



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

How to Establish Healthy Boundaries

Guest: Dr Pedram Shojai

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Pedram Shojai. And we're going to be talking about boundaries. We'll be talking about how to recognize the impacts of unhealthy boundaries, both boundaries with ourselves, but also boundaries with other people. And then, what are some of the practical ways that we can start to establish and put those boundaries in place.

To give a little of Pedram's background, Dr Pedram Shojai is a man with many titles. He is the founder of theurbanmonk.com, co-founder of whole.tv, the New York Times best-selling author of *The Urban Monk*, *Rise and Shine*, *The Art of Stopping Time*, and *Inner Alchemy*.

He is the producer and director of the movies *Vitality*, *Origins*, and *Prosperity*. He's also produced several documentary series like *Interconnected*, *Gateway to Health*, and the *Exhausted* series.

In his spare time, he is a Taoist Abbott, a doctor of Oriental Medicine, a Kung Fu world traveler, a fierce global green warrior, an avid backpacker, a devout alchemist, a Qigong Master, and an old school Jedi biohacker, working to preserve our natural world and wake us up to our full potential.

So firstly, Pedram welcome, I really appreciate your time, and always enjoy our chats.

Dr Pedram Shojai

Great to be here, thank you.

Alex Howard

Why don't we start with giving a bit of frame around boundaries, maybe say a little bit about what is a boundary, but also why are so many of us so bad at them?

Dr Pedram Shojai

The simplest way to describe a boundary is a line, and most of us have dotted lines at best. And that's around not just relationships, but time, around energy, around the word yes, and using the word no in the appropriate context.

I think that we have... And boundaries vary culturally. My father was German educated, he has very different boundaries than my mother who grew up in Iran. It's like a tide pool when it comes to boundaries, there's a lot of in and out, and they oftentimes collide. I find that in the United States, East Coast versus Midwest, versus West Coast, very different boundaries.

[00:02:45]

A lot of people are trained to become people pleasers, a lot of people interpret scripture in a way that gives them kind of dotted lines in their boundaries with certain folks, and they believe that that is the way they should emanate on planet Earth. But what it translates into is really terrible personal boundaries, interpersonal boundaries that lead to all sorts of problems that probably counter the intended result of their spiritual practice.

I think that it's a big mushy area that is going to require a lot of unpacking. So I'm very happy to be here talking about it, I find most people have problems in their lives that fall back on really poor hygiene around their boundaries.

Alex Howard

In a way, there's the boundaries we have with other people, but there's also the boundaries we have with ourselves, like our ability to say yes and no to what we want, to what we don't want, and so on.

Dr Pedram Shojai

Let's go to neuroanatomy first, because we have this part of our brain that has developed on top of mammalian brains, namely the prefrontal cortex, that is really functioning as a kind of higher executive function battle station. It's there to negate impulses, it's there to turn around and reflect inward and say, how do I feel about this? Let me introspect for a moment and see if this is something that I indeed want to be doing.

And that overlay, that is supposed to stop the amygdala. It's supposed to stop the impulsive parts of the brain from just... it's supposed to say, monkey no, monkey no. Right?

They said, let's go to dinner, but you said you were going to the gym, which one's it going to be? And so that part of the brain is particularly interesting to a guy like me, being a former monk, and owning brain labs and studying this stuff, is the more you develop this part of the brain, the more you have layered on the executive function that allows for the negation of impulses.

Boundaries and negation of impulses are first cousins to me. Because saying yes to something without holding the line of your boundary is literally a lapse in the function of your prefrontal cortex that needs to be shored up. And we know practices, we know things that very specifically help bolster that and reinforce that.

Yet we live in a culture that monetizes the attention economy. We live in a culture that needs you to be impulsive because you got to buy that Toyota, you got to buy that purse, you got to say yes to the Disney Cruise. All these things that are trying to pull the money out of your wallet are geared towards shutting down your prefrontal cortex, so you could be a really good consumer. So we got a lot stacked against us culturally, too.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me that for a lot of us that grew up with boundaries that maybe felt a little bit too rigid and hard, and sort of oppressive, there seems to have been a cultural swing towards raising kids, for example, in a way which is unbounded. Their feelings are the most important thing all of the time. Do whatever you want, go to bed when you want. And in a way, what a healthy expression of boundaries actually looks like, and what isn't a swing, or an extreme in either way.

[00:06:40] - Dr Pedram Shojai

The pendulum has always been swinging. We have the finely manicured Victorian garden, and then we have the wild of a National Park that's never been touched. And somewhere in between is where your boundaries need to lie. I think that having the wild energy of expression, and nature, and discovery, and all this is very appropriate to tap into and harness with the right bumpers.

So how does that inform your parenting? How does that inform the way you navigate the politics at the office? It becomes a personal deal, and I call it life gardening. To instill the right amount of balance for you requires thought, it requires premeditated definition of where your boundaries are, and where they should be.

And does that mean that you can't renegotiate those? No, but it means at least having your life garden. The balance between your career, your health, your family life, and all these things booted up, and allow new things to go through the filter of that, before you say yes to the next new thing. Because we are already over-committed.

Most people are financially strapped in debt, yet keep spending money on stuff they don't need. People are complaining about not having time, yet they say yes to things every day that make them more time deprived.

All of these are a function of not having that filter put up in front of you. And that filter is very much governed by the prefrontal cortex. Now, how do you bolster that? We could meditate. There's plenty of conversation about how to do that. But once you understand that that might be the central pivot to all the problems that are coming downstream in your life, then boundaries suddenly become a very interesting topic.

Alex Howard

As you're talking, it struck me that to know where and when we need boundaries, we also need to have clarity about what's most important for us.

Dr Pedram Shojai

That's it. And we don't live in a culture where we've been allowed to introspect. We live in a very declarative culture. It's like by the time I'm 17, I'm supposed to try to declare my major, so that I can pick my life path to say who I'm going to be for the rest of my life. I don't know about you, but I was thinking about girls and cars at 17. Not about the long game of who I'm going to be with in my golden years when I'm retiring.

So I am, okay, I'm going to be a doctor person, I'm going to be a lawyer person, an engineer person. And this is very declarative, this has no anchor in the who am I? And how do I feel? And what are my values? And the bigger questions. Now, I know there's cultures like the Australians who do this, the Israelis do this, where there's a couple of gap years, it's like, you know what go walk the earth, go figure out who you are.

I find that to be extremely useful, and I think that that leads to more maturity in the people that end up kind of coming back into the workforce because they have a little bit more of gnosis, a little bit more introspection. They've seen the world, they're less narcissistic, and they start to make decisions based on their values a little better.

But our culture doesn't really enforce that, or let alone reinforce it. It's just trying to pull you into the workforce, and get you moving out of mom and dad's house so you could start paying rent and waiting tables, and so when the hell are you going to do that? And I think that is a big problem in our education system.

[00:10:30] - Alex Howard

One of the challenges when it comes to boundaries is that we have all kinds of, you mentioned about people pleasing for example, all kinds of narratives of needing to be nice and accommodating. And in a way to be able to say yes to what we want, unless that's completely aligned with everyone else, we're going to have to learn to say no to other people. What helps us do that?

Dr Pedram Shojai

Holding what you've said yes to on the altar of your daily routine. I think it's very easy to say yes to other people's wants and desires of you, and your time, and your energy, before considering what you need to say yes to for yourself.

I think some of that is, in my assessment, the misread of scripture and just be, oh, I'm such a nice person, I'm always giving, I'm always giving, to the point where there's nothing left. I think some of it is just cultural people-pleasing, and some of it is the impulsivity of taking that one fraction of a second and stopping and saying, is this the right move for me?

If I say yes to this, what is this effectively saying no to downstream in my life? I'm going to go to dinner and drinks with you guys. I just said no to the gym. I said I wanted to lose that weight, I said I needed the energy. I said all of these things that I needed for me to be lined up in the life that I say I want. I literally just said no to by saying yes to this dinner and drinks, sounds great moment.

So having that ability to filter in that moment, and just think for a second, again, is predominantly the function of a well-functioning prefrontal cortex. And that sounds really geeky. So I can go mystical, spiritual, and point to the Buddha statue behind me and say, look, that's what these guys have been saying all along. The mindfulness needs to be your operating system, not something you go back to when you need a Hail Mary to cleanse the bad decision you just made.

It should be at the forefront of your decision making matrix, not a Quaalude or a chill pill you're taking once you're too stressed out. I cannot fix, and I've been teaching meditation and Qigong and all these wonderful practices for decades, someone comes into my sphere with really poor time boundaries. Really poor hygiene around their boundaries and they're like, I want to learn all this stuff. I've learned over the years that it won't work for them if they continue to have a life filled with bad decisions, and impulsive irrational moves that then keeps bringing chaos into their world. What do you want? More energy, more chaos? It's not going to work.

I had to learn the hard way. Because when you come through this and you're a monk, and you think your solution is just meditate. I had to learn what meditation really was, and what it did, and moved it higher upstream into the actual operating system. That needs to be always at play for a person living in a world that has gazillions of distractions coming at them every moment.

Alex Howard

I think people don't like hearing this, but in a way, we make compromises all of the time. We either compromise our goals, or we compromise relationships, or time we spend in different places. And I think people can get caught in a place of wanting to believe that everything's possible. They go and do a workshop and they come up with their goals and what they're going to create in their life. And they want all of it.

But the lived reality is that they probably can't do all of those things in one go. And so somehow that being able to put in place the right boundaries also requires a level of emotional awareness, and radical honesty with oneself, about what really is most important.

[00:14:45] - Dr Pedram Shojai

Well, and we're trained especially in this podcast health, personal development universe where everyone just says stuff. Half these top podcasters have never seen a patient before in their lives, and so they're testing theories out there on mass media, and not anchored in real life.

I have the governor of real lives that come back and reflect back and tell me that worked or that didn't work. As do you. And so it's really easy to just spout theory. It's a whole other thing to say, well, how did that work in Betty's life who has three kids and a career, and, and and...?

The reality is you can't do it all at once. You know one of the examples I like, if you're an ambulance with a guy who's bleeding out, and you're racing to the hospital, and you see a guy on the side of the road with a flat tire. Are you the one that's supposed to stop and pull over and help them, or do you need to keep going to the hospital? Look, no one helps a guy with a flat tire anymore, right?

Alex Howard

No one helps women with a flat tire either these days.

Dr Pedram Shojai

That's it. No one even knows how to change a flat tire.

But we live in a world where we have to learn to triage decisions like that ambulance driver. And so on one side you become incredibly selfish and narcissistic and never help anybody. And on the other side, you're never handling your own needs in a way that moves your life forward in any meaningful way.

And that then becomes how many people out there are saying, oh, I just feel super unfulfilled, I feel unhappy, I'm depressed. Where does all this come from? I have these plans for me and my life, and then I have these audacious goals that I talk about, and then I have the reality of the life that I'm stuck in, which really isn't moving forward in a meaningful way.

The common denominator on all three of those lives is me. And so how am I looking at my life, and how can I look at it differently, so that I can make better decisions around time, energy, money, all the boundaries that need to be there, so that I could fill up my own cup and come from a place of fullness?

Alex Howard

One of your areas of speciality is your work as a Qigong master. There's the energetic drain that happens... and we're talking about those boundaries and time boundaries, but there's those energetic boundaries where we can be in certain dynamics and relationships, which it's not just the time that we give, but it's also the impact of that time afterwards. So maybe you can speak a little bit to how those toxic relationships can really impact our capacity to create life the way that we want it.

Dr Pedram Shojai

So we'll go back to Chinese Medical Anatomy 101. We have the Jing, which is our essence, our material essence that comes from our DNA, and what we fortunately or unfortunately inherited from our lineage. Our Qi, which is the energy. And then our Shen, which is the mind, or the spirit.

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And in Chinese medicine, and Qigong, and all the architecture of that system, the Qi will follow the Shen. And if there's enough Qi following the Shen, eventually the material reality coalesces and manifests around that. So your energy goes where your mind is pointed. And so if your energy is being drained, the question very simply becomes, what is your mind focused on? Because your focus is drawing your energy to an area that has diminishing value.

Now, if you're focused on work, and you need to focus on work, that's fine, that's a necessary expenditure. But how many times an hour have you checked your TikTok feed? Do you check the headlines because you're infatuated with the war? Do you check the headlines because you're infatuated with the politics? And so just look at where the attention gets splintered. And that is one of the major thoroughfares of energy that starts to diminish, and that's here.

Now, talk about interpersonal boundaries. I think everyone listening can relate to having toxic people, energy vampires, in their lives. There are parasitic individuals, the ones that are overtly parasitic. You're like, wow, that guy's toxic. He's out. Those are the easy ones to punt, right?

It's the one that breastfed you, it's the one that helped put you through college. It's the ones that have transactional relations with you that are a little bit more unclear, and not so overtly parasitic, that are harder to sift through in life. And for the most part, I've met people that I would deem as evil, but few and far between. Most of them are just really confused and unable to understand how to nourish themselves.

And so the architecture I've talked about in a couple of my books is, you have vertical feeders, and you have horizontal feeders. Vertical feeders have learned to drink through the energy of infinity by filling their own hearts, and emptying their minds, and nourishing themselves, and connecting with the earth and heaven, whatever you call that, and learn to fill their tanks from a non-local and infinite source of energy. Whatever you call that.

And however you do that, whether it's meditation or prayer, Qigong, whatever, there's a million ways to climb that mountain. But vertical feeders have learned that they are ultimately responsible for their own happiness, and tap into that grace. Then you have everyone else who are horizontal. You know, it's like, hey, Alex, I really need you to compliment on the beautiful haircut that I have because I need to feel good about myself.

Alex Howard

I was appreciating your hair today, Pedram, just to say (laughing)...

Dr Pedram Shojai

Very glossy.

It's like this tit-for-tat universe where we all take these cosmic straws and put them in the back of each other's necks, and are feeding off of each other. I need to call Betty because she listens to me rant, but then in exchange, I have to listen to her rant. So there's a horizontal transactional thing going on that's just churning and burning energy in a way that really isn't efficient. And so we have those tacit relationships and mixed boundaries with people.

But then we also have a common one. I got to put up with my mom's drama because she babysits my children, and there's no such thing as a free lunch, or free babysitter. And so people who put up. We have this with someone we know very closely, she's got to work, and mom watches a kid, and, is that mom toxic, but you're paying rent. And those type of energy parasite, energy transactional, bad boundaries relationship. Not only do they drain you of energy, they start to fill your mind with the, god, I should have said this, or I shouldn't have let her do that.

[00:22:23]

And so you're spending so much of your cerebral bandwidth just processing the dramas, and the traumas that come through those transactional deals, that it's no wonder you have no time to even consider going to the gym by the time you get home. It's no wonder that you go through a bag of potato chips before you realized that you told yourself you're not doing that.

And so it takes our conscious energy and drops us into an unconscious area of just not enough personal power to make good decisions for ourselves anymore. And of course, your question is going to be, so how the heck do we fix that?

Alex Howard

It is. Before we come to that, I just want to also pick up on that point, which is that what happens in those relationships, is that we get depleted, and then we get normalized, and then we get more depleted. And then the very resource that we need to get out is what's getting sucked by staying in? And so people often forget their true capacity, and their true personal power to create change, because of how they're getting sucked in those dynamics.

Dr Pedram Shojai

Yeah, and that's the problem, because you need a certain amount of vitality to run the show, for your muscles to move, your heart to beat, your brain to function. And every year, if you're living in that kind of transactional horizontal economy, you're taking a bar of energy out, and you get to the point where you're just robbing Peter to pay Paul, to get up and have your coffee and go to work, and your life becomes smaller and smaller and smaller.

And with that diminished output of energy, you no longer can make life-affirming decisions and look forward in life, because you're really falling down Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in a way, where again, you're in survival mode. And most people live there looking for... And this is the problem, and this is my problem with the health industry, the wellness industry, and all of it. Is then those people end up buying Hail Mary promise after Hail Mary promise, trying to get their way.

It's like a poker player who's been losing a bunch of hands. All the other players on the table are like, he's on tilt because he's going to start betting like an idiot to try to get his money back. And most people are playing on tilt, trying to make up for 20, 30 years of bad energy hygiene with some sort of miracle maca supplement, or some 'tap this' and all your drama trauma goes away.

And so all of the parasitic health and wellness hyperbole is very easy to market to those people, as is the, hey, man, we got this take this drug. So Western Medicine will just pimp you a drug, and then kind of the infantile magical thinking will give you some magical promise that yet again, doesn't deliver.

And so every year, you just keep diminishing in your glow and your ability to dig out of this mess. And the solution is vitalism to begin with, which is how do you bring up your vitality? It's like if you were in financial strain and had a lot of debt, what do you do? You cut up your credit cards, you stop spending in stupid areas, and you start figuring out ways to get money back in the system, so you could basically earn your way out of this mess.

Alex Howard

Well, that's intelligent thing to do. That's not what everyone does.

[00:26:00] - Dr Pedram Shojai

Yes. No, but what I'm going to do is I'm going to take all my money on credit cards and buy crypto because some guy said...

Alex Howard

I know someone did that recently.

Dr Pedram Shojai

Yeah, I know a bunch of people. I know a lot of people with high net worth who are like, oh, I lost millions of dollars on crypto. I'm like, how do you know anything about this stuff? And everyone just falls for a lot of this crap.

And so the answer is, how do I move my body? So movement, exercise, how do I start moving my body and generating energy through this bioelectric machine that needs more than just food to operate. I need to move my body, and build mitochondrial function through big muscles of my body. So that I can be bigger and consume calories in a way that then become energy for my brain not sitting on my waistline.

How do I change my diet so I don't take foods in that my body says, I don't like, so that I build inflammation and autoimmunity around the things that are supposed to give me energy. So you have diet, you have exercise.

How do I start sleeping better so that I recover and move into an economy where I have more energy the next day instead of less? And I'm not borrowing from tomorrow's energy through Red Bulls and crack to try to get by every day.

And then mindset, which is obviously why we're here. How do I fix my toxic relationships and my boundaries and get the toxic people at bay?

Look, it's easy for me to say, kick all the toxic people out of your life, they're at the office, they babysit your kids. There are a lot of areas there that we could get into that need better boundaries, because you can't just punt everyone in your life.

But how do I fix my energy economics, so that the parasites aren't drinking what's left of my vitality? So then I could start building this fire back up into this robust bonfire of a life, because right now, it's starting to choke under the weight of all of my obligations and lifestyle choices. And that to me, has been the only way I've seen people truly emerge and be healthy. None of this hyperbolic Hail Mary crap.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me that the one common denominator in all of our relationships is us. And so what often happens is that we have the same dynamics playing out in a bunch of different places, and then our narrative becomes, well, that's just how people are. And what I think we forget is that, well, that's how people are with us because that's the way we've set those relationships up.

I'm mindful we haven't got loads of time left, but maybe as a message of hope... What's empowering is, if we're the common denominator in all those relationships, if we change how we relate, then we can actually have an impact on that.

[00:28:59] - Dr Pedram Shojai

100%. We are the focal point of this holographic projection that's called the world all around us. And how we think, and how we exude our energy, and our mood, and our grace, versus stress, will absolutely reflect poorly upon us.

And look, you've all seen, I'm having a bad day. My kids were a jerk to my wife, and this conference call fell through, and I need to just stop over here and pick up something from the store. And I'm sitting here and I'm like, God, that lady is such a bitch right across from me.

And none of it has anything to do with the scowling, stressed out, time-constrained guy who didn't even realize he was in a store with other people. And was just moving through there, pushing a product in front of some checkout person who just needed a smile that day. And so that falls back on me, man. Like, wait, I'm the guy that showed up time constrained and not present, scowling, or maybe still on my phone, not treating this person like a human. And this person may have needed to be treated like a human this morning.

And so, who am I, and how did I show up, and how's the world reflecting back on me? Is a very good indicator of what my internal state is right now. And anyone could do this right now, sit down, close your eyes, breathe into your heart, and think of three things that you're so super grateful for. There's your children, the roof over your head, whatever, and fill your heart with gratitude, and thankfulness for the grace that has come to you. And then go back into your day and just see how your day unfolds differently.

And so how else can you manage your life? How else can you tighten up your boundaries to be stern, yet nice? My problem, and I find this with everyone, especially yoga people, who are all loving kindness, and want to seem like they're nice. You don't want to disappoint people, you don't want to look like a jerk. And so learning how to say no without being a jerk is a learning curve.

Yet it's the most important life-affirming decision you can make. So practice how to say no with a smile on your face, and say it kindly so that it doesn't reflect poorly on them.

I have a lot of different no's. Like, oh, my God, thank you, that is such a gracious offer, I simply just don't have time for that. But I really am honored that you invited me to this. That's one way to say no.

Or if it's a soft no, I can often, and I've learned how to do this say, you know what that is amazing, I really love that, I don't have time this year for that, but in the first quarter of next year, man, I would really like to revisit this. Can we book a call in the future? Because right now, I have room for six tomato plants, and they're already getting water, and I can't dig them up for something new.

And so there's a lot of ways to learn to say, yes but later, or hard no, but thank you. But don't have soft no's, because soft no's live in your head forever, soft no's keep them calling, soft no's are not no's.

Alex Howard

They also can be crazy making to other people as well. It's like there's a certain safety that's built when we're just straight with people, and we know we stand, and other people know where we stand. Sometimes it can be more challenging in the short term, but everyone ends up feeling better in the long term.

[00:32:45] - Dr Pedram Shojai

Super. And I think that because we live in this weird, squishy reality where nobody has really learned good boundaries energetically, temporarily, or any of it. They're all a bunch of children who don't have the right manners. And so when you see someone who has good time boundaries, at first, you're taken aback in some ways. And then I have so much respect for people who have solid boundaries because, you know, there's an adult in the room like, wow, that guy is really making good decisions for him and his family.

And over the years, I've realized that the ones with the better time boundaries are also the ones that happen to be spending more time on people's boards, and in charitable foundations, and donating more at their church, or their temple. And you're like, Holy crap, this person actually has space for more because they understand the aperture of how to deal with life events as they come.

And so to me, it all starts, it goes back to the prefrontal cortex, and the ability to jump in front of an impulse before you just say yes. And the best way to do that is to learn how to have a mindfulness practice, that trains the part of the brain that gives you a fighting chance to jump in before the impulse has already passed. You've already said, yes, it's already over.

Alex Howard

Yeah, there's so many places we can go, but I'm mindful of time. So, Pedram, for people that want to find out more about you and your work. And in fact, the next question I would have asked is, how do we develop those capacities? And maybe point some of the things in your ecosystem where can they go to find more, and some of what they can find.

Dr Pedram Shojai

Yeah. So everything I have is over at theurbanmonk.com. It'll point to everything. I have a program that I've brought back by popular demand called the *Seven Day Reboot*, which is a free seven day journey into all of it, where I have meditations and mindfulness practice and everything just in there.

Help yourself, right? And people who actually do it get better. It's very easy to say, I downloaded a meditation on my phone. It's very hard to say, I did this meditation every day for 30 days, and here are the results that I have.

So people have been trained to have things done to them, people have been trained to think that if I consume this product, or buy this pill, everything's going to change. And what they're missing is the very thing you and I have been talking about this entire talk, is the nexus of control starts with you, your personal decisions, and the agency to curate your life in a way that allows for you to leave room for your plants to grow.

You have to be the gatekeeper, that's what boundaries are. You don't have to be a jerk about it, but if you don't have a place where you can kind of keep things outside the walls, your life is going to look just as chaotic tomorrow than it did last week.

Alex Howard

That's a great place to end Pedram, thank you so much, I appreciate you and your time.

Dr Pedram Shojai

Great to be here. Thank you.