

Navigating the Fs of setting personal boundaries

FIGHT: Confront the threat

anger
rage
confrontation
high energy



FLIGHT: Run away from the threat

anxiety
panic
avoidance
high energy



FREEZE: Shut down to block out the threat

dissociation
numbness
shutdown
low energy



FAWN: Appease the threat

people-pleasing
codependency
lack of boundaries



With February being Heart Health month, our Well Teacher giveaway this month continues the tradition of tending to our feeling heart as well as our physical heart health. This month, we look at the book *Setting Boundaries, Finding Peace* by Nedra Glover Tawwab, as a way to provide ourselves with direction and reminder of the importance of where and how we spend one of our most precious resources—our energy. In these times that are not any less demanding, it is so important we tend to our own needs as much as we can.

Now that talking about our mental wellness is becoming more and more accessible, what we gain from that is the ability to recognize how our feelings are connected to our behaviours and our actions. The key to this is to practice the ability to notice these patterns, without judgement, so we don't become "stuck" in an unhealthy place. Throughout this column, we will focus on the better known series of responses—**fight, flight, freeze, fawn**. These physiological reactions come into play when our autonomic nervous system—our gatekeeper—identifies something potentially harmful. Because we feel in response to situations before we are able to think (roughly 2.5 seconds sooner), the connection to our thinking brain can become blocked and so we find ourselves stuck in our "downstairs" brain. This is how Tawwab acknowledges as the freeze response:

"It's true that setting boundaries isn't easy. Paralyzing fear about how someone might respond can easily hold us back. You might play out awkward interactions in your mind and prepare yourself for the worst possible outcome. But trust me: short-term discomfort for a long-term healthy relationship is worth

it every time!"

The paralyzing fear we can experience in starting our boundary journey can cause us to **freeze**. We are unable to move or access that part of our rational selves to help us to take perspective and take the next step. Another common fear is the one mentioned below that often causes us to take pause or can even stop us in our tracks. So, what happens if we stay frozen and don't vocalize our boundaries? Let's see what Tawwab has to say.

"Unspoken boundaries are invisible, and they often sound like 'They should've known better' or 'Common sense would say...' Common sense is based on our own life experiences, however, and it isn't the same for everyone. That's why it's essential to communicate and not assume that people are aware of our expectations in relationships. We must inform others of our limits and take responsibility for upholding them."

There are many reasons why individuals have or have not set boundaries. Leaving important messages unspoken is common within the **fawn** response to potentially upsetting situations. This is the "people pleasing, not-wanting-to-rock-the-boat" approach that often leaves us feeling depleted and can lead to unhealthy patterns of resentment and rumination.

Through reading this book, Tawwab walks with us down the path of this process, acknowledging the challenges along the way. Validation of our feelings is always a crucial step in making change and moving forward and Tawwab does an excellent job at providing us opportunity to sit with discomfort and helping readers to see the other side and walk towards it.

"Focusing on how others might

respond is one way we ruminate, which impacts our ability to act... The hardest thing about implementing boundaries is accepting that some people won't like, understand, or agree with yours. Once you grow beyond pleasing others, setting your standards becomes easier. Not being liked by everyone is a small consequence when you consider the overall reward of healthier relationships."

Being able to identify these potential roadblocks can allow us to prepare and make the choice whether we will freeze or flip the script for ourselves to reframe the roadblocks as speed bumps. Speed bumps remind us to slow down and take our time. In slowing down, we have the opportunity to look around, take more in and be more intentional with our next steps.

"Nothing other people do is because of you. It's because of themselves. All people live in their own dream and their own mind. Even when words seem personal, such as a direct insult, they really have nothing to do with you."

Mel Robbins talks about the idea of "let them." This is an important tool and reminder when we are on our boundary journey. This allows us to externalize other peoples' actions and reactions and to leave them where they belong; with others. Tawwab also speaks to her work in managing others' reactions,

"I constantly work with my clients to depersonalize events and interactions with others. When we personalize, we negate the personal story and history of the other people involved. Personalizing assumes that everything is about us."

Instead of getting stuck in **flight, fright, freeze** or **fawn**, reframing our ideas and expectations about the process of setting and communicating our boundaries can help us to access the "f" that wasn't yet mentioned—**flow**. On the other side of the **flight, fright, freeze, fawn** responses, we work towards the goal to getting to the **flow** of using our strength to move through the discomfort to a place of action and relative ease.

What does this process look like?

"Tell people what you need."

Seems simple, right? Not necessarily. For those who have experienced either direct or indirect trauma, speaking up for ourselves can be very difficult and can elicit the same discomfort or paralyzing fear mentioned earlier. So, how do we move through? Tawwab shares what her own boundaries look like. Readers can use this as a sort of framework in considering what their own needs are.

"Boundaries to Consider: I say no to things I don't like. I say no to things that don't contribute to my growth. I say no to things that rob me of valuable time. I spend time around healthy people. I reduce my interactions with people who drain my energy. I protect my energy against people who threaten my sanity. I practice positive self-talk. I allow myself to feel and not judge my feelings. I forgive myself when I make a mistake. I actively cultivate the best version of myself. I turn off my phone when appropriate. I sleep when I'm tired. I mind my business. I make tough decisions because they're healthy for me. I create space for activities that bring me joy. I say yes to activities that interest me despite my anxiety about trying them. I experience things alone instead of waiting for the "right" people to join me."

This is an extensive list. However, you don't have to take this all in at once. Like many other life lessons, we take what we need and leave the rest. Maybe we pick it up later or recognize what we no longer need. Tawwab also recognizes that setting boundaries

also for ourselves.

"The ability to say no to yourself is a gift. If you can resist your urges, change your habits, and say yes to only what you deem truly meaningful, you'll be practicing healthy self-boundaries. It's your responsibility to care for yourself without excuses."

As you work towards practicing implementing your boundaries, be sure to recognize the wins/gains as much as the challenges. I don't know about you, but I LOVE a good checklist. Here is one that Tawwab provides that can support our process.

"To determine if your expectations are reasonable, consider this:

- 1. Whose standard am I trying to meet?*
- 2. Do I have the time to commit to this?*
- 3. What's the worst thing that could happen if I don't do this?*
- 4. How can I honor my boundaries in this situation?"*

Of course, we don't want to share too many more spoilers because we want you to access this resource yourself. Whichever version you choose, we hope your read leaves you feeling ready to take on this self-care task. Use your voice; speak your truth and recognize that discomfort is a part of the process. *"We can't create more time, but we can do less, delegate, or ask for help."* This process requires energy and time. Being patient is crucial. Knowing the outcome will be that much better for us, the more we are able to invest, in our own time and our own ways highlights this.