

THE JOY OF BEING SELFISH

*Why you need boundaries and
how to set them!*

MICHELLE
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WELBECK

*For every woman who has been treated badly and wondered
whether you deserved it – you don't.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of the names and identifying details in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the people in the examples used. All stories involving clients have been included with their permission.

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Acknowledgements

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Selfish (adj.): Seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure or well-being without regard for others

Self-love is a concept everyone can get on board with – as long as you have done what you need to do for everyone else first. The problem is, once you've done that, there is usually no time or energy left for yourself. Often, we are so quick to take care of others, but it is important to recognize that there is a cost to this: you. It's coming at the expense of your own self-care. Here is where boundaries become important. Boundaries are the practical side of self-love. It's the part that no one wants to talk about because it flies in the face of the narrative that in order to be a good person, you need to put others' needs before your own, and if you do put your needs first and foremost, you are considered selfish. Self-love means saying, "I'm going to love myself and not make it anyone else's job." Setting boundaries means saying, "I'm going to get my needs met and I'm not going to expect others to do it for me." If that's selfish, then I'm selfish.

Controversial or not, I believe in order to have self-love, it is necessary to be selfish. It requires you to reorder your priorities to ensure you come at the top of that list. The word "selfish" holds a stigma in modern society because it is associated with the idea that you have a disregard for other humans. But when you regard others more highly than yourself, the unfortunate consequence is often that you are completely forgotten. I think one of the most loving things you can do for the people around you is to take care of yourself. When you don't, the people in your life often feel a responsibility to do that duty for you.

Conversely, selfless people in our society are often praised – but those who act like they are selfless are hiding behind the fact that they are too scared to ask for what they want. Take the example of the person who is so "selfless" that when you ask them where they want to eat, they don't know. It's your choice and they don't mind, no matter how many times you ask them. It might seem kind of them, but when you are put in this position

often enough, it becomes exhausting because you end up having to read their mind. Do they truly not care, or are they just not vocalizing what they truly feel? Many of these people don't know what they want because they either have never been asked, or were so often ignored when they did ask that they stopped asking. Either way, "selflessness" is not about being "good", it's about being liked. It is deriving self-esteem from your usefulness to – and approval by – others, and holding that above your own needs.

The ironic thing is that most people who pride themselves on "selflessness" are not being selfless for others, but actually for themselves. They do everything for others to fill a void in themselves that they are unwilling to confront. They make sacrifices that no one asked them to make, which results in pent-up resentment because no one is taking care of them and their needs. The problem with the "selfless" person is two-fold. There is an assumed uselessness in the party they are helping because when you do things for a person that they should be doing for themselves, inherent in that is the belief that they are not capable enough to manage without you. Then, because that "selfless" person is so involved in your life, they are unable to boundary their opinion because they feel like they have a right to have an opinion on areas in your life that are none of their business. "Mind your own business" is a phrase that is used a lot in these situations but if the selfless person focused more on their own business, they would realize their selflessness is a result of insecurity, and it creates more problems than it fixes. In fact, I believe if we all were "minding our own business" more and being more selfish, there would be fewer judgements and unsolicited opinions; you'd spend time focusing on the resolution of your own problems rather than projecting onto the people around you.

For women in particular, the first step is to believe that you deserve the right to set boundaries in the first place. Women are taught to be martyrs: to empty ourselves out in the service of others, forgetting about our own dreams, ambitions and desires and instead using our time and energy to fuel the people around us. How many gifts has the world been deprived of because that woman does not have the time or energy to fulfil her own dreams? How many important ideas were shelved because pursuing those dreams would have been "selfish"? Societally, women are taught to give, give, give – but when is it our turn to take? What if we flipped it around? Instead of giving so much to others, we could give to ourselves so that we don't need to take so much. We can demonize the people who take, or we can own our stuff and recognize that the problem is not that they take, but that we are unable to say no.

Since this message of needing to be “selfless” and look after others is drilled into women from such a young age, the majority of women get their self-esteem directly from how much they can give to others and be available to every-one’s requests. Their value is derived from their usefulness to others and their worth is based on being seen as a good person. Your behaviour cannot define your goodness, because if it does, you are giving others the power to determine what is “good enough”. When you stop striving to be seen as a good wife, friend, employee, mother or daughter, it gives you permission to realize that you are a good person not because of what you can give or provide, but because of who you are. Part of boundary setting is realizing your worth is intrinsic. We need to let go of the societal messages we have received about what we need to do to be good to others, and instead start redefining how we need to be good to ourselves.

Learning how to set boundaries might be hard, but living without boundaries is harder – and I would know. I used to be the perfect example of someone living without boundaries. At 18, I had no clue where I ended and someone else began. If you had asked me then what I wanted, I couldn’t have told you, and if you asked me to communicate how I actually felt in a situation, I would have been terrified. I was surrounded by co-dependent relationships; my friends would joke that I would answer the phone after one ring. Being a “good friend” was my number-one priority, almost always to the detriment of myself. While that sounds admirable, it was not healthy. My best friend and I, at the time, were so co-dependent that if I turned up to the university bar without her, people would ask me where she was. If a friend wanted to go out and no one would go with them, they always knew I was the one to go to because if they nagged me enough, I would cave. Even if I didn’t want to go. Even if I had a deadline the next day. Long story short, I was a pushover.

In terms of my romantic relationships, I would bend over backwards for the person I was dating, and the worst part was that they knew it. One evening, I took an hour to reply to one of my boyfriend’s texts and he joked that it was unusual because I was “usually at his beck and call”. When I would ask my friends why all my romantic relationships went so wrong, I would hear the same thing: “You are too nice.” In hindsight, “too nice” was code for “You have no boundaries.” I would rather be liked than say how I actually felt. I would stay silent if someone upset me, and explain away shitty behaviour as “not a big deal”. I would release the resentment from those boundary violations with passive-aggressive comments, and worst of all, I would keep people in my life who had no respect for me. I was so shocked

anyone would want to spend time with me that I didn't think I had a right or a choice to end a relationship or friendship.

It would take me many more years of learning the hard way to finally be ready to face the fact that my lack of boundaries was not only causing unnecessary drama in my life, but also stress, anxiety, guilt and resentment. In short, boundaries revolutionized my life. It is the single greatest tool I have learnt in all my coaching, and has personally changed my life in a way that renders my previous life unrecognizable.

My introduction to boundaries, and everything I have learnt since, came in the form of a person called Michelle Zelli. She was, and still is, my life coach, and is completely responsible for the very boundaried person now writing this book. We met back in 2015 after I became convinced I needed "business coaching". I was a year into being a life coach, and was unsure which direction to go with my business, and whether I should specialize in a certain area. In our first session, she informed me that I did not need business coaching, I needed life coaching. Throughout our first year working together, I left each session aware of more problems in my life than I thought I had. It was an eye-opening experience. Not only was Michelle showing me all the blind spots in my life, but she was the first woman I had met that so fiercely knew what she wanted and was unafraid to say it. I didn't know how to get that, but I knew I wanted it. Six months into working together, it felt like I had received an endless fountain of information that I couldn't absorb quick enough. I entered 2016 with a greater awareness of my needs and redefined "selfish" as a positive thing. For the first time in my life, I prioritized myself. I finally took notice of the people who put me down or insulted me, and most importantly, I learnt about the power of boundaries. 2017 was going to be the year I put it into action.

Enter my "Year of No". For the whole of 2017, I decided that I was going to live my life according to one simple rule: I was going to say no to anything I didn't want to do and I wasn't going to justify it. At the time, I was in my early twenties and was at a stage where my friendship groups had started fragmenting. Gone were the days of house parties and catching up with everyone in one night. Instead, one-on-one post-work dinners were squeezed into my schedule on the rare evenings I was not working late. I found myself on a never-ending hamster wheel where I never had time for myself. Now that my co-dependency had been dramatically reduced, I started noticing that for the first time in my life, I craved alone time. Without the group dynamic and the convenience of being across the corridor from each other, it started occurring to me that we didn't actually have much in

common anymore. I realized that in order to have any alone time at all, I needed to learn how to say no.

The first instance of me saying “no” came late on the evening of 6 January 2017. Somehow I had escaped the first six days of the year without encountering anything that I didn’t want to do. A friend called just as I was finishing up work. It had been a long day of tiny frustrating things building up, and he was calling to see if I wanted to go to a pub quiz halfway across London that started in two hours. Without even thinking I said, “Yes, send me the address” and hung up. Crap. The moment I hung up, I knew I had flubbed my resolution already. Yes, I love a pub quiz. Yes, it was a Friday night – but I’m old and 9 p.m. is late and Shoreditch is far. I was *really* looking forward to turning my phone off, watching *Grey’s Anatomy* alone and getting an early night. So I called him back.

“I’m not coming anymore.”

“Why?” he asked, as I recalled the second part of my resolution to not justify why.

“Just because . . .”

“Because why?”

“Because I said so.”

“OK, you are acting weird.”

“OK. Have a nice evening! Bye!”

Can you imagine if one of your closest friends did this? It was awkward. It was weird. It was clumsy. But that’s usually how it goes when you set your first boundary. What I have since learned about boundaries is while you never have to give a reason to say no, you most definitely do have to give a reason if you are cancelling. The best thing is, the more you get used to saying no, the less you have to cancel.

The good news is that we aren’t learning boundaries for the first time, we are actually relearning them. Most children know where their boundaries stand. A baby communicates boundaries by screaming. Put them in the arms of a stranger and you will see a baby communicate when their physical boundaries are being crossed. With toddlers, as soon as they learn the word “no”, they will use it liberally. Take his toy and my one-year-old nephew will yell “no” until I give it back. They might not have the full vocabulary to engage in a conversation, but they make that boundary clear.

At some point, we are taught by other people that our needs aren’t as important as others. This could be a parent continuing to tickle you even though you have told them to stop, or being told to stop crying because it’s impolite. My earliest memory of having my boundaries crossed was when I

was around 10 and my family and I went to Santa Barbara to stay with a family friend for two weeks. The first night we arrived, he cooked this incredible meal for all of us and when it was time for dessert, he brought out this gorgeous berry tart. The only problem is I hate fruit. Yes, all fruit. Fruit triggers my gag reflex in quite an extreme way, so when he went inside to get a knife, I told my mum that I couldn't eat it. In my mind I debated, what's worse, telling him that I don't like fruit or potentially throwing up after a mouthful? My mum responded, "Just have a bite. He has spent all day making it, it's rude if you don't eat it." This is a comment that probably all mums make at some point. But what actually lies underneath this is the message that in order to be polite, I needed to disregard my own needs.

In fact, if we actually look at the situation, how would it be rude to tell him that I didn't like fruit? He couldn't have known and it's not that I am taking personal offence at his berry tart specifically. There would have been three other people around the table who would have enjoyed it and it would not have gone to waste. Intentional or not, I was being taught that my discomfort was unimportant and that the potential of upsetting another outweighed my own feelings.

Another reason why boundaries become harder to set as we grow older is due to our evolving Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind is a term used by psychologists to describe the skill of having awareness of your thoughts and the ability to think about both your beliefs and someone else's. When we are born, we are naturally very egocentric. As we develop, we realize that not only do we think, but others have thoughts too, and that some of those thoughts are about us. Suddenly it becomes more complicated to prioritize ourselves. A large portion of this is due to our need to be liked. Since we have a greater perception of what the other person is thinking, believing and assuming about us, the decisions that adults make and the behaviour that follows is much more guided by other people. But when we exchange being liked for lowering our boundaries, the unexpected result is not only a lack of respect but a rise in our own negative emotions from anger to resentment. People who accept that being disliked is a part of life are more willing to prioritize themselves and that is why boundaries are a crucial part of self-love.

The most common response I get when I teach boundaries is that this process is "easier said than done" and yes, I agree with you. Everything is easier said than done. If boundaries were easy, everyone would be setting them and there would be no need for this book. This phrase also comes from a victim mentality of believing that every other person in the world who is setting boundaries has always found it easy, and that you are the only person

in the world who finds this difficult – but you are wrong. The reason this book exists is because people struggle to establish boundaries. Even though they are now a normal part of my life, they were once hard for me too. There is no promise in this book that any part of this will be easy, but it is simple: do you want to keep living your life the way you are or are you ready for something better? If you aren't, put the book down now and come back to it when you are ready. Some people need to reach their breaking point in order to be motivated to change. When you are ready, this book will be there for you, but if you are going to spend the rest of this book saying, "easier said than done", then you are wasting your time. Boundaries are really scary to set when you aren't used to them, but over time they become your norm. My hope is that by the end of this book, these changes will become a part of your daily life.

What Is a Boundary?

At their very core, boundaries are the way we teach others to treat us. They are how we communicate what is acceptable and what is not. They define where you end and another person begins. We need boundaries in order to protect ourselves from manipulation, gaslighting, disrespect and abuse.

Boundaries between you and others are like a house. Inside the house is your life, and the four walls that create the house are your protection from the outside world. You aren't completely closed off because you can open the door to let people in, but you only open that door when it is your choice. If someone were to kick the door down, that would feel like a violation – you wouldn't then tell them, "Oh well, since you are here, make yourself at home." That's the same as someone violating your boundary and you saying, "Well, since you are going to do what you want anyway, who am I to say anything about it?" If someone climbed through your window, you wouldn't let them in because that window was closed for a reason. If I didn't want to do something, my friends knew that if they pestered the old me long enough, I would give in. That's the same as someone knocking on your door all day and then you eventually letting them in simply so they stop annoying you. You would never do that!

Your home, like your life, is your space. You get to decide who comes in and who has to leave at any moment. If someone walked into your house and took a delicate vase and threw it on the ground, you would kick them out. Now imagine that the vase is a private, vulnerable piece of information. How many times have you shared something confidential and it wasn't treated

with the care it should have been? It is your house, and you get to decide what behaviour you tolerate inside it. Some people would allow others to wear shoes inside the house, while others don't like it. There are no right or wrong rules, but which are *your* rules? It's your house, they are your boundaries, and you decide.

Pia Mellody, a respected educator in the field of relationships, has previously described boundaries as "invisible and symbolic fences". She describes their purpose as three-fold:

- 1) To keep people from coming into our space and abusing us
- 2) To keep us from going into the space of others and abusing them
- 3) To give each of us a way to embody our sense of who we are

All three of these, and the third one in particular, allow us to form an identity that we have chosen that empowers us. This affects all areas of our life. You can have strong boundaries in one area of your life and weak boundaries in another. Identify the areas where you have the strongest boundaries and then use that as proof to yourself that you, just like everyone else, have successfully set boundaries before and have the ability to transfer those skills to other areas of your life.

Throughout this book, I give examples of how I have set boundaries and the language I used when doing so. Instead of telling you what your boundaries should be, I have found that the best way to teach this process is to share concrete examples from my own life. It is important to remember that these are my boundaries. Yours will not be the same as mine, in the same way your needs will not be the same as mine. The way you communicate may be different to the way I do, but these examples are to be used as an option and a starting point on how to phrase your own boundaries.

Throughout my time teaching boundaries, I am frequently asked, "Is my boundary unreasonable?", "Am I asking for too much?", "Is my boundary too needy?", all of them generally boiling down to "Am I allowed to set this boundary?" Personally, you are never going to hear me say that a boundary is too much or that you are unreasonable, demanding, high maintenance or selfish (in a negative way!) for asking for what you need. Not only because I think these are words that are largely only used against women who have needs, but also because I think it serves no purpose. Dismissing someone's needs does not stop that need from existing and at the end of the day, your

boundaries are none of my business. Your needs are just that – yours. Your boundaries are just that – yours. The whole world can think you are overreacting and I will still believe you are allowed your feelings, your reactions and your boundaries. The other party might believe that your boundary is unreasonable, and they are allowed to think that and yet, it doesn't mean it actually is unreasonable. Instead of trying to determine if you are asking for too much, question if you are asking the right person. The right person respects your boundaries and will never make you feel like they are too much.

Do You Need More Boundaries in Your Life?

Here is a list of warning signs that you might need more boundaries. The more statements that are true, the more you struggle with boundaries – and all the more reason you need them in your life.

I find it hard to voice my opinions when I disagree with someone	True/False
People regularly talk about me behind my back	True/False
I struggle to say “no”	True/False
If someone is in a bad mood around me, my mood is affected	True/False
I find it difficult to end phone calls	True/False
I feel guilty when I ask for what I need	True/False
I have been described as passive-aggressive	True/False
I worry that if I don't agree with someone, their feelings will be hurt	True/False
I would rather everyone else be happy even if I am unhappy	True/False
If someone hurts my feelings, I will try to forget about it	True/False
My life is often full of drama	True/False
I replay conversations in my head after they have happened	True/False
When people fight around me, I feel like I have to fix it	True/False
I find it difficult to express anger and would rather stay silent	True/False
I work longer hours than the rest of my colleagues	True/False
I am the peacemaker in my family	True/False
I give more in my friendships than I get in return	True/False
I overshare when I feel uncomfortable or in new relationships	True/False
I value other people's opinions more than my own	True/False
I often feel resentment and I do not know how to express that	True/False
I am uncomfortable when the conversation is about me	True/False
I agree to things I don't want to do to keep the peace	True/False
I feel guilty when expressing my opinions	True/False
If another person has an incorrect opinion of me, I want to change it	True/False
When I tell people information in confidence, it is rarely kept private	True/False
I feel responsible for other people's happiness	True/False
I have relationships in my life that I would label as “toxic”	True/False

I am scared to be honest, in case it turns into an argument	True/False
People have described me as a “pushover” or “too nice”	True/False
I cannot trust the people in my life to be there for me	True/False
Other people in my life need me to be the strong, reliable one	True/False

Boundaries are essential for self-esteem, confidence and personal power. When you demand respect, your self-respect also flourishes. When you become more conscious of your needs and wants, your general self-awareness also increases. Boundaries grow your sense of self and allow you to build a strong identity. People with boundaries know what they want and who they are because the line between who they are and who the world wants them to be is clear.

We have become used to the idea that other people, namely our romantic partner, have a responsibility to look after us. Yet the idea that you should look after yourself seems bizarre to most people. Your self-care is your responsibility, and your responsibility only. Take care of yourself and you remove that job off other people’s lists. In fact, write a list of all the things you expect your partner to do for you, whether it’s keep you happy, make you feel beautiful or bring more excitement into your life, and ask yourself if you are fulfilling those requirements yourself. More likely than not, you aren’t, and that’s why you are looking for that in another person. Let’s normalize fulfilling our own requirements. By doing so, our relationships will be healthier because we will be more self-sufficient.

There is a Jewish saying, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14). It is your responsibility to live your life for yourself. If you don’t, who will? Think about the son who is going to medical school to make his parents happy and continue the family legacy of becoming doctors. Is that his goal or his parents’? Once he has achieved the goal of satisfying his parents, will the fulfilment from the job he never chose continue to satisfy him? And once his parents are gone, will he end up living with regrets? The problem is that most people let their lives be dictated by the expectations of others and rarely take the time to figure out what they want from their life, let alone how to achieve that.

If you remove the idea that being selfish means having a disregard for others, is there really a downside to selfishness? If you think of the most selfish person you know, you might recall times in your life when they’ve refused to do things that you want to do. It’s annoying, but that annoyance is on you, not on them. Alternatively, you might be picturing a person who demands a lot of you, but is that person being selfish or are you not good at

turning down their requests? A boundaried person would have no problem saying no, no matter how many times they are asked to do something they don't want to do. Are you picturing a person who is never there for you? Someone with healthy self-esteem would also not invest in a relationship where the effort wasn't reciprocated.

Another association with the word "selfish" is that a selfish person thinks the whole world revolves around them – but actually, that's just an insecure person. An insecure person assumes your silence is because you are annoyed at them, or interrupts a conversation to only talk about themselves. If we reframe the word "selfish" and realize that you have power in the way you respond to others, there are actually no downsides to prioritizing yourself. If the word "selfish" is one that makes you uncomfortable, or the concept of self-care makes you roll your eyes, then consider this book a guide on how to look after yourself.

The most challenging part of setting boundaries is that we often don't feel we deserve to set them. We don't believe our needs deserve to be met. Particularly if we have grown up where there was an absence of love, we spend our entire adulthoods chasing the attention we never got and will do anything and everything to attain that attention, no matter how much we have to ignore our own needs and desires. I see this a lot when I ask people to do homework after a coaching session; even if I say that it will only take five minutes, they will tell me that they don't have five minutes. Actually, you do, you've just decided you are not worth those five minutes. You have allocated them to someone else and deemed them more worthy of your time than yourself. Be more selfish.

Ultimately, we have to get you to start caring about yourself, first and foremost. I remember how scary that was for me initially. That first time I said no to going to that pub quiz, my mind jumped to the fact that my friend would be angry with me and then I asked myself if he would stop inviting me to everything. Because that's what the mind does, it exaggerates in order to scare you so that you stay safely in your comfort zone. But all those thoughts were about my friend – and if I was going to break this pattern, I needed to start thinking a little more about me. How did I *actually* feel? In a word, relieved. I was tired. I had worked all day and the last thing I wanted to do was leave the house. I had done what I wanted that evening and aside from the niggling thoughts of self-doubt, that made me happy.

To build up your self-esteem, it is time to learn what you have the right to ask for. It is important to know how you deserve to be treated and what you

will accept so that you refuse to settle. This is the beginning of a list that you might want to complete yourself:

I have the right to:

- Be spoken to with respect
- Prioritize my needs and interests
- Have my feelings
- Communicate my thoughts
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-

Myths Around Boundaries

There are a lot of misunderstandings around boundaries and we must clear these up from the outset.

Boundaries are mean

Boundaries in themselves are not mean. However, you might be communicating them in a way that could be perceived as mean. In which case, the problem is not the boundary but that you do not have the vocabulary to set boundaries in a kind way. If boundaries are set correctly, they are often laid down out of love and respect for the relationship and a desire to keep it healthy and sustainable. There is a certain level of

vulnerability that is required to communicate these needs. Now that I have a broad understanding of boundaries, I am actually grateful when someone tells me directly that I have crossed their boundaries rather than sitting in resentment and releasing it in passive-aggressive comments.

Boundaries are walls

The person with no boundaries is interchangeable with the person who has walls up. They are two sides of the same coin. As Pia Mellody explains in her book *The Intimacy Factor*:

“If you have no boundaries to contain yourself, you are a spewer. You feel you can do anything you damn well please – like a god without accountability. If you have walls to contain yourself, you are rigid. You become shut down, one-up, judgemental and controlling. You become an oppressive god: “Sit down, shut up. I know what you need to do”. Boundary work teaches us to modify these extremes.”

Both are protection mechanisms to keep the person safe and for them to avoid being abandoned. The middle ground between the two is a person with boundaries, and this is where healthy lies. Walls and boundaries are completely different. Walls close you off from the world and prevent intimacy, whereas boundaries allow for healthier relationships and enable people to feel vulnerable while also staying safe. The intention behind putting up a wall is to keep a person out. The intention behind a boundary is to know the difference between me and you. Simply put, boundaries keep the people you want out, and walls keep everyone out. People who build walls have more in common with people with weak boundaries than meets the eye. They are two versions of the same insecurity: a fear of rejection and abandonment. One protects themselves by closing themselves off to everyone so they are always in the position of perceived power, and another protects themselves by trying to get everyone to like them by never saying no, and thus avoiding conflict. The latter has the idea that the more they can do for a person, the greater the chance that person won't leave.

Walls

Boundaries
