

# Let's talk boundaries: When all work and no play leads to burn-out

 By [Anja van Beek](#)

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Have you ever calculated how many of *your* 24hrs you are in "work-mode" - whether thinking, doing, or responding to a quick mail at a family braai?

I love this quote: "Balance is not better **time** management, but better **boundary** management."



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I have noticed that many people, at one point or another, struggle to find time to cope with the demands of modern-day life, especially as we are surrounded by technology. The "always-on" mode was heightened during this pandemic now that most have settled into remote working routines.

We are all 'expected' to strike a reasonable balance between the needs of our personal lives and professional careers. But in reality, it is a very tough task. And we are now dealing with a new reality: Zoom fatigue is very real.

A [study done by OECD](#) before the pandemic revealed that:

- 1 in every 8 employees works 50 hours or more per week.
- Turkey is by far the country with the highest proportion of people working very long hours, with 34%, followed by Mexico with nearly 30%.
- In South Africa, almost 19% of employees work very long hours, more than the OECD average of 13%. This is quite alarming!

## The work-life challenge should be a key focus area for all managers

The reality is that leaders also need to fill their own cup. Many of my clients say they feel overwhelmed by what we need to do and achieve in a day. They also say, "There is just not enough time in one day," (sound familiar?) and sometimes they even feel run-down, frustrated or anxious.

## This all boils down to boundaries

If you are a go-getter and crave to feel less overwhelmed, consider one of these 5 suggestions, especially in a remote

world, where it is very easy to “quickly reply to that one mail”:

## 1. Learn to say no without feeling guilty

‘No’ is also an answer. The truth is: if you say no, you are in fact just taking control of your life and prioritising what is more important to you at that current time. Warren Buffet says:

“ *The difference between successful people and very successful people is that very successful people say ‘no’ to almost everything.* ”

We can't all be "yes-people" - imagine what the world would look like? When saying no, don't beat around the bush or offer a weak excuse; just say it. [In a study done by Prof Hagtveld](#) he suggests one uses the words “I don’t” rather than “I can’t”. The latter might sound like an excuse whilst “I don’t” implies you have established certain boundaries for yourself.

## 2. If you take on new things, consider what you’re going to park for a season?

All we have is time. The way you spend your time determines the quality of your life. I’m a strong believer in having a growth mindset and being a life-long learner; we all should find time to pursue goals and interests outside our family and work life. Having said that, I’m mindful that we sometimes take on too much and set ourselves up for failure. If you take on a new hobby, venture or enrol for a course, consider choosing something that you are currently doing that you can “park” for a season.

## 3. Important vs urgent - make time to reflect

Daily reflection can be an effective way of creating mind space as it allows one the opportunity to gain perspective on situations we find challenging. Many successful people make it a daily habit of taking time to reflect.

By reflecting, we can consider what didn’t work, acknowledge what went wrong and choose a different way to prevent it from happening again. An easy way to start reflecting is to do a one-sentence journal every day; also list and incorporate something that you are grateful for. If you need some inspiration, [Sentence Starters.pdf Ulysses.org](#) provides a few good sentence starters.

## 4. Choose a support system you can trust

Most working women feel trapped. They feel they need to take control of every single aspect in their lives – personal and professional... and that is exhausting! We need to remember that we don’t have to do everything ourselves.

As we successfully delegate certain tasks at work; similarly, we need to delegate duties in our personal lives as well.

Yes, the #TheJugglesReal, I have been there...trying to do everything myself. Being a supermom at home and being an ambitious colleague at work. I felt drained most of the time.

## How do you get out of this rut?

- Get a support system in place that you can rely on. It could be arranging a lift-club at school, assigning a tutor or au pair to help the kids with homework or choosing to do your grocery shopping online.
- Discuss sharing chores with your partner; many modern partners are more open to taking on non-traditional tasks e.g. cooking dinner, doing the washing or putting the kids to bed.
- The best advice that I have received as a working mother was: "Be present in the moment". This simply means choosing to focus on what you're doing and not allowing your mind to wander to other urgent matters. I often found that when I'm busy helping the kids with homework my mind is already busy with the presentation for the next morning. I then need to refocus and choose to concentrate on the important and not the urgent.
- You don't have to be superwoman; decide what is important to you and stick with that.

## 5. Consider your full stop

A common theme that has developed during the isolation period is the importance of self-care. For years, we have tried to 'find' work-life balance and work-life integration. During the past couple of months, we had to learn how to set clear boundaries to survive the blending work and life spaces. A reminder that you are not working from home – you are working *while being at* home – and this is different.

This has forced us to learn to prioritise a full stop to our day... indicating that it is time to close the laptop and start the "being home" part of your day. To successfully work from home in the future, you owe this to yourself. The always-on-mode just isn't sustainable and 'lockdown burnout' is real, as many people are working harder than what they would have in the office.

Our bodies need to recover; recovery is a critical part for you to maintain resilience and being a high performing employee. Simply taking a break is not good enough. Your brain needs 6 – 8 hours of sleep to function optimally, but stopping does not equal recovering. Rest and recovery are not the same thing.

## Final words

A reminder that when you receive an unreasonable request from a colleague or your manager, don't beat around the bush or offer a weak excuse. Just say no.

If there is a pattern, you need to have a conversation with your manager to agree and work towards a mutual understanding. For some, this will be a massive adjustment, but a necessary one.

## ABOUT ANJA VAN BEEK

Anja van Beek is an independent leadership consultant, talent strategist and coach.  
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