

PUBLICATION

Choosing Option 2: Building Space to Reduce Stress

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Every day starts the same, with you walking quickly down the hall to get to your desk as soon as possible. You have an agenda for the day and, this time, you're really going to stick to it so you can get out of the office at a reasonable time. You notice your colleague's door is open. You find yourself picking up the pace. You start to sweat. Your muscles tense up. When you finally get to your office, you sit down, breathe a huge sigh of relief, and turn on your computer.

At this point, you have two options:

Option 1: Move right into the tasks on your list.

Option 2: Stop to reflect; to notice and understand why you just rushed by your colleague's door.

Option 1 is so much easier and, frankly, is the choice that you make most often. It's true that you don't have any extra time to add to your day. If you stop to reflect, though, you may realize that your reaction to your colleague is about more than being busy. It is likely you don't realize the full extent of the negative impact this colleague's behavior is having on you.

But, if you stop and reflect, you might realize that your temptation to avoid your colleague is rooted in something bigger.

Anger. Resentment. Guilt. Discomfort. All of these are warning signs that a boundary has likely been crossed.

Choosing Option 2

If you decide to take Option 2, you might realize that your avoidant behavior is really rooted in a buildup of negative feelings associated with this person. As you sit and think about it more, you will likely start to visualize a situation where this colleague asked you (for example) to stay late and complete an assignment, something they had put off until the last minute. Yet, you were expected to stay late and finish it because it had to get done.

In this situation, you might feel angry and resentful. You might feel guilt from not making it home in time for dinner with your family or sadness from having to cancel a much-anticipated dinner with your friends at the last minute.

And the longer incidents like this have been going on, the worse you're going to feel. If you have been unable to communicate your frustration to your colleague, your "symptoms" will likely worsen over time, leaving you feeling even more angry and resentful.

You might notice your heart racing, blood pumping, and that you are visibly frustrated when you interact with this colleague. You might notice that you aren't able to focus on projects, that you are yelling at family members, and that you feel burned out.

The Stakes for This Sort of Thing are Higher Than You Might Think...

When we ignore red flags that are often waving right in front of us – the emotions and the physiological reactions we experience when we feel that someone has overstepped – we are setting ourselves up for more stress. Ignoring our physiological fight or flight responses that are designed to detect threats – sweating, heart pounding, red face, adrenaline rush, and the emotions that follow – can build up to toxic levels.

If we're not careful to notice and create healthy boundaries toxic stress can lead us down a long, winding road of continued frustration, decreased productivity, and, over time, lead to anxiety, depression, physical ailments, and ultimately, complete burnout.

I've seen it in my practice. Some lawyers tell me they want to leave the practice of law, they're just done. And that might be the right choice for them. But that's rarer than you might think. There are so many things you can do *before* taking the nuclear option – and one of the best ones is getting better at setting boundaries.

Starting Place

Many professionals never learn how to set boundaries or, quite frankly, even how to read and comprehend the red flags. If this describes you, don't worry, this is a very learnable (and valuable!) skill.

First, you need to build your self-awareness. An easy way to do this is to notice when you feel triggered by a person or situation. If it's difficult, focus on situations where you notice your emotions shift quickly or when you experience physiological reactions – muscle tension, headache, feeling flushed, or sweaty. Write down the situation, the thoughts you're having, and the accompanying emotions and physiological reactions.

Second, note how you handled the situation. Ask yourself if the current solution worked for you or is this a situation where a boundary might be needed? If so, what would the boundary look like? An important clue is to start small and to view boundary setting as small experiments. Small steps lead to big changes over time.

Third, think about the type of boundary that might be needed. Sometimes, we can set verbal boundaries. For example, if a colleague is constantly asking you to complete tasks at the last minute, it is appropriate to explain that you want to give them the best work product you can and that receiving assignments earlier, when possible, will help you in showing up for them in the way you want to.

Boundaries can also be physical. For example, maybe it's possible to change your route so that you don't always pass your colleague's office first thing in the morning. Or there might be times you need to shut your door to complete tasks that require more cognitive thought.

Internal boundaries are cognitive frameworks that can be used to set "limits" in your mind. These are most helpful when you can't set the other types of boundaries. For example, if you work for someone who is demanding and likely wouldn't respond well to feedback, reminding yourself that you're focused on your goal and that this person treats others in a similar way can stop you from spiraling as much when you're working with them.

Fourth, boundaries are starting places. Often, we have to set boundaries to determine if situations are workable. For example, if you set a boundary with someone and they continuously disrespect it, you collect data. Gathering data over time can lead you to clarity. If you continue to feel toxic stress due to a recurring situation, you have information to guide your next decision.

Most importantly, remember that boundaries are there to protect you, to make your life easier, and less stressful. They are not designed to make your life harder. Boundaries help you determine what you need to be "okay," more productive, and happier.

Boundaries can be difficult to set at first. You are changing neural pathways in your brain and creating new behavior patterns isn't easy. The more you push through the tension and discomfort, though, the easier it will be to set boundaries and, before you know it, you will have strengthened a much-needed muscle to be a successful, productive individual.

And remember, you don't have to do this on your own. Getting an outside perspective and support can make all the difference.