

# Final Thoughts



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Julie is a compassion fatigue specialist who brings a unique perspective and approach to support the sustained energy and passion of animal workers. Her company, Rekindle LLC, offers on-site compassion fatigue training to veterinary hospitals, animal shelters, and other animal organizations.

Julie has more than 20 years of experience within the veterinary field and with leading organizations. She has developed and executed training, workshops, and 1:1 coaching for major companies in the animal health industry. She obtained her certification as a compassion fatigue specialist through the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology and has also completed training from The Figley Institute and Traumatology Institute. Julie's clients also gain from her experience as a certified health and wellness coach and corporate wellness specialist.

## The Space Between Us

I remember the first time I felt my body image violated. I was 13 years old, and my mother told me I had better “watch it” in regard to my weight. I had started to gain weight, as any normal prepubescent girl does, but to her it was unacceptable. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach, and for the first time, I felt that *I* was unacceptable. That moment changed my life forever. It was the moment that other people's opinion of me took precedence over my own.

Soon after, my brother started bullying me, relentlessly calling me “Blimp” and “Thunder Thighs.” I felt humiliated, embarrassed, and deeply encroached upon.

Not knowing where I began and my family ended, I internalized what they thought of me as Truth and eventually decided I would rebel against the Truth they imposed on me.

I developed anorexia.

My eating disorder was an attempt to put space between me and others, to create separation and ultimately protect myself from the pain I felt for not being “okay.” I didn't know it at the time, but I was trying to enforce my boundaries. True, it was not in a healthy or sustainable way, but I can see the twisted logic in it now.

When we know better, we do better.



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**ENFORCING OUR BOUNDARIES** is how we demonstrate respect for ourselves, whether by telling others it's not okay to comment on our weight or our parenting style or that we won't accept being spoken to in a certain manner.

• **TECHPOINT** •

Boundaries are an ultimate act of self-love and self-care. Boundaries are a way of not only respecting but also protecting ourselves.

**What Are Boundaries?**

*Boundaries are where one thing ends and another begins; the place where two things become different, where you end and I begin.*

According to Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend in their *New York Times* bestseller *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life*, “Boundaries impact all areas of our lives: Physical boundaries help us determine who may touch us and under what circumstances—Mental boundaries give us the freedom to have our own thoughts and opinions—Emotional boundaries help us to deal with our own emotions and disengage from the harmful, manipulative emotions of others.”

Boundaries are how we protect ourselves from emotional harm. This harm can come in many forms, such as always picking up the slack from lazy coworkers, allowing clients to have our cell phone numbers, not saying “no” when we want to, allowing clients to be disrespectful to us, and being touched when we don’t want to be. Enforcing our boundaries is how we demonstrate respect for ourselves, whether by telling others it’s not okay to comment on our weight or our parenting style or that we won’t accept being spoken to in a certain manner.

Boundaries are an ultimate act of self-love and self-care. Without them, we become ineffective at caring for others because we end up feeling immensely depleted and sometimes even contaminated by others. And we are. Boundaries are a way of not only respecting but also protecting ourselves.

Euthanasia comes to mind. There are simply times when assisting in euthanasia is not in our best emotional interest. When we are struggling with other heavy-hearted circumstances in our lives, we have to recognize that we can’t do it, enforce our boundary, and ask for a reprieve.

“But I could never do that. What would my coworkers think? What would my boss think?” I’m sure a version of this is going through your mind. Remember, boundaries

are about respect and protection. Recognize when you need both.

**Why Do We Lack Boundaries?**

**We are people pleasers.**

We want everyone to like us, and we don’t want to “hurt anyone’s feelings.” Know that no one has the power to make another person feel a certain way. Our feelings come from our thoughts and not the circumstance (more on this in the next issue!).

If you are a people pleaser, ask yourself: *How’s this working out for me?* My bet is that it’s not. I would guess that you often feel angry and resentful and wonder why no one is thinking about you, since you are thinking about everyone else and their needs.

Here’s a secret: It’s your job to meet your own needs.

**We lack an understanding of boundaries.**

Most of us aren’t “taught” about boundaries. Typically, we learn them from our families—or not. When we don’t understand the importance of boundaries, we don’t know why we need them. This was my experience. I didn’t know that it wasn’t okay for others to comment on my body, so I didn’t speak my Truth and enforce my boundaries.

What did you learn?

Lack of understanding is also true from the other side. For example, if you work with someone who doesn’t understand boundaries, they may very well mistake your enforcing of boundaries for obstinance, refusal to be a “team player,” or, for women, bitchiness. You have to be okay with the risk of misinterpretation to maintain your boundaries. Ask yourself what the cost of not having boundaries is, and I’m sure you will agree that the risk is usually worth it.

If you work in a toxic environment where you are penalized for standing up for yourself, then at the very least, recognize this as a workplace/leadership flaw and not a personal one.

Even when we understand boundaries, we can inadvertently break them. Boundaries are intensely personal, and we don’t always know when we are violating others’. For example, I love to hug people and was unaware that others are not okay with this until I met a practice manager who—I learned after I hugged her—hated it.

**We don’t think we’re important.**

Many of us come with an internal “I’m not good enough” or “I’m not worthy” tape playing on continuous loop. We think, “Who am I to ask people from work to not text me

at home unless it's a true emergency?" Who are you *not* to? Your personal life is as important as anyone else's.

Others don't feel comfortable standing up for themselves, but if you don't, some people will see how far they can infiltrate your space.

### **We don't think we can.**

There is no question that enforcing boundaries requires patience, diligence, and practice, but consider the possibility that it's these exact boundaries that will help build both your self-esteem and confidence. And as you establish your boundaries, people will begin to recognize where they have to stop *before* you have to enforce them.

### **Where Do We Begin?**

#### **Start small.**

Find little things to start with, such as telling friends that you put your phone on do-not-disturb at 9 PM, and you won't be answering texts after that time. Sure, you will likely have to remind them—that's what it means to enforce boundaries. Once you get good at setting and enforcing small boundaries, then you can move to larger ones like setting boundaries with coworkers, clients, and family.

#### **Use a mantra.**

Brené Brown, a research professor at University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and author of the *New York Times* #1 bestsellers *The Gifts of Imperfection* and



**VETERINARY MEDICINE** requires us to be empathetic with our patients, clients, and coworkers. At first, the idea of setting boundaries can seem to be counterintuitive to this need. In fact, healthy boundaries enable us to maintain the space between us and others while being empathetic.

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Without boundaries, we become ineffective at caring for others because we end up feeling immensely depleted and sometimes even contaminated by others.

*Daring Greatly*, uses the mantra "Choose discomfort over resentment" to remind herself to not be pulled into saying "yes" when she really wants to say "no."

#### **Practice, practice, practice.**

Start saying aloud (alone or to others) what it is you want to say. The more you become comfortable setting and enforcing your boundaries, the easier it will be.

*"That sounds interesting, but I can't make it."*

*"I don't give my phone number out to clients."*

*"I'm not able to assist with this euthanasia, can you?"*

*"No, my plate is already full."*

*"Thanks for the invitation. My weekend plans are to be with my family, so I won't be able to attend."*

*"No, I can't work that day. I already made plans."*

### **How Do We Stay Connected Through Our Boundaries?**

Veterinary medicine requires us to be empathetic with our patients, clients, and coworkers. At first, the idea of setting boundaries can seem to be counterintuitive to this need. In fact, healthy boundaries enable us to maintain the space between us and others while being empathetic.

As Brené Brown explains in her video "Boundaries, Empathy & Compassion," "Empathy minus boundaries is not empathy. Compassion minus boundaries is not genuine." She disagrees with the current belief that empathy can lead to burnout. Instead, she defines empathy not as feeling *for* someone, but feeling *with* someone. When approached this way, empathy can actually restore us. I highly recommend watching the whole video at [theworkofthepeople.com/boundaries](http://theworkofthepeople.com/boundaries).

Boundary setting and enforcing is one of the most powerful tools we have against compassion fatigue and, when practiced, can sustain us indefinitely in our career and our lives. ■