



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

How To Set Effective Boundaries

Guest: Alex Howard

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[00:00:08] Alex Howard

Hi, I'm Alex Howard, and welcome to this session where we're going to be exploring how to set effective boundaries. We'll talk about why effective boundaries are so critical for really any kind of physical or emotional healing work that we're doing, beyond all the obvious things around having healthy relationship dynamics and so on. We'll talk about how to identify boundary violations. How do you know when your boundaries are being violated?

We'll talk about the dance of change. We'll talk about how when we start to put healthy boundaries in place in our relationships, how do we navigate how other people may respond to that? And we'll also talk about effective ways of saying no. So when it comes to putting in place boundaries with other people, how do you actually do that? But before we come to that, why should you listen to me?

So I've been working as a clinician now for over two decades. My original journey into all of this work was suffering from a severe chronic illness in my teenage years. I suffered from ME, otherwise known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, for around seven years. And for the last five years of that was on a very proactive healing and recovery journey. Having made a full recovery, I went on to set up really the clinic that I'd wanted to exist in the years that I'd been ill. And that was and is the Optimum Health Clinic, which has now been going for, as of next year, 20 years, has a team of 25 full time clinicians. We work with patients in over 50 countries around the world.

I'm also the creator of a methodology called Therapeutic Coaching, which we created within the Optimum Health Clinic. And that really brings together the best of psychotherapeutic approaches with a solution based coaching approach. Really, how do we understand the impacts of the past? Learn to live in the present, but create our future the way that we want it to be.

I'm also the founder of Conscious Life, which is the platform where you're watching this conference, where we've had the privilege of working with hundreds of the world's leading experts on subjects like trauma, anxiety, sleep, fatigue, relationships and so on. My online coaching program, the RESET Program, which is really at the heart of it, is how do you cultivate a calm, relaxed nervous system so we're not constantly being triggered by the world around us. That coaching program is, I believe, if not the one of the most successful online coaching programs specifically focused around nervous system health. And so I bring all of that experience, both my own personal journey, working as a clinician for 20 years, but also having had the privilege of

interviewing so many of the world's experts into the creation of my programs and then therefore, in this session, and feeding into this content.

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So before we get more fully into this whole area of boundaries, I want to say a few words about my own journey with boundaries. And so I mentioned a moment ago briefly that I suffered from a debilitating severe chronic illness as a teenager. That catalyzed a massive internal journey of discovery. And like anyone who goes on a journey like that starts to change the dynamic of the other relationships in our lives. And often we find ourselves moving away from certain old friends, friendship groups and hopefully starting to cultivate friendships and relationships that are a mirror and a reflection of the inner work that we've been doing. But that's always challenging in dynamics with our family because it's less easy to walk away from those family dynamics.

And I remember a time, a memory around my mid 20s where I'd started working as a clinician. I was becoming quite effective in that work but still found myself in a very difficult relationship with my mother. My mother who I loved and I still love dearly, but had, let's say, a different relationship to boundaries and in a way found myself at a sort of classic drama triangle relationship of the perpetrator or the sort of problem element which was my sister, the rescuer, which was me and the victim which was my mother. And my sister suffered from a number of quite extreme mental health issues and was, and still is, quite unstable as a person. And this would manifest in a lot of different ways, but one of the ways it would manifest is these explosive episodes of sometimes physical and certainly environmental kind of violence and damage.

And these situations would happen sort of again and again, and my mom would become the victim of these and I would become the rescuer. And the more that I trained in therapeutic work, in a way, the more skills I hopefully had to try and be helpful and then felt this sort of rescuer kind of quality and responsibility to then step in and to rescue. And on this particular evening, it was quite late on a Saturday evening, I was sitting on the sofa watching TV and I saw my mom phoning and my mom wouldn't normally phone me at 11:00 at night and so obviously realized something was not right. She explains that my sister has had this explosive episode and sort of smashed up the house and had sort of stormed off and would I come and help. And I lived in North London and they were down south of London so it was a kind of hour and a half journey to get there. No trains at this time, so I get a taxi late at night, very expensively, all the way around London and arrive and my mother's in distress, and so I take my mother's car and go off and try and find my sister and eventually find my sister pacing the train station at sort of 01:00 in the morning. I then proceed to drive my sister sort of the two or 3 hours that she lives away from their home, sleep a couple of hours on the floor, drive my mum's car home and then get the train back to where I live.

As I'm traveling home after all of this I'm just thinking my life can't continue in this dynamic. That I'm spending my whole life in this dynamic of rescuing and helping, and the thing is that that rescuing and helping doesn't make anything better. It rescues in a moment of crisis. But the moments of crisis keep coming because the habits and the patterns of behavior that are causing them are not being addressed and they're not problems that are within me that I can do anything about. It depends upon other people engaging in a different way. And so I realize at this point that for my life to work I've got to start saying no. To be able to say yes to myself, I'm going to have to be able to say no to other people. And that was hard, it was a difficult conversation to have with my mother and she didn't necessarily quite get it the first few times but I had to keep practicing using that no.

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And this is where boundaries... Some boundaries are easier than others to put in place. Boundaries with strangers, where we've just got to get used to sort of being assertive and saying no is one thing, but when the boundaries are with the people that are sort of closest to us in our hearts or in our lives, and we've got to start changing those dynamics that can bring up a lot. But the heart of this, and I'll come back to this in a bit, is that if we don't draw the boundary somewhere then someone else is drawing it and that means that someone else is ultimately controlling and impacting what happens in our lives. And so to have a healthy boundary which is put in place, which is defended, which is stood up for, that takes certain awareness, it takes certain tools and skills and it takes patience to really retrain the dynamic of that relationship. The interesting thing was that learning how to do that, not just with my mom, but also some other relationships in my life, was really the heart of so many of the things that I value in my life then becoming possible.

Being able to scale my impact in my work and to have healthy boundaries with colleagues, with clients, with students. To be able to do that in such a way that I could take care of myself while staying in empathic caring relationship with other people. So that's what I really want for you and that's what's at the heart of what we're going to explore in this session.

I guess really at the heart of all of this is the recognition that in life we have an ongoing potential tension between our needs or your needs and other people's needs, and the line here is really the boundary of where that sits. Now of course in different relationships, at different chapters of our lives, that boundary can move around.

There are times there particularly where we may have young children and their needs are consistently going to come as being more important than ours. Not always, but certainly a lot of the time. There may be times in a relationship where there's a really healthy balance between our needs and the other person. There may be times we're on a very active physical or emotional healing journey and we need to have a stronger emphasis towards our own needs. So this is not about good and bad and right and wrong, it's about what is most healthy and optimum for us and the relationships that we're in at different points at different chapters in our lives.

At the heart of this is the recognition that to say yes to ourselves we have to be able to say no to other people. If we can only say yes to other people, we're going to have to consistently be saying no to ourselves. This is the heart of the work with boundaries. It's figuring out where those boundaries are and then being able to say yes when we want more of something, but also no when we want less of something. And in a way at the heart of this is the recognition that in different relationships there's different levels or types of responsibility that we may have.

So this is what I call the continuum of responsibility from you to the other person or other people. And whereabouts on this line we are, as I was just saying, is different in different relationships, different at different chapters in different relationships and also different based upon what's happening in our lives. But you might want to take a moment to reflect where is this balance for you typically in relationship at the moment? Is it that you tend to take a lot more responsibility and maybe other people take less. Maybe everything is down to what you have to do for other people and maybe there needs to be a moving of some of that responsibility towards others. Or maybe it's the case that you make everyone else take responsibility and actually you need to take on more of that responsibility yourself.

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But the connection between responsibility and boundaries is that if we make ourselves always responsible for everything it becomes hard to say no to other people, but also the recognition that if we can take less responsibility for everyone else, it becomes easier to say yes to ourselves and no to other people. But as we're going to come to in a little bit, we also teach people how to treat us. And so the dynamics of a lot of the relationships in our lives will reflect the way that we've set either consciously or more often unconsciously how we've set these dynamics up.

So I also want to say something around why healthy boundaries are so critical for physical and emotional healing work. In a way, one way to look at it is we all have a set number of units of energy which are available for us in any hour, day, week, month, year and so on. Now of course, how we live our lives may impact the amount of energy that we have that's available. But doing physical and emotional healing work means there needs to be time, space and energy which is available to be invested into that. If we're on a physical healing journey we effectively need to be making more energy a day than we're giving out. Because it's that extra energy which then in a way becomes part of our energy reserves which then build up, which then become our capacity for healing.

If it's an emotional healing journey, we need to be able to have enough distance and space to be able for our nervous system to settle and to go into those places of emotional healing. So when we don't have good boundaries, when we find ourselves constantly saying yes to everything for everyone else and ending up being very stretched and all our energy being out there for others, it's very hard for that physical and emotional healing work to really happen. This is where the more that we can find the edges, decide where they need to be and then create that space for us, it allows our nervous system to settle, it allows us to feel a sense of inner safety and it's from that settling and from that inner safety that then our natural capacity to heal can then kick in.

It's like if we cut our hand or finger, whatever, as long as that cut doesn't get infected we might have to stitch the skin together, it naturally heals. We have a natural capacity towards healing. The problem is when there isn't the time, energy and space, that natural healing capacity can't then happen. And so for any of us that are on a physical, emotional, life healing journey, part of what's important to support that is to have enough time, energy and space to have the boundaries that allows that work to be able to happen. It's also true in relationships that of course when we're in an intimate relationship with someone there's a certain merge, like an energetic connection and merge that happens.

And we also need to have enough space within that that we're then able to feel connected to ourselves. It can also be the case that for some of us, depending upon our attachment style, it can also be the case that for some people, the closer they get, the more anxious. For other people, the further away they get, the more anxious that they get. But finding our place of being in a healthy boundary with that person, being able to connect, but also being able to separate and then staying in a regulated, calm place in us, that's really one of the keys to a healthy relationship dynamic. But to be able to find that place and then to be able to stay protected where we need to in that place, we need to have this capacity to say yes, we want more but also no, we want to put an end or we want to take some space.

So I want to talk a little bit about some of the warning signs that our boundaries are being violated. How do we recognize that there's a boundary violation in the first place? We'll talk in a minute

about what you can then do when that happens, but firstly I want to talk about how you recognize it.

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Now there isn't a single formula that I can give to you because of course this is different for different people. But there are things that happen in each of our three bodies. Our mental body, our mind, our emotional body in our heart and our physical body in our physical body. So I'm going to go through a few possible examples but I also want you to take some time to reflect. What do you notice happens in you when your boundaries are being violated? Examples of boundary violations might be someone pressuring you to do something you don't want to do. Someone being too close into your physical or emotional space. Someone saying something to you which is unkind or ungenerous, or someone saying something about you behind your back to someone else which is unkind or ungenerous. Someone demanding at work things that are beyond what's reasonable and not paying attention to your kind of limitations and your edges. So any of these things are just a few examples that may happen. So let's look at what can happen in us as a warning sign that boundaries are being violated.

So in our mental body, the first one is that we feel like someone is gaslighting us. Gaslighting is when someone is trying to trigger us to constantly question our own narrative. Now, I don't mean in a healthy way. It's healthy to self reflect and go is that really true? Is the way that I'm seeing that accurate? I mean in an unhealthy way where someone is constantly trying to coerce and manipulate our perspective, so in our mental body, in our mind, we may feel this sort of pressure and this sort of stretching and this discomfort and a sense of anxiety being created by that.

Another example of a boundary violation in our mental body is we find ourselves excessively replaying conversations. So a situation or event happens and we keep rerunning the visual or the words or the conversation that happened.

Another example of a boundary violation in our mental body is when we feel anxious. We feel like our mind is just constantly kind of activated and racing and there's a sense of discomfort and overthinking that's there. And of course this could be happening because we're just dysregulated. But it's particularly when it happens in response to something that someone does or says and then we notice the way that it's like the anxiety is a warning sign from our system saying, this doesn't feel okay. Because in a way, each of these things that I'm talking about that can happen in response to a boundary violation is like your internal alarm system, which is going off and telling you that something isn't okay.

In your emotional body there may be a feeling of just feeling unsafe, like there's a sense of shakiness, like the ground isn't there that you feel unsafe in this situation. You may find yourself shutting down emotionally. So there may be a sense of feeling defended, frozen, numb, and just not really feeling your feelings and emotions. You may find yourself feeling irritable and wanting to push other people away. It's like the boundary violation makes you want to shut down, but also push away and take significant space from others.

It may also be that there's just a general feeling of discomfort. Like emotionally, you just don't feel at ease or comfortable around this person.

In your physical body, maybe there's muscular tension. Like you sort of find yourself sort of rigid and tight and holding on in yourself. It may be that your breathing becomes shallow, like you're not

taking a full breath into your lungs, there's a kind of tightness around your chest. It may be that your heart starts racing. There's a sense of being on edge and your body's trying to pump energy through your body. You may actually feel a physical sensation of your body trying to move away, like trying to create physical distance and space from this situation.

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So you may have some of these, you may have all of these, you may have none of these experiences. The thing that's most important to me in you doing this is to get some awareness of what happens in you as like your alarm bell, that your boundary is being violated. Something someone says they do, they don't do, they don't say, whatever it may be. But when a boundary is being crossed, what's your internal response? What's your internal alarm?

Now, if we notice that happening, here's the next bit, the temptation may be to ignore that or to override that. We can get so normalized to not having our boundaries being honored, respected, protected, that something happens and it's just we're so normalized to the feelings and the emotions and the kind of mental experience that that's just part of our life.

The better we get at setting boundaries, the calmer overall that our system becomes, the more we find our nervous system being regulated, actually, the easier it is to spot a boundary violation. Because when we feel these things, it's not our normal. In a way part of the problem is that, as I say, when we're normalized to all of these things happening and our system's used to being dysregulated, we don't notice it for what it is. So the better we get at putting boundaries in place, the more we work to calm and settle our system. When there is a boundary violation, it's much more obvious in our internal experience.

So we've talked about some brief examples of boundary violation. We've talked about how we might notice in our mind, emotions and body what happens. I want to talk a little bit about what healthy boundaries look like. So I'm focusing this particularly on what healthy boundaries look like in parenting to child, because this is in a way the way that a lot of our boundaries got set up or didn't get set up. So I'll talk about it from that context and then I'll map it across to what it then looks like in our adult lives.

So the first thing that's critical with healthy boundaries is they need to be strong. Now, I'm not saying they need to be overly strong or crushing or demolishing, but there needs to be enough strength that the boundary holds. So if it gets pushed against, there's a sense that it's going to hold in place. What boundaries with kids might look like when they're strong is that if you're going to go to bed at this time and it's a young child that needs to have a firm bedtime, it doesn't keep getting slipped and moved around and it's inconsistent, like there's a strength that shows up there. For us as an adult. That might be when we say no to someone and they're not listening to our no, the no is just very clear. No, I'm not going to do that. The real trick here is to be strong in holding our ground, but not to become aggressive, that we're trying to invade the other person's ground. So we're not collapsing, we're not attacking, we're just being strong, firm and clear.

The second is it needs to be intelligent. So sometimes we can set a boundary in a way where we've kind of missed the point of what's going on and then it becomes really hard to hold that position because it just doesn't make sense. With a kid it may be that we need to hold, taking the bedtime example, hold a boundary, but also that child is in genuine distress and needs love and holding and care, and the intelligence is the recognition that this needs to be adapted in a different

way, or what we're doing is not working so we can evolve and change what we're doing to then be able to be more effective with it.

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The third is a boundary needs to be loving. Now, this is one of the things that I think a lot of people can be surprised to hear. We can be strong and we can be loving. There can be strength in holding our position whilst also having a sensitivity, a caring, a kindness. Like we're loving of ourselves by the fact we're putting the boundary in place, but it may also be in the dynamic of that friendship or relationship. We're being loving of that other person. We're understanding the impact and we're still being strong. We're still holding our position.

Healthy boundaries are also responsive. If new information or new reality comes up, there may be an adaptability, there may be a movement that comes with that. If we give a boundary to a kid, for example, that if you don't do this, this is going to happen but then a whole new set of other things happen in that circumstance the responsiveness may be that we have to slightly reposition. Now the trick here is that we need to be responsive in a way which is effective. So if we have someone who is by nature quite coercive and manipulative in their behavior and our slight kind of compromise or responsive way of being is something they can weaponize, then we may need to be just very clear and hold our position with that person. In other situations there is a bit of give and take and a bit of flexibility that can come in. So we need to be able to read the person and read the situation to do that skillfully.

The final thing is boundaries need to be empowering. They need to be empowering to us but also to the dynamics hopefully of where possible our relationships in our lives. It's like we want to come away from boundaries not feeling like we kind of crushed someone else or we're bigger or stronger hopefully where possible it's a win win. But we also feel this sense of by saying no to others, it is an act of self love. For the younger places inside of us it's like what we're really doing is saying I love myself and care for myself enough to hold this boundary. That feels good, feels empowering, it feels like we're standing up for and protecting those places inside of us. So our boundaries need to be strong, need to have power but they need to be intelligent, need to be loving, need to be responsive, but also ultimately need to be empowering.

In a way, what we're often learning to do is we're growing our capacity to say no. In a way we're growing our no. And it may be initially that we feel quite unsure and quite afraid and we don't know what's going to happen if we say no to other people. And so we practice and we get more familiar and more used to it. We grow our capacity to say no to other people, and the more that we do that, the easier that becomes.

So I want to say a few words around what a healthy no might sound like. Now you're going to notice with each of these there's not apologizing, there's not getting into lots of story and lots of background and lots of history. It's short but sweet, and it's also not about the other person. It's not even necessarily being about us, it's just this is our boundary and it's having a way of doing that. So let's imagine a situation where someone is being very critical or unkind or they're asking us to do something in a way that just feels off. We may say, please don't speak to me that way. Now, notice it's not please don't speak to me that way, you're such a horrible person, you did this, you did that. We're not getting into an attacking of that person. It's also not, please don't speak to me that way, I don't have what it takes. We're not getting into a collapse or an apology, we're just being very clear, please don't speak to me that way.

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Now, of course, if that person kept continuing, the boundary may be, if you continue talking to me in this way, I'm going to leave this situation. Now, of course, if we say we're going to do that, we then need to do that. One of the things which is most critical with boundaries, and this is more true than ever with children, is boundaries what you say is much less important than what you do. So if you say you're going to give a boundary, you absolutely need to a) not give boundaries you can't follow through on, but if you do give a boundary, be able to follow through.

I remember it's a bit of a story that's become a bit infamous in my household. A few years ago, my eldest daughter was acting up in a way where she was deliberately trying to provoke a reaction from people. And I said to her, and it was kind of the depths of winter here in the UK, and I said, if you carry on doing this, I'm going to pour a glass of water on your head. Slightly tongue in cheek, but also completely serious, she carries on and so I get a glass of water and I pour it on her head, obviously, in a sort of wasn't like a shaming way, in a sort of playful way. And I did, by the way, let her get me back later but that's not the story. But the point was boundary set, boundary needs to be followed through. If kids think that a boundary is not going to be followed through, the words become impotent, and so it's much better to not offer a boundary that's not followed through than to offer it and not follow it through.

I hear that may be important for you, but that doesn't work for me. Another example of a response, you acknowledge the other person. I hear that for you that's really important, but for me that doesn't work. Another example is I understand that's your truth, but it isn't mine. Here's what's true for me. So you're acknowledging you're recognizing the other person's perspective, but then you're also going to speak your perspective.

Another one might be, this is where things may have escalated a little bit, I don't feel you're listening to me or respecting my boundary. And so I'm going to leave now. Now again, that needs to be followed through with an action of leaving, not a sort of tentative threat, but an actual action of leaving.

Sometimes, and I'll come to this in a minute, sometimes the only way to be effective of resetting the boundary is to have things blow up temporarily because things get reset and then let them calm to a new normal on the other side. In fact, part of the challenge with boundaries is if what we really want to do is keep everyone happy and keep the peace, we never risk the temporary blowing up which may be needed to reset the dynamics. And it's also worth saying that when it comes to this no or this stop or putting a boundary in place, it isn't just the words that we speak, it's also the way we speak the words. So the research shows that communication both to other people and to ourselves is about 7% words. It's about 38% voice tonality, the tonality we say those words in and it's about 55% body posture.

So if I say to you, that's really interesting, I don't think you buy my interest, right? If I say, oh my God, that is the most boring thing I've heard all day, again, it seems incongruous. So what we say, for example, saying please don't speak to me that way is not the same as please don't speak to me that way. So we need to make sure it's not just the words, it's also the tonality and the body posture that lines it up as well.

Now, here's the thing. When it comes to changing any habit in our lives, we have to have the awareness of what's happening to then be able to change it. A phrase I often use; if you can see it, you don't have to be it. If you can recognize that that boundary is being violated and you can see

the dynamic that empowers you to take different action to do something different. And we have to retrain our mind and our nervous system.

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The research of neuroplasticity shows us that the more times we have the same thought or we do the same habit or behavior, we're building a stronger connection between the neurons in our brain. We are literally wiring our brain in a certain way. Neurons that fire together, wire together, which means we're literally wiring in a shortcut in our mind that we're able, that when this happens, we do that. So if we can break the habit of not having healthy boundaries and each time someone starts to cross the boundary or someone starts to beat us up or attack us or give us a hard time and we say please don't speak to me that way, for example, and we do that consistently. We're rewiring the habit, the pattern, the behavior, which then resets that dynamic not just through effort, but over time, it becomes the new normal, the new automatic.

And so ultimately we are going to go on a dance of change here. So let's imagine that there's a particular person in your life that you need to reset the boundaries with, and let's say that consistently you're dancing together and you're dancing the foxtrot and then you decide one day you want to dance the tango. That person has one of three choices. They're either going to come and dance the new dance with you, that would be great, or they're going to try and pull you back into the old dance, not because they don't care about you, they don't love you, maybe because they do love you and they miss you and they want things to be the same. Or the third option is you're going to dance a separate dance. So when we work to reset the boundaries in our lives, when we work to retrain the dynamics of how other people are with us and how we are with them, we may have to risk that we dance separately, that that person doesn't want to meet us in that new way. And if they don't, we've got an important reflection to make. Do we want our dynamic to continue in this way or do we need to take space and take distance?

Now, one of the things that can stop us doing this is a fear that we're going to be alone. That people are going to not want to meet us in this place. But here's the thing, relationships and friendships that don't respect our boundaries are problematic in several ways. One, they drain us, they deplete our energy and resources. But number two, they take up the space that a new healthier dynamic could fill. So we're spending all our time in dynamics and friendships that are toxic and unhealthy. We need to clear those out to make the space for new dynamics and relationships to come in.

If we make that space and we do that inner work, we're going to find ourselves attracting a very different way of being in relationship. The more we work on cultivating a place of inner care and inner love, the more we're going to notice when that isn't present in our outside friendships and relationships and the more skillfully we're going to be able to cultivate friendships and relationships that do have that quality.

Setting healthy boundaries, it takes time, it takes practice, it takes patience. But the potential for our life is enormous. For our physical and emotional healing, for new kinds of nourishing friendships, connections that really nurture us and feed us, but also to be able to live our real potential in our lives in a way where we have people around us that are on our team, that are supporting us, not that are trying to pull us back to places that we're working hard in getting away from.

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So I want you to encourage you to play with this. Now, it may be the case that it's a little bit like if the point of balance in your boundaries is a middle point, but you've been so far in one direction, it may be that to find that new point of balance, to teach people how to treat you in a different way, that pendulum has to overswing initially. So it may be that you go from being very unboundary to being quite firmly and perhaps a bit overboundaried, like super, that's not acceptable, don't talk to me that way. And you got to reset these dynamics. And it may be you go a bit too far and you're a bit stronger than you intend to be and you can always mop that up and apologize if you need to, but you gotta put the work in to find that place of boundary which is healthy, nourishing and supportive for you. There's also few things more healing than those younger places inside of us knowing that we're going to stand up for ourselves.

So I hope this has been helpful within this conference, this is a fantastic conference. There's dozens and dozens of different interviews with experts on the whole range of subjects around toxic relationships. There's also a bunch of excellent interviews going into boundaries from different perspectives. But my invitation to you is to say yes to you. But to say yes to you, you're going to have to practice saying no to other people.

Thanks for watching and I hope that's been helpful.