

Why Boundaries + Balance = Self-Care

by Sandie Dennis



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for life's toughest challenges

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“What are
you doing
for you?”



Regardless of their individual challenges or specific issues, I tend to ask this question of every employee I support.

But usually, the question is met with silence, and then by a confused stare.

I understand why.

All I have to do is think back to the time, around twenty years ago, when I felt overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, and utterly lacking in energy.

I knew nothing about how to practice self-care. If I had, maybe I wouldn't be where I was at that point in my life, floundering in the bleak depths of burnout.

Back then, I didn't know how nourishing self-care prevents what I now call 'energy bankruptcy' through excessive depletion. I had no idea that not taking care of myself could lead to more serious issues, including acute stress, anxiety, and even PTSD.



Did you know that our emotions carry an energetic charge?

Every person you encounter, every worrying 'prediction' you make in your head, every idea, thought, sight, sound, taste, and smell you encounter leaves an individual impression.

The way you interact with your loved ones: friends, parents, children, lovers, teammates, and even colleagues, also influence the amount of energy you have on any given day.

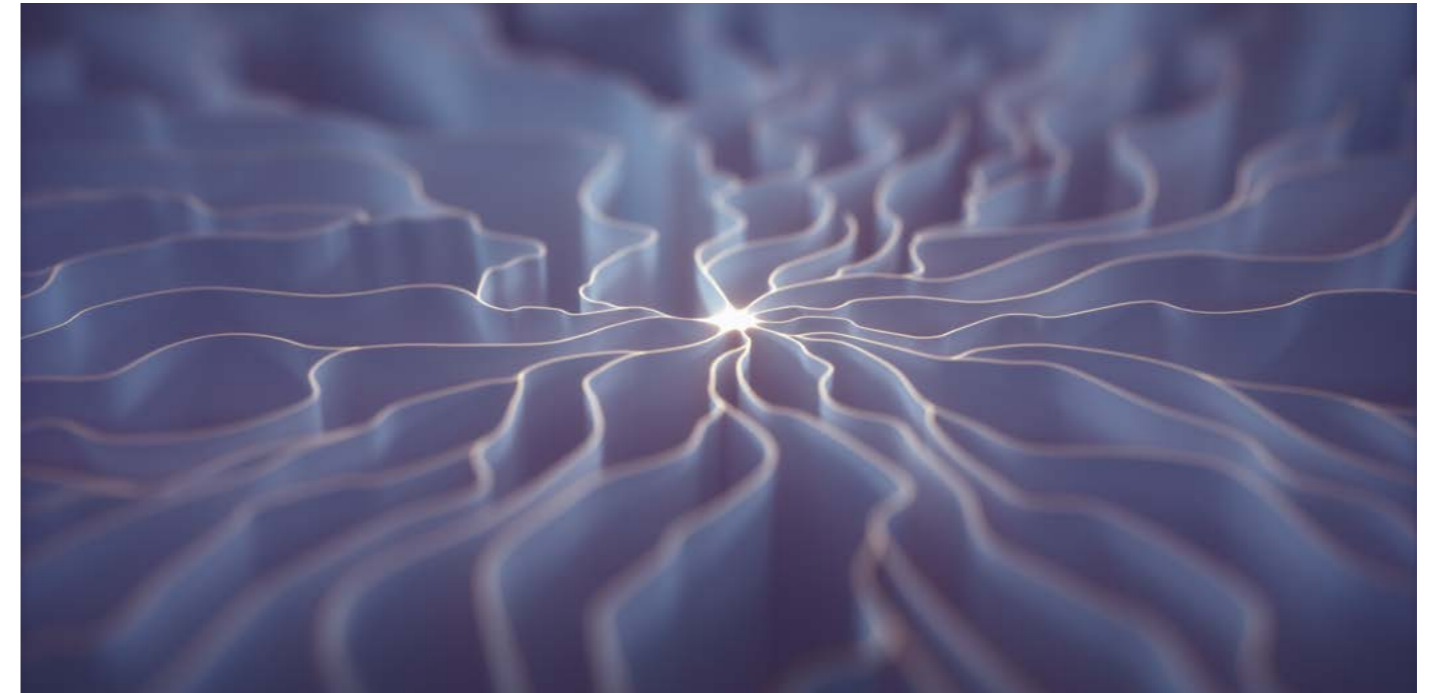
Your brain burns 20% of your body's entire metabolic 'budget', even when you're resting. This makes it the most energy-expensive organ in your body; no other organ spends anywhere near this amount.

In other words, every 'thinking' moment is an economic decision about the amount of energy you're going to spend.

Did this fact surprise you?

I was certainly surprised when I first learned about it!

But these days, this vital knowledge forms the reasoning behind our self-care strategy at Beyond EAP. When we work with clients, we discuss time and energy management in depth, so that we can achieve the dream combination of **boundaries and balance**.



A note about energy management

Energy management focuses on our ability to notice and understand our energy levels, so that we can work on restoring them whenever we need to.

If it helps, you could try thinking of your energy levels as money in your bank account. You make a withdrawal with each responsibility you take on, until – often without realising – you're suddenly overdrawn.

But when you take care of your own needs first, you will have more energy to invest into your work, your family, and all the things you love the most... so you could think of taking good care of yourself as taking good care of others, too!

If you can make daily deposits into, instead of withdrawing from, your energy bank, your sense of wellbeing will grow.



The hard truths about time.

Does anybody else say “yes”, overbook their schedule, or make the needs of others as much of a priority as you?

Below are some of the most common complaints I hear from the employees I work with.

(Be honest: do you recognise yourself in any of these?)

“I never have time to do what I really want to do”.

“I always end up doing everything myself”.

“My kids take up all my time”.

And here is what they’re really saying:

“I don’t take time for my own needs”.

“I’d rather not ask for help”.

“I choose to prioritise my children’s needs over my own”.

Why do you keep putting yourself last?

There are many reasons why we feel we can’t take time for ourselves. For one thing, we may not want to be seen as “selfish”, or we simply feel obligated (we love our children, so why would we even think about putting our needs before theirs?)

Some people have never been set the right examples, they don’t want to disappoint anybody, or they fear conflict (“oh, it’s easier if I just do it and not say anything”).

Keeping the peace, or even plain old wanting to be liked, are also powerful reasons for not putting ourselves first.



There’s no sugar-coating this: self-care can be hard.

Yes, you will probably disappoint some people when you practice self-care, and that may mean you’ll have to give yourself a push in the beginning. You can do this by focusing positively on the future, instead of the past and present.

And yes, the new boundaries you set for yourself may scare some others... but don’t worry. If they care about you, they will adjust!

Don’t neglect yourself, because you’re too busy looking after someone else.

It could be that you have to let go of some relationships, habits, and choices that no longer serve you.

Even though this can be insanely hard, it’s crucial to be honest with yourself. Deep down, you will know which ties must be cut.

(Do make sure you have a support network in place – even if it’s just your best friend at the end of a phone or Zoom call whenever you need one. Self-care can be hard to practice at the best of times, but it’s often hardest when we need it the most).



Not sure where to start?

Try asking yourself these self-care questions:

- What do you most enjoy doing?
- What makes you feel happiest?
- What are you truly passionate about?
- How do you/would you like to relax?
- What interests or hobbies have you always wanted to try?

“Expectations are resentments under construction”

Anne Lamott

Identify time-slots

When we work with employees at Beyond EAP, we take a detailed look at their week so we can carve out time-slots for the things they have identified as being the most important to them.

(You can discover yours by answering the questions above, or perhaps by talking to a friend who knows you well).

Set clear boundaries

Now, it's time to protect those time-slots with your life!

You will do this by setting clear boundaries, which are defined rules or limits that put your needs first.

An example might be telling your partner about your need for some alone-time once or twice a week, or simply blocking out time in your work diary to have coffee and a chat with your favourite colleague!

Our work with employees will typically cover family, work, friends, partner, and children (if applicable) – so that we can protect the time-slots they have personally defined in each of these areas.

What are the benefits of boundary-setting?

Sometimes, employees will tell me that they don't need to set boundaries. Surely, identifying time-slots is enough?

But boundary-setting is a crucial part of self-care, because it signals to others – not to mention yourself – what treatment you find acceptable, and that you value yourself enough to set the right limits.

Your boundaries will stop you from feeling resentful or taken advantage of, whilst protecting your energy levels and allowing you to make those crucial deposits.



What happens next?

As if by magic, you will find your energy, time and emotions have greater balance. You will be able to make independent decisions, process your feelings, and ensure your needs are fully met.

You will be less reactive, and feel less resentful, because you have learned to communicate firmly (not aggressively), using decisive language that is neither confrontational, nor apologetic.

In other words, you will no longer compromise yourself for the sake of others.

That is how balance and boundaries create self-care.

If you have any questions about the best ways to practise self-care, we at Beyond EAP are always happy to advise.

We are also on hand to help if there is an employee, or employees, that you feel particularly concerned about. Our team's combined experience spans a number of therapeutic disciplines across diverse global settings, and we are well-known for our friendly and empathetic approach.

Browse our website to find out more, or get in touch for a confidential chat.



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