

PEER REVIEWED



Setting Boundaries to Protect Personal Time

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Most veterinary professionals have experienced the dreaded Sunday evening text message: *Sorry to bother you, but can I ask you a question about my dog?* The message could be from a friend, neighbor, or family member and can elicit feelings of resentment, frustration, and anger (eg, *How can this person think it is okay to contact me late on a Sunday night? or Just because I work at a veterinary practice does not mean I am obligated to spend my spare time answering veterinary-related questions!*) These completely normal reactions signal that a boundary clearly has been crossed.

BENCHMARKS

Do It Now

If you are a good veterinarian, practice manager, veterinary nurse, or customer service representative and you treat people well, enough clients will rearrange their schedules to see you when you are available.

It does not work the other way around. Your kids will not wait until your work schedule is clear before they grow up, nor can a hike with your spouse through the colorful autumn mountains be put off until business slows.

SOURCE: Watts M. *Benchmarks 2015: A Study of Well-Managed Practices*. Columbus, OH: WTA Veterinary Consultants and Advanstar Publishing; 2015:97-98.

Unfortunately, setting and adhering to healthy boundaries is difficult and requires awareness and practice. However, the increasing use of smartphones and social media makes setting and sticking to boundaries more important than ever.

Unhealthy Boundaries

Unhealthy boundaries occur when we do not set limits on ourselves or others. Some examples include giving out personal contact information, responding to work-related messages at all hours, and over-sharing personal information with clients or team members on social media. These situations result in resentment and regret and are a common cause of anxiety, fatigue, and burnout.^{1,2}

Healthy Boundaries

Healthy boundaries are essential to maintain strong relationships and foster work-life balance. Healthy boundaries help people avoid situations in which they feel taken advantage of (ie, working during time off) and protect time dedicated to personal wellbeing.^{2,3}

Following are some practical steps to help set and maintain boundaries.

- **Identify limits.** Every person has physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual limits that must be honored to foster a sense of empowerment and wellbeing. Recognize veterinary-related questions that are tolerable and acceptable outside of work.
- **Tune in to feelings.** If requests for advice via social media, email, or personal cell phone lead to anxiety, discomfort, or feelings of disrespect, recognize that a boundary needs to be

set. Feeling resentful or uneasy or experiencing energy loss indicates a boundary has been crossed.

- **Recognize the boundary.** Practice self-awareness when feeling taken advantage of or a lack of appreciation. Think about what makes the situation, interaction, or expectation bothersome and how it can be prevented. Perhaps the specific individual making the contact, the time of day, the type of question being asked, or the method of contact is the problem.
- **Be direct.** People are not mind readers and they may not intuitively know when they have crossed a boundary; therefore, be prepared to directly communicate expectations (eg, availability for work-related questions, appropriate methods of contact, anticipated response times).
- **Be assertive.** Setting boundaries is not enough—they must be maintained. Defending, debating, or overexplaining the situation is not necessary. Simply be firm, gracious, and direct. (See **Setting Boundaries in Practice**.) Remember that giving in sends the message that a boundary does not exist.
- **Start small.** Setting boundaries and communicating assertively can feel overwhelming. These skills take courage and practice, but they can be mastered. Start with less-threatening boundaries with clients and team members (eg, not responding to work-related emails outside of business hours) and move to more challenging boundaries with family and friends (eg, not discussing veterinary-related questions at social gatherings).
- **Grant permission.** Veterinary care providers are givers by nature and have

Setting Boundaries in Practice

Following are healthy and unhealthy ways to handle 3 common scenarios.

1 A neighbor knocks on your door at 6 PM on a Sunday and asks you to look at his dog, who has been scratching his ears all weekend. The neighbor has been to your practice before but has a habit of occasionally asking you veterinary-related questions at home.

- **UNHEALTHY BOUNDARY:** You agree to look at the dog immediately, and after completing an examination, tell the neighbor to come by your practice tomorrow to pick up the necessary medications.

- **HEALTHY BOUNDARY:** You thank your neighbor for trusting you to give your opinion and explain that you only see animals who have a life-threatening emergency outside the practice. You confirm that the dog is not in any immediate distress and ask if the neighbor can call your practice tomorrow to set up an appointment so you can examine the dog and do any appropriate in-practice tests before prescribing any necessary medications.

2 A friend sends you a message via Facebook at 10 PM on a weeknight asking for advice regarding her cat's teeth and whether she should schedule a dental prophylaxis.

- **UNHEALTHY BOUNDARY:** You reply immediately and ask her to send pictures of her cat's teeth. You advise her about scheduling the procedure and tell her the estimated costs.

- **HEALTHY BOUNDARY:** You reply the next day and applaud her for being so proactive in deciding whether her cat might need a dental prophylaxis. You let her know that you do not check messages after 9 PM, nor do you respond to work-related messages via Facebook. You advise her to contact your client service representative, who will be pleased to schedule an appointment for an examination and any necessary preanesthetic tests.

3 A colleague sends a text message asking you to work her Saturday shift so she can go out of town for the weekend.

- **UNHEALTHY BOUNDARY:** You respond, *Of course!*, even though this means you will work 6 shifts in a row, which typically makes you feel resentful and exhausted the next week.

- **HEALTHY BOUNDARY:** You tell your colleague you would like to help her out, but you will need to trade a different shift that week or the following week.

 **BENCHMARKS**
Know When to Ask for Help

The work veterinary professionals do has great emotional impact, regardless of their role. It is okay that your work has this effect and to ask for help if you need it. As with any process change, you must acknowledge that you would like something to be different and make a commitment to yourself and those around you.

SOURCE: Hess B. *Benchmarks 2017: A Study of Well-Managed Practices*. Columbus, OH: WMPB LLC; 2017:118-120.

Boundaries are a sign of self-respect and must be respected and preserved. Give yourself permission to say *No*.

Maintaining Healthy Boundaries**DO:**

- Use an auto-reply for email or professional Facebook pages indicating when messages will be answered and who to call if immediate assistance is needed.
- Let friends and clients know that if they have questions about their pet(s), they should call their veterinarian during work hours and schedule an appointment or contact an emergency practice.

DO NOT:

- Give out personal information (eg, personal cell phone number, email address, personal Facebook page)
- Answer work email outside of work hours—use an auto-reply message if necessary
- Go in to work or call clients on your days off

difficulty saying *No*. Recognize that doing things out of fear, guilt, or self-doubt will only lead to future resentment and exhaustion. Boundaries are a sign of self-respect and must be respected and preserved. Give yourself permission to say *No*.

- **Enlist support.** If a person tends to ignore his or her own needs and to always focus on others, emotional and physical exhaustion are inevitable. If setting boundaries is too difficult, seek support from a counselor, therapist, life coach, mentor, or friend. Accountability to another person may be enough to foster and maintain healthy boundaries.
- **Make personal time a priority.** Veterinary care providers need time for self-care and nonveterinary activities to foster resilience and wellbeing. Protect this time by setting and adhering to boundaries to conserve energy and allow a more positive outlook. (See **Maintaining Healthy Boundaries**.)

Conclusion

Creating healthy boundaries helps maintain work–life balance, promote resilience, and develop stronger coping strategies. Also, making healthy boundaries part of the practice culture can ensure that all veterinary team members foster personal and professional wellbeing. Today's constant accessibility via social media and smartphones make boundaries essential to protect personal time and stay healthy. ■

References

1. Schultz K, Delva D, Kerr J. Emotional effects of continuity of care on family physicians and the therapeutic relationship. *Can Fam Physician*. 2012;58(2):178-185.
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and palliative medicine: peer advice for physicians on achieving longevity and fulfillment. *J Palliat Med.* 2009;12(9):773-777.

3. Zwack J, Schweitzer J. If every fifth physician is affected by burnout, what about the other four? Resilience strategies of experienced physicians. *Acad Med.* 2013;88(3):382-389.



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Suicide Intervention Skills Training course at the Centre for Suicide Prevention in Canada. Marie writes a biweekly blog and a monthly newsletter on pertinent issues related to veterinary wellbeing, and she facilitates veterinary wellness workshops and retreats for veterinary care providers.

FUN FACT: Marie's speaking engagements have allowed her to travel worldwide. Her favorite destinations thus far include the Bahamas, Northern Ireland, Belize, and Peru.

Resources

- *Boundaries Updated and Expanded Edition: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life.* Cloud H, Townsend J. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 2017.
- *People Pleasing: Saying No and Setting Boundaries: Applicable Action Steps to Saying "No" With Confidence, Setting Firm Boundaries, and Warding off Boundary Invaders for Life!* Hall R, O'Donnell J. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform; 2016.

TAKE ACTION ✓

- 1 Create healthy boundaries by identifying your individual limits and developing firm but fair responses to those who try to break into your personal time.
- 2 Stick to the boundaries you set, reminding yourself that maintaining boundaries is necessary for a healthy balance that will enhance your life professionally and personally.



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