

Growing your shiny spine

Boundaries are not the stuff of “snowflakes”; they are crucial for good mental and emotional health. Rebecca Douglas shares how you can rediscover the power of no and grow the backbone you need for what comes next.

Words Rebecca Douglas

From a young age, I was taught everyone else’s needs came before mine. My mother was very emotionally fragile, and as an only child in a single-parent household, I assumed responsibility for tasks such as replacing appliances that broke down with my own money, and dealing with government agencies on her behalf when she couldn’t cope. This left me anxious, frustrated, lacking in self-esteem, and only willing to take a stand in defence of other people and not myself.

Healing this fraught relationship with myself has meant letting go of unreasonable expectations and learning to ask for what I want and to say no when it’s necessary. It sounds simple, but speaking up and setting boundaries is tricky to execute when you feel like you’re not enough. Perhaps you feel taken advantage of but worry about losing friends if you’re frank about your feelings, or you’re not getting what you need from a relationship, but fear the judgement of others if you were to communicate your needs.

Calmly but firmly voicing what you need is a vital skill to building and keeping healthy relationships, says psychiatrist Dr Frank Chow. “In every relationship, whether it’s with your partner, parents, friends, children or colleagues, there’s always compromise and give and take,” he says. “Communicating boundaries to others in a mature and respectable manner, without judgement or being emotionally charged, is vital to the future of your relationship.”

The key is balance. On the one hand, we might be tempted to give too much of ourselves, but on the other, we can set boundaries that are too harsh and fall into controlling others, rather than co-existing with them. It’s worth setting your expectations early in a new relationship and reaching an agreement of sorts to

give yourself the best chance of smoother sailing down the line.

In existing relationships, it takes conscious effort to reset what’s not working for you when expectations and patterns have become worn. It’s certainly possible to reorient yourself and others, though, I’ve found.

Gradually, I’ve acquired the ability to maintain my boundaries when people try to stomp on them. I can now say “no” politely but firmly, even in the face of challenging people who fray every nerve you have. I’ve also been mindful of my tendency to leave my wants and needs unspoken, noticing when this happens and giving voice to them more often, particularly when the setting is friendly and the stakes are low.

Instead of phrasing my preferences as a question, I have practised gently articulating what I want. After a tough day, for example, I might be desperate to order a pizza and collapse on the couch in the evening. Previously, I would pose this as an open question to my husband: “What would you like for dinner?” and he might respond with “I’d love you to cook your spaghetti.” Miffed that he hadn’t magically read my mind, I might then suggest what I really wanted and he’d get huffy that I hadn’t listened to him. Things now go much more smoothly when I simply state “How about we order pizza for dinner?” from the get-go.

Other tricks I’ve discovered along the way include a collection of confidence-boosting mantras I have saved on my phone, remembering that walking away from a frustrating conversation is a valid option, instead of getting angry or backing down, and regular reminders that it’s not my responsibility to solve every problem in the universe.

“We all have areas of our lives where our boundaries are strong and clear and others where they’re weaker, usually where we feel



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Phrases to keep in your pocket

Dr Lillian Nejad recommends practising some of these phrases for exerting space around yourself and expressing your needs.

- ✔ "I know you thought you were doing the right thing, but what I'd like you to do in the future is..."
- ✔ When I expressed my opinion and you made fun of me, I felt disrespected. I know we disagree about this issue, but it's important to me that we can agree to disagree in a respectful way."
- ✔ When I feel sad, I need some time to myself first and then I'll come to you when I'm ready to talk."
- ✔ "These are my expectations — I'd love to hear what you think. What are your expectations?"
- ✔ "I really struggle to say what I want and need, but I am going to give it a go now. I hope you can help me by listening and trying to understand why this is important to me."
- ✔ "Can we talk about what we both need to make our relationship stronger?"

we have more to lose," says coach, speaker, teacher and founder of Better Boundaries, Claire Nettley. Claire says there are six categories of boundaries in our lives — physical (such as rest and personal space), intellectual (your thoughts and opinions), emotional, sexual (including consent and preferences), spiritual and material (time, money and energy).

You are allowed to have needs in these various realms, and protect yourself from unwanted encroachment from others, particularly in the areas most important to you. "Boundaries are guidelines, standards and limits for our own behaviour and what we will and won't tolerate in all our relationships," says Claire. "They empower us to live authentically, pursue a life that has meaning to us and limit our exposure to people, places and things that don't serve us or our wellbeing."

Not only is this not selfish, sometimes it can be a matter of safeguarding our physical safety and sanity. Consistency is often key in setting boundaries, particularly with difficult individuals. If you let rules slide once, they'll often expect the same next time round. "If you set consequences, make sure you enforce them," says Claire. "For example, 'If you continue to talk over the top of me, I'm ending this conversation' and then doing it. One of the biggest mistakes people make with boundaries is hoping the other person will change, but when we bring our focus in-house and change our own behaviour, miraculous things happen."

Also be mindful of the urge to over-explain and justify your boundary when others are

testing it. The more information you offer someone, the more chance they have to argue their way around your reasons. Don't give them that option. Stay clear, concise, polite, firm and consistent for best results.

In a work setting, navigating boundary-setting can feel tricky when we're encouraged to have a "can-do" attitude, not to mention the increasingly blurred lines between our jobs and personal lives in this new work-from-home era. Marking out a dedicated clutter-free workspace at home, maintaining a routine, and using technological tools to keep you from checking your email out-of-hours can work wonders.

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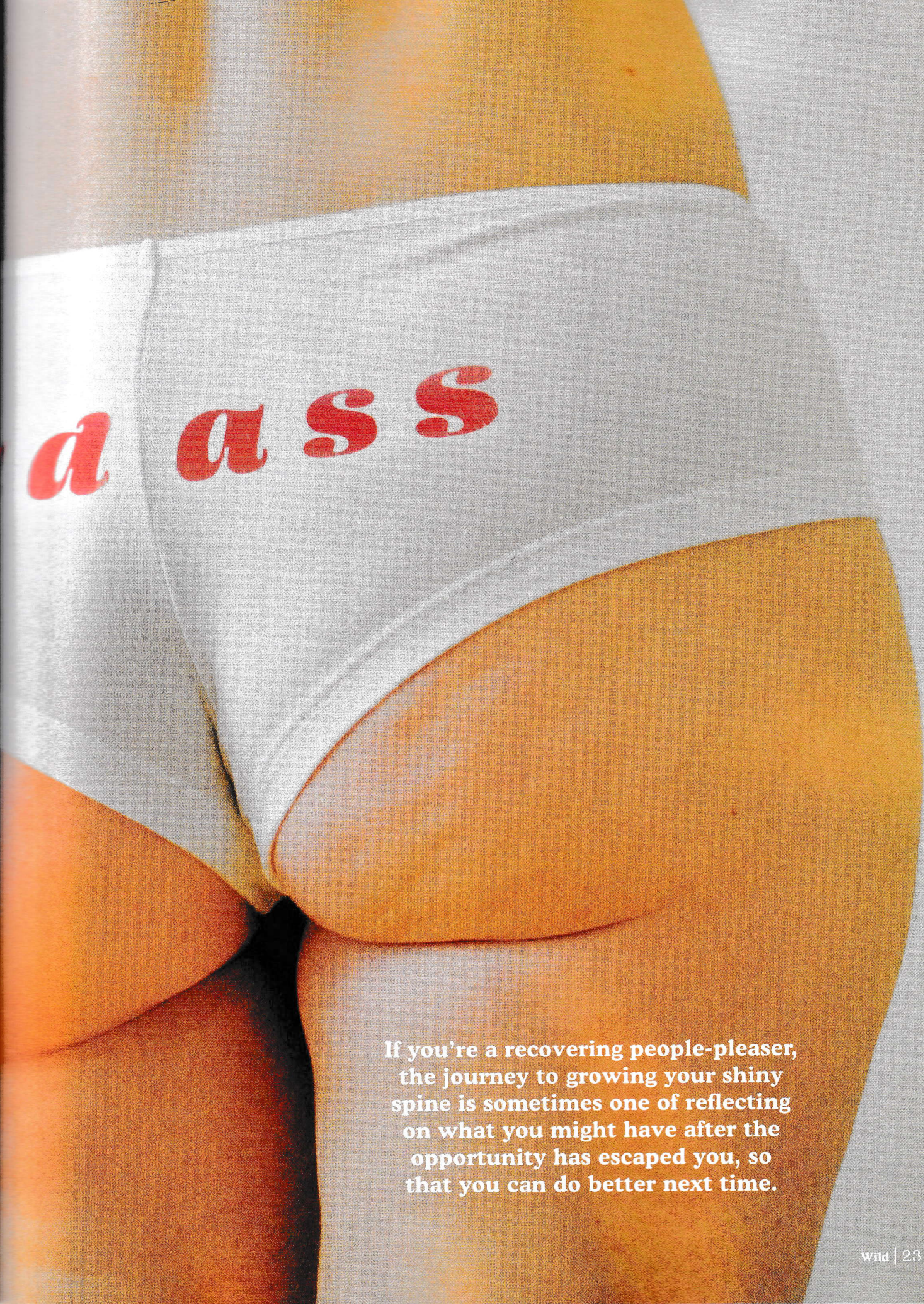
"Women have historically been socialised to be accommodating and helpful, praised when they are pleasing others and criticised or punished for asserting their needs and wants," says Dr Lillian. "This has led to the belief that saying no, setting boundaries or asserting yourself is wrong or selfish."

The research backs up claims that women are typecast in the role of people-pleasing. A 2010 study on unhealthy lifestyle habits found 54 per cent of female participants struggled with this type of behaviour compared with 40 per cent of the male participants, with accompanying consequences for their physical and mental health.

If you're a recovering people-pleaser, the journey to growing your shiny spine is sometimes one of reflecting on what you might have said after the opportunity has escaped you so that you can do better next time. Claire encourages clients to journal when they notice their boundaries being violated, how it feels, and what they could have said in the moment, but didn't. This way, if they encounter a similar situation in the future, they're ready. Knowing yourself, your past mishaps, and the reasons for your boundaries allows you to improve future outcomes.

"If you are struggling to set boundaries, reflect on why to gain awareness about your behaviour," says Dr Lillian. "Is it to avoid conflict or keep yourself safe? Do you fear being disliked or abandoned, or are you having trouble because you never learned how to have this kind of conversation? Once you know what's behind it, you can do something about it."

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