability to establish boundaries. Working with a therapist can be an effective tool.

The following questions from Dr. Gabor Mate, world-renowned trauma expert and physician, are introductory questions to consider when trying to shift patterns that prevent us from establishing and implementing effective boundaries:

⁵ <https://lindseylockett.com/>

- Where in my life do I have difficulty saying no?
- What's the impact of me not saying no on me?
- What's the belief that makes me not say no?
- Who would I be if I didn't believe that?
- What am I not saying yes to, that wants to be said no to?