

# Nedra Tawwab Drama Free

**Nedra Tawwab:** [00:00:00] we are waiting for this other person to magically change overnight. It's like , we've been watching too many Disney movies and we think, oh my gosh, they're gonna bump their hair tomorrow, get struck by lightning, and they're gonna wake up a different person or in someone else's.

Body and they'll be great. And it's like, that's not what happened with people. That thing that they did last week. They will continue to do that thing. So the change will happen on your part, not on theirs.

That was Nedra to Wobbe on psychologists off the. Clock we are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yael [00:01:00] Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No more.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

I am here with the EL to introduce today's episode with Nedra Tawwab, where we talk about how to handle family dysfunction, and we had Nedra on the podcast a couple years ago to talk about her. Boundaries book. That was for general relationships. And now she's written a book about how to deal with family relationships.

There's a lot of cool information in this episode, little nuggets. And I was thinking a lot about. , like once we have an understanding that maybe there's

been some dysfunction in our family of origin, maybe we even see the way that that has played out.

We see the impacts of it and maybe we know like we're at the point that we need to do something differently. We need to [00:02:00] set some boundaries, but we're not really sure exactly. or what to do. And so I thought it might be useful for Yael and I to talk a little bit about that in this intro.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Family dysfunction has been something that we've been doing more of. And we actually have a recent episode with Stephanie Kriesberg on adult daughters of narcissistic mothers, and then my interview with Lindsay Gibson on adult children of emotionally immature parents.

And this is just a really complic. Issue that many, many people tangle with. And I think, um, the more that we can talk about really strategic concrete tools to manage family dysfunction, you know, the more equipped that we're gonna be even in the midst of, you know, a situation that we don't, that we really don't have control over.

So I, I just have think that it's so wonderful that Nedra is out there talking about it and offering skills. And I do think, you know, having some concrete things that you can do when you're not really sure what it looks like would be so helpful.

**Jill Stoddard:** as I was listening back to this episode, I kept having thoughts about the book, [00:03:00] values and Therapy that was written by Jenna Laun and Jason Luma, and I actually interviewed Jenna for my book on imposter syndrome.

That's that's coming out in a few months because one of the strategies that she suggests, so once you have an idea of the values you wanna embody more. You might struggle to know exactly how to kind of walk the walk of living those values. And one of the things she suggests is interviewing someone who you see doing a good job of living out that value.

And I love this strategy and I just kept thinking in this episode with Nedra, like, what a cool way to think about boundaries. , one of the things Nedra and I talk about is how you can't wait around for other people to change that. The change has to come from you, right? And so maybe, you know, like I need boundaries, I need change, but I'm not really sure exactly what to do or how to do it.

And so I thought this strategy that, that Jenna and I talked about, where you can look at someone, we probably all know [00:04:00] somebody who does a really good job of setting boundaries. And so some of the questions that Jenna recommends are asking a person, So, so in a values context, let's say the value is courage.

It might be things like, what does living courageously mean to you? How have you put courage into practice? Have you always lived courageously? If not, what made you center this value? And how are you able to make the change so you can take courage and change that into something related to boundaries?

Right? So like, . How does, how does living in a more, with more boundaries or in a more boundaried way, what does that mean to you? How have you put boundaries into practice? Have you always been able to use boundaries? If not, what? How were you able to make this change? So here are a couple other questions.

What have you noticed about yourself, your relationships or your career since you started enacting boundaries? Have things changed for you? How do you think having boundaries impacts others? What [00:05:00] gets in the. of choosing to have boundaries and what helps you when you're stuck. What do you think, yell, do you think that could be a helpful way to like, get, really get moving if this is a change you're ready and willing to make?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Totally, and, and sometimes even if you're sort of more in like the contemplation stage, if you feel not quite ready. I think sometimes what keeps us not ready is that we don't really know what it's gonna look like in sort of like when the rubber hits the road. , so, we feel a little bit like unsure about proceeding because we just don't even know what it would look like.

And I'll just share, this is not about family dysfunction, it's about my difficulty with time management and setting boundaries on my time. But I recently am very excited because I'm going to be doing a newsletter on relationships with the growth equation, which is managed by Brad Stolberg, a, a past guest that we had on to talk about.

Book The Practice of Groundedness and his colleague Steve Magnus, who's also a terrific writer, , and they have a great newsletter. And I'll be doing a sort of offshoot newsletter that talks about relationships. So I'm taking on this new thing and one of the things that [00:06:00] I really struggle with boundaries around is time.

I feel like I constantly say yes to things because I'm really excited. , but I also really value sort of doing things in a non chaotic way and not dropping the ball all the time. And Brad is somebody who has similar values to me in terms of sharing science and getting out there and writing and, and really engaging, , in all sorts of ways around the, the things that he loves to do.

But he seems to be very disciplined about his time. So I literally, we met yesterday to talk about some things related to the newsletter, and I literally found myself interviewing him. , what, what do you say no to? How do you organize your time? When do you work out ? I probably got a little too personal, but it was so helpful to have him walk through sort of his thought process about the kinds of choices that he makes.

Sort of what goes into it. , because I am aware that we have similar values in terms of, you know, making sure that we're present for our family and doing, really being engaged in our work and, and sort of being methodical. . And so it was really helpful to sort [00:07:00] of hear about like how he makes those choices and then like literally what his weeks look like.

, and to use that information , to sort of allow it to kind of give me a sense of what those choices , around time boundaries can look like.

So I do think that asking somebody who you really look up to who's doing a skillful job can really help to clarify for you and help you to feel more ready to make

changes.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Oh, I love that. I'm s that's, uh, that's so cool. I'm glad you actually just had that experience. And I think one of the things that's important about what you're saying is you were focusing on his process. It was more about how do you go about making these choices rather than a. , oh, you put exercise in your calendar.

Okay. I'm gonna put exercise in my calendar. Right? It, it's not so much the content as the how you go about doing it. And that might be an important thing for people to think about in terms of like, you know, interviewing about boundaries. And you'll be interested to know, , yeah, that what my next guest that I'm interviewing is Vanessa Patrick and her book.[00:08:00]

the power of saying no. So that might be a good one for you.

**Yael Schonbrun:** one.

**Jill Stoddard:** Well, listeners, if you want your family to be more drama free, we hope that you find this episode with Nedra Tawwab helpful in that domain.

Hey everybody, it's Jill here and I have quite a treat for you today. I have Nedra Tawwab coming back on the podcast. She was here a couple years back talking to Diana about her first book *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*, and I have her back today to talk about her new book.

*Drama Free: A Guide to Managing Unhealthy Family Relationships*. Nedra Glover Tawwab, L C S W is a New York Times bestselling author, licensed therapist, and sought after relationship expert. She has practiced relationship therapy for 15 years and is the founder and owner of the Group Therapy practice Kaleidoscope Counseling

Nedra earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees from Wayne State University and Detroit, Michigan. [00:09:00] She has additional certifications in working with families and couples and in perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, plus advanced training for counseling adults who have experienced childhood emotional neglect.

Nedra has appeared as an expert on Red Table Talk, the Breakfast Club, good Morning America and CBS Morning Show to name a few. Her work has been highlighted in the New York Times, the Guardian and Vice, and she has appeared on numerous podcasts including The Good Life Project, Sophia with an F and Therapy for Black.

She runs a popular Instagram account where she shares practices, tools, and reflections for mental health. And hosts weekly q and as. Nedra, welcome back to Psychologist Off the clock. I'm so happy to have you here.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Thank you. Thank you for having me back. I love talking to fellow clinicians.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yes, me too. Well, your book is tremendous.

Right from the very beginning I was, I was totally drawn into, I just think there was so much that resonated with me personally, but also among the clients I've seen. And one [00:10:00] of the, the first things that occurred to me is, , how common it seems to be for people to really minimize their dysfunctional family

issues, and maybe, especially when they come from more privileged backgrounds.

or if they haven't been, um, physically or sexually abused. So like, almost like they don't feel like they have a right to feel the way that they do about their family of origin. So I thought maybe where we could start is if you could talk about what you mean when you say unhealthy or dysfunctional family relationships and, and maybe give a few examples.

I'm, I'm hoping that for any listeners who have struggled with family of origin issues, it would be helpful to hear like how many behaviors and patterns still count, if that makes sense. Like even if it's not outright abusive.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah. Gosh. Um, I think this function is any persistent, unhealthy pattern. Sometimes that looks like competition within family relationships. [00:11:00] It can look like emotional neglect. It can look like substance abuse issues. It can also look like sibling rivalry. It could look like, , financial abuse, sometimes weaponizing money.

And rich families and middle class families face that as well. It is so many different things and you know, the way that I typically find out is through. to a client and you're like, oh, here's an interesting issue. When you have something really great going on, your mother brings up what's happening with your siblings.

Isn't that a dysfunctional pattern for her to shift the conversation away from you to everyone else? Isn't that dysfunctional too? So it's so many things, and I think we do only see it in the context of abuse and. Like it has to be a really hard thing for us to have a problem, but it's also a really hard thing when I'm unable to talk to someone in my family.

It's [00:12:00] also a really hard thing when my emotional needs are going unnoticed. It can also be a really hard. Thing when every time we get together on the holidays, we argue about politics. There are so many different things that happen within families that therapists are starting to need, new resources to address.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that really struck me, like all the very different ways that this can happen and, and and, and the ways people can be affected and. One of the examples you use in the book. You have many different kind of case examples that I think really bring this to light and you

know, there were so many, there were, there were even notes I took in the book where I wrote Me too.

You know, just, you can really see yourself in here. I think, you know, there, there, there is something for everyone in this book. And so there was one example, I think her name was Carmen and she was a person who pointed out family dysfunction. while everyone [00:13:00] else around her, you know, in the family would accommodate the dysfunction and then sort of turn it around on her, like making it out.

, that she was really the problem. And so I'm curious, that was something that resonated with me personally. And, and so I was curious about how common that is to have kind of like an identified. Bad guy. If they point out legitimate family dysfunction, is that like, what do you think is going on here and how can people like Carmen know that they're really seeing what they're seeing and aren't just like troublemakers, so to speak,

**Nedra Tawwab:** carmen will have to seek support outside of her family. It's really hard to be in a dysfunctional system where many of the other folks are not ready to change, and as a part of them not changing, they have to deny what the reality is because they can't really face it. those situations, the person calling out the behavior, the person who was saying, oh my gosh, did you see this [00:14:00] big issue?

It's like, This has been happening so long, Carmen, what are you talking about? Why are you bringing light to this situation? It's really unfortunate, and it's actually a form of gaslighting when we really think about it. For a person to reshape the reality, to fit what they want to have or to reshape it, to make it, , sensible for them and to disregard what's actually happening.

I first started to see this a lot in the families, , with addiction. You know, when there's a person who says to their parent, oh my gosh, dad is an addict, or mom is an addict. When people aren't ready to address that, it's like, that's your mother. It's not that big of a deal. She can come to your party, everybody.

Sort of dealing with this behavior, and you're the one who's saying, but it's problematic. We don't see this. She's, you know, I listened to a podcast the other day where, A guy was talking [00:15:00] about his mother being anorexic and his father would never notice it. He really fed into the mom's behavior. Oh, she just has lots of stomach issues.

There's nothing going on with her, so he. , everyone tried to make him seem as if you're, it is really not that big of a deal. She just has all of these gastrointestinal issues and she, you know, doesn't like to eat with us. And, you know, all of these excuses. And he's like, am I being a butthole? Am I being

You know, am I being a hell raiser by saying, mom, you need to eat. Mom, you need to see a doctor and be honest with them, but that's how his family made him feel and unfortunately his mother ended up passing away because of her issues with eating until her death. No one else acknowledged that she had any issues with eating except for this person.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah. It, it really is gaslighting. I think anytime [00:16:00] there's that sort of, you know, people can't see me right now, but I'm kind of looking around, looking back and forth like, am I crazy? Am I the only one that sees this? Like, how is it that everyone else around me doesn't think that this is the problem?

It must be me that I, how am I the only one? , but I, I do think it's, it's so much easier for people to put their head in the sand because if you admit there's a problem, then there's a lot of work to be done.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah. Yeah. It's really hard to acknowledge it, and in many cases, you know, people may choose not to because they're not ready to do any work, and it's not always that they support the problem, but they also aren't supporting the solution to the problem.

**Jill Stoddard:** Exactly right. It's a lot harder to kind of call out someone's problematic behavior and attempt to have some sort of intervention therein than it is to just keep pretending everything is fine. And you know, you are just a troublemaker. You're just making waves. We're all fine over here. Yeah.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I've also heard of people acknowledging it [00:17:00] secretly. They won't say it to. Um, The person in their presence, but they may pull you aside, aside and say, you know, Jill, you, you're right about that. And that's, that's all they can give you. They won't advocate for you. They won't stand up with you. But in secret, there may be a person who's able to say like, you are seeing what you see.

It is accurate, but they want, they don't have that commitment to continue in their behaviors with that.

**Jill Stoddard:** And I wonder too, so, and this is something that has happened to me, where in my own family, a substance abuse was finally acknowledged. But when the abuse, the substance abuser was sort of called out like, this is a problem, let's do something about this. When that person didn't say, you're right, I have a problem.

I need help everybody back. right? When that person was like, Nope, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm fine. This is you. This isn't me, it, then it was harder [00:18:00] to keep pushing and pushing, so everybody backpedaled and then I was kind of that one still in that position of like, wait. What, what, what. But we, but we, but we all agreed, we all see that it's a problem.

Like, what, what's, what's happening? You know, as soon as it became something that was gonna be much more challenging to, to address and keep called out it, it suddenly, it became less of a problem. And maybe we can, we can talk a little more in, in a minute or so about, um, you know, some of the obstacles to change what we can change and can't change in some, some of the obstacles.

But I, I wanted to, but before we go there, you, you shared some, I mean, what I can only call kind of like truth bombs, right? In the first, I think it was like the first 15 pages of the book that I thought were. A really important place to start. And so I'm gonna give just a quick quote. Um, one of the things you say is we carry the weight of the years when we were most powerless, as if we [00:19:00] have to continue that way.

But adulthood gives us the opportunity to change our narrative. So that's one. You also said you are not what happened to. . And then the other thing you point out, I don't think this is a quote, this was just a note I wrote down, but that we can't change other people and we can't change the past. The only thing we can change, of course, is ourselves.

And so I definitely wanna spend some time talking about changing the narrative and ourselves. , but can you first talk a little bit about, we've talked about the ways we, we've talked about examples of what dysfunction might look like. what are some ways that childhood dysfunction can impact people and their adult relationships?

Like what do you see in your adult clients who have had, um, family dysfunction as part of their, their picture, their history?

**Nedra Tawwab:** Well, I work with couples. So with couples I see two people coming together [00:20:00] and being their parents or trying to be the direct opposite of their parents or bringing any of those family, uh, Patterns right into their marriage, into their partnerships and their dating experiences. Because if we don't notice it, we don't do anything about it.

So often people are, I don't wanna be like my dad. I'm like,

You describe yourself in a way that I've heard you describe your mother and people don't even realize it,

**Jill Stoddard:** Wait, how does that go over when you do that? You know, some, my, my husband knows he better not

**Nedra Tawwab:** well, I, I say in session, I'll say, who does this remind you of?

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm. There you go.

**Nedra Tawwab:** won't say who the person is, but I will say, who does this remind you of? And I may give them some, some clues. You know, the person who doesn't understand No. The person who doesn't, you know, and they'll be my mom. Yeah.[00:21:00]

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I, I, I hear a little bit of that because people sometimes don't even know the way in which they are displaying these qualities that they don't want to have.

**Jill Stoddard:** Sure.

**Nedra Tawwab:** They're, they

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. You, I mean, you would hope if they are aware of it, then they would, they would change it. They wouldn't be doing it. And so often it is, it is outside of awareness.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Very much so, and it can be in, in work relationships and friendships. Um, I see a lot of women sometimes who struggle with accepting help from, from anyone, from friends, from family because they were so

responsible as children and, and you know, I have to tell them perhaps that tool, that that skill was. In childhood.

Do you need that skill at 30? I don't think so. I don't think you need to do everything anymore. Clearly it's stressful. It probably was stressful when you were 12, but now you have people [00:22:00] saying, what do you need? What do you need at 12? You didn't have that. So how do we get you to live in the now? How do you release that part of yourself that you don't even need?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. I think it's so huge. I mean, . There are so many behavioral patterns that we develop in our younger years that worked at that time. They're, they were adaptive, protective, safe, you know, whatever. And then no one ever comes and says to us, uh, unless we get into therapy later, but no one says, Hey, you know, your situation in your context is changed.

You don't have to do that anymore. You can do so. Differently now, and that, you know, that can be a real aha moment, I think for people to realize, oh, right, me sort of wearing my suit of armor back then. Me not letting people get in close me. Not trusting people, you know, that that was adaptive at that time, but I don't need to do that anymore.

And in fact, doing that now is really harming me,

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yes, [00:23:00] absolutely. Um, you know, I'm thinking your context has, has shifted and so should your behaviors.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right, right. It's huge. Well, let's talk about trust for a second cuz that's something you do address in the book. That, you know, trust issues are one thing that can result from dysfunctional family relationships. And I, I bring this one up specifically because I see it so frequently in my practice and it feels a little hard.

For folks to tackle, because at the end of the day, trust is a leap of faith. Like it's something that we have to choose even when it will always be uncertain. You know? I mean, I, I, I'll give the example to clients that I feel pretty confident that my husband isn't cheating on me, but at the end of the day, I have no idea.

Like there's no way for me to really know that unless I follow 'em around every second of every day. And then that's gonna do damage to our relationship in its own right. So ultimately this is a leap of faith that requires us to, to sit in uncertainty. And, and that's tough for people, [00:24:00] especially if they have been betrayed or, or had, you know, had, um, Had their trust violated in the past.

So do you have any specific tools or recommendations that you use with your clients who really want to be able to trust but struggle to kind of take that leap?

**Nedra Tawwab:** I encourage them to practice trusting.

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I mean, you, you, you said a wonderful thing that you have to take the leap, and so when I notice their ambivalence, I will say, What can you do to trust this situation? It's a behavior.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I don't know if this person will, does trust look like in this situation? What is a trust practice that you can implement with this person?

Because they haven't let you down yet. You're, you're stopping them from having the opportunity to meet an expectation or let you down so,

**Jill Stoddard:** love [00:25:00] this too, in, in framing it as a behavior and in this moment right now, it doesn't have to be either you trust everyone completely or you don't. It's what's one thing you can do in this particular context or relationship that is trust? And it could even just be a baby step, right? It could be just sharing one personal detail about yourself.

sharing the whole, the whole vault,

you know?

**Nedra Tawwab:** and sometimes I use a therapeutic relationship as an example of how you may engage in other, other relationships. I've had clients who are very guarded with me. I mean, it's, it's like, okay, well let's play tic tac toe for eight sessions before we'll have something to talk about because you're not saying anything, right?

And so, I use that when they get to the point of comfort and then they're trying to explore other relationships, I remind them of what I saw. I remember when you first started coming [00:26:00] here and, oh my gosh, you would just sit on this one part of the couch and your legs would be so tight. And every question I asked, it was like I was doing a little interview.

It wasn't a conversation. And look at you now after you've started to trust.

**Jill Stoddard:** I love

**Nedra Tawwab:** I wonder how you can start to open up maybe sooner in some relationships, because everybody isn't gonna give you eight weeks.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. Right,

**Nedra Tawwab:** I'll give you eight weeks,

but that's not, that's not the real world.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, and, and then there's so much else you could even unpack from that in terms of what do you notice about the quality of our relationship in the first four weeks and how is that different from how it is now, you know, kind of pointing out like what was it that you needed to feel safe in order to be willing to start trusting.

And in what ways has your willingness to trust me improved our relationship and our work together? You know, you can kind of like point [00:27:00] out experientially the way that these things influence one another to then hopefully create more willingness to now take that outside of the the therapy room. There's a lot inside of that therapy relationship.

I think that can be useful there. That's.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yes.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. . , okay. So both of your books of course, have a big emphasis on boundaries. And I also, so that I don't forget, I also do wanna emphasize that you have an incredible. Social media presence and your Instagram account. I feel like every post you have, I don't know how you have as much content as you do , but every single post I get something out of, I tell so many of my clients about it, so I, I really recommend it to listeners.

It is such a helpful, uh, you know, like bite sized advice that you can really use in enact, in a, in an immediate way. And a, and a lot of it, of course, is about boundaries. So, Let's, before we really dive into boundaries, can you define what you mean when you use the [00:28:00] word boundaries?

**Nedra Tawwab:** I mean, needs are expectations in our relationships with other people. , when you grow up in dysfunctional families, unfortunately boundaries are very blurry and often you are not allowed to have them. And so a part of your landscape is being without. And so much of who you are is this boundary per boundaryless person who has to learn that it is okay to have needs.

It makes sense to have expectations, not just for other people, but also for yourself. because sometimes when you have no boundaries, you become a people pleaser, extreme people pleaser. Um, I think most people are people pleasers, but I'm gonna say extreme people pleaser, where you have nothing left for yourself or you become extremely self neglectful or you [00:29:00] become, , a yes person and those things aren't good.

And those are things that. Sort of do to ourselves. Those aren't things that other people are doing to us. So, you know, boundaries are really an important way that we show up in our relationships with other people. And most people have boundaries. I hear a lot of people like, oh my gosh, I need so much help.

I don't have any boundaries. I'm like, well, you have. . I don't know what those are, but we can certainly do a discovery and I bet you have some and we need to get you to a place where you can have them. In other places, there are people who have wonderful boundaries with work, but they can't say anything in their family relationships.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. And I imagine that comes from a place of, in what context are they experiencing fear? You know, fear that they will have a loss of a relationship, that someone will be disappointed, or that they'll hurt the person, you know, maybe they don't care if they hurt their coworker. , you [00:30:00] know, that feels like a risk that's easier to take.

But when it comes to my parent or sibling, you know, the stakes probably feel higher. And, and it could be the opposite for someone else. They may feel terrified that they could lose their job. So they have terrible boundaries at work, but they're fine having boundaries at home because they feel safe with their family members.

, and I, I liked what you said, this is often something we do to ourselves because I think often, , we may have a tendency to blame other people, blame family members for what they're doing or their behavior and sort of feel helpless and powerless. But this is really kind of an answer is, you know, y you do have some power and part of that power is in your boundaries.

Do you think that's, that's an accurate way to, to conceptualize what you were saying?

**Nedra Tawwab:** I think that is very accurate, that boundaries are a really powerful force for yourself with others.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. . . , and so you were talking about some of the ways that not having boundaries can present being a people [00:31:00] pleaser, et cetera. it seems to me too, you talk quite a bit actually in the book about co-dependency and that seems like it is primarily an issue with boundaries.

Do you think that's That's right.

**Nedra Tawwab:** that is 100% an issue with boundaries. I meant the idea that who someone is, is enmeshed with who you are, what they do. Everything that they do impacts what you do or what you need to do for them. So they don't get to experience any discomfort. Um, I feel like codependency has been talked about so much, you know, in the last few years, and sometimes it's been misplaced.

You know, sometimes relationships are close and there are boundaries, and it's like that's co-dependent. They're close. I think co-dependency really happens when people start to experience dysfunction in their own lives as a [00:32:00] result of being overly involved in other people lives, right? When you are unable to take care of yourself because you are taking care.

Of this other person who has the ability to care for themselves, but just is unwilling to do it.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right and that, right. So there's the one side of the co-dependence is you are taking care of someone who can take care of themselves, or you are allowing someone to take care of you when you can take care of yourself. . . , right. So it's like boundary issues in both, but sort of opposite directions. Well, and it makes me think about, there's a section in the book too where you talk about the difference between enabling versus helping.

So similar to this idea that a relationship might be very close and not codependent, if it's not interfering. So I imagine in that version of a relationship, then behaviors are actually helping, whereas in a truly codependent relationship, the behaviors are really more enabling. So can you talk a little bit about.

[00:33:00] Distinction and like how do we know where that line is between enabling versus helping

**Nedra Tawwab:** Oh, I'll give you an example. I've heard some parents say I'm helping my adult child by paying their bills. Okay? How? How long have you been paying the bill for? Three months. Three months, have they increased their income? No. Okay. Sounds like you have a new bill. Mom. help would mean that they're starting to do something more.

To be able to take this away from you and do it themselves.

**Jill Stoddard:** Hmm.

**Nedra Tawwab:** a bill is continuing to do the same thing for them every single month. You now have rent another space. And that's okay, but that's what it's, that's not helping.

**Jill Stoddard:** No, you're right. And what you're saying is it's not about, you don't distinguish between those two, these two things. Based on what you're doing, you distinguish based [00:34:00] on the the function or the process, like what, what is your evidence? What do you see? Is this person changing?

Are they getting better? Is their improvement? That's helping, but if they're staying the same or they're getting worse, then it's enabling.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Absolutely. And there are so many times with family relationships that we label our help as helpful. You know, I've, I've, I always ask the question of how are they being helped? What improvements have you seen with this person? You have, you know, baby their Kia every Saturday. What has changed in their life where they can start to maybe not need you anymore?

Or they have some other solution? Are they, you know, moving towards something where this won't be a forever thinking? In many cases, it's like, no, it's, I don't know if you're helping them. I think you're allowing them to. Go out and party and have fun and, uh, not be responsible [00:35:00] for, for their kids. And it's only a reason sometimes because the person is complaining about it, they are doing something they don't want to do.

They are doing something that they see as problematic. And that lets me know, oh, you don't even think you're being helpful. You have a problem with the behaviors that you're implementing because now you're saying something about it, which is like the first sign of. . Is this really an issue? Well, it is.

You're talking about it?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, so I wonder if like one, one way to set boundaries in this case to, because sometimes you won't know right away whether so. Helpful or enabling. So one form or example of a boundary might be a time limit. So let's say I say, well, I'm just helping until they get back on their feet because something hard maybe has happened.

Um, okay, well how long do you think it's gonna take for them to get back on their feet? Like what would be a reasonable amount of time for us to start to see some evidence of that change? So maybe you pay [00:36:00] the rent or whatever it. For three months or six months. But at some point there needs to be some, you know, uh, like if you're looking at a line graph, there needs to be improvement over time or some point at which you can say like, okay, now you need to go continue to do this on your own.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah. There does need to be some shift in what's happening in a very clear expectation. I can, he, I will help you for three months and it could be a reduction. It doesn't have to be a complete cutoff. It could be, you know, I'll give you a little stipend after three months, I'll, instead of giving you 400, I'll give you 300.

And the next three months I'll, you know, it's not about like cutting people off, but how do you help a person become. Sufficient. How do you help them become, um, someone who can take care of certain things in their life? How do you help someone understand that, you know, I love you deeply, but I may also need support.

And so these are [00:37:00] some things that, that we have to talk about in our relationships that's not being mentioned. You know, as, since we're on a topic of adult children, you know, I've heard parents say, The relationship with their adult child is very, gimme, gimme, gimme. But they don't hold any space for the parent. They don't. They're not, Hey mom, how is your day? What's going on with your friends? And that's when we start to teach them. I am a person too. I have

needs too.

**Jill Stoddard:** It should be

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah. And I understand I'm your, your, your dad and I've been cooking for you for 18 years, but can you start coming over on Sundays and, and prepare a meal for me?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

**Nedra Tawwab:** invite us over to your house? Can you come down outta your bedroom and maybe help me cook? You know, so these are things that are also boundaries, transitioning that relationship. So it is more. Reciprocal and not so transactional [00:38:00] can be a wonderful boundary for adult children.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. I love that. Well, let's talk a little bit about change.

So one of the things you talk about in the book is how one way people try to deal with dysfunctional relationships. And that maybe is like, well-meaning is like I just have to learn how to be more tolerant of this person. But ultimately that often means feeling more resentful rather than patience, which is

what we might be going for. So you recommend instead changing the things that we no longer want to tolerate. So what do you think are the most common obstacles to making those changes to instead of just continuing to tolerate someone's bad behavior, or maybe it's easier to continue tolerating someone's bad behavior, like you might see that you really need to make a change, but get something gets in the way of doing that.

What do you think are the things that get in the.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I would say number one is we are waiting for this other person to magically change overnight. It's like we're, we've been watching too many [00:39:00] Disney movies and we think, oh my gosh, they're gonna bump their hair tomorrow, get struck by lightning, and they're gonna wake up a different person or in someone else's.

Body and they'll be great. And it's like, that's not what happened with people. That thing that they did last week. They will continue to do that thing. So the change will happen on your part, not on theirs. So if you're wanting something different, what is that thing that you want in the relationship?

Increasing your tolerance for poor behavior, for mistreatment, for, um, Competitiveness for abuse in some cases is not a reasonable strategy.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah,

**Nedra Tawwab:** don't have to

**Jill Stoddard:** made me, you just made me have a little bit of an aha moment because it's not just Disney movies, it's every single book, TV show and movie we have ever watched. Every single character has a character arc and they typically grow and evolve and change [00:40:00] from the beginning of the story to the end.

So we're really inundated with these messages that these things happen. . Right.

So it, I mean, that's really interesting that you don't even realize like, I mean, it's just sort of in the water that like, this person's gonna grow and change, right? If I just wait long enough or if I just quote unquote help a little more.

Even if that

helping is actually enabling and Yeah. And that really, it has to be on us and we can certainly hope that they go through that transformation, but that, that, you know, if we want to take care of our ourselves, we really have to be the ones that are changing.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah. And I, I think of this, I think for people who experience trauma or who. , maybe in certain circles where change is not encouraged or they may feel like life is great as it is, or they may be emotionally immature or any sort of thing where they're unready, they're unwilling to change, [00:41:00] expecting them to grow up because their aging is unreason.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah,

**Nedra Tawwab:** And we really have that expectation of people like, because this person is 65, they will have all of these life skills. And I'm like, well, I don't, I don't think your aging body means a growing mind.

**Jill Stoddard:** right?

**Nedra Tawwab:** It just means that your bo you have gray hair, . Gray hair doesn't actually mean wisdom

**Jill Stoddard:** Right,

**Nedra Tawwab:** it just means your hair is turning a different color.

That's it. . That's all that's happening, so. So often we look at, especially our elders or you know, just people in the world, our friends, sometimes when they've been doing stuff for eight years and you're like, it's been eight years. It's like they are just waking up [00:42:00] every day with the same mind. Maybe their body is changing, their mind is not changing,

**Jill Stoddard:** right.

Well,

these patterns develop for a reason and like we were saying before, like they worked at some point, and if you don't identify that it's happening and that it's no longer working and do the work to change it, it's just going to continue in, in much the same way that it always has.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Absolutely. So, um, as we're thinking about increasing our tolerance for, for things, we have to stop ourselves from doing that. You know, I get a lot of questions around how do I deal with, , my mother yelling at me and I'm like, deal with it. Like, you wanna improve your tolerance to be yelled. I don't, I guess you just sit there and you let somebody, I don't wanna encourage that.

I would say, you know, maybe when a person starts to yell at you, you make a statement, you say, Hey, you're yelling. This isn't a good time for us to talk. I'm gonna go ahead and [00:43:00] call you back later. Or Call me back. Once you're calmed down, I don't know if you sit there and you tolerate it better.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. So that, this is a great segue cuz I wanna ask you about like, what are some specific examples? Like, like strategies for boundary setting or, or, or other strategies. It doesn't have to just be boundary setting, but if we are wanting to do a better job with the dysfunctional family relationships. That are around us and we know we can't sit around and wait for other people to change and that we cannot change other people.

What are some examples of things that you have taught people to do differently if they have a yelling mother or they have a, I mean, there's so many different examples of

the way dysfunction could play out, but can you think of maybe some that stand out to you from, uh, or that have been particularly helpful with clients that you've.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Uh, I'm thinking of a situation where a parent clearly has a favorite child, [00:44:00] and the expectation is, okay when I go home this holiday season, Things are gonna be fair this year. They are going to not ask me to do so many things while allowing this person to relax. They're going to ask me to do these, these special projects with them.

They're. And it, it typically doesn't happen that way. The person goes home for the holiday, they re-experience the stuff that they always experience, and they're upset again. So how do you go into a situation like that with a different expectation? You know, if a parent is clearly showing some favoritism, I've even heard of it where the parent will, will give a certain child better sleeping accommodations or something like, you know, like, oh, this person needs it because it's like, no, they don't

Do you need to stay with your parent if that's the case. do [00:45:00] you want to to sit in a house where this will constantly happen over and over? You have to experience it. Do you wanna see your parents for the holiday? Yes. How do you need to visit them? Do you need to stay in the same home? If you stay in the same home?

Do you have to be in the same room with all of your family at the same time? Are there other activities you might want to do in that city? With other people. Do you wanna bring a support person with you to maybe break up some of that energy? There is a whole arsenal of things that you can do instead of going into that situation, expecting those people to be different.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Well, and and what really stands out to. This is everything you're, you're saying in that example actually has nothing to do with anyone else. And I think maybe sometimes, I don't know if it's a mistake, but . . . , the intention is to be assertive and to change the situation. But, so for example, maybe it's. [00:46:00] You know, I'm gonna have a conversation with this parent and say, you know, I, when you always give my brother the better room, it makes me feel like I'm not as important. And it would really mean a lot to me if you could consider, you know, that we would switch off every other time.

You know, this seems like it's a really effective communication strategy, but it's still relying on the outcome of someone else's behavior. Right,

and then that

can be so demoralizing and frustrating when it doesn't

actually work. And the kinds of boundaries you're talking about it, there's no way it can't quote unquote work because it has nothing to do with outcome or other people.

It's strictly what I'm gonna do to take care of myself in this situation with these people that all of which are unlikely to change.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I love that. And I, and I think also in that situation, Let's say they start to do every other year. Your brother gets the room, then you get the room, that sort of thing. That's just one [00:47:00] situation. It's probably tons of situations, so you'll constantly have to correct every single thing. Hey, you fix this person's plate first.

Hey, you're complimenting them endlessly in front of me. Hey, you didn't ask me to go to the store with you. Hey, I mean, it's going to be so many. Things that

you will have to say to this person. Yeah. It's like, okay, here's another, oh, here's another one here. Here's another one.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right, and what I can do instead is like knowing that there are going to be so many different things that are gonna trigger this distress in me, I'm just gonna limit the amount of time or my limit, my amount of exposure by getting a hotel or by only coming for the day, instead of the weekend, or you know, whatever the case may be in terms of the specific boundary.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah, I think it's very common for parents to have, , Codependent relationship with one of the children, and the other children are just watching, and it's typically the one who, you know, they feel needs [00:48:00] the most help. You know, they're not able to do whatever and all the rest of the siblings is like, well, we did it.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right,

**Nedra Tawwab:** Like, why do you think this person won't be able to to do this thing? And it, it causes issues not just in the parent-child relationship, but even your relationship with that sibling for receiving the help. You know, there's a lot of resentment that they're even allowing themselves to be helped in this way while other people are being.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, absolutely. I, I'm guessing this is probably a question that you get pretty commonly, but how do you help people decide if they're asking you, listen, I've got these dysfunctional family relationships.

It's like really causing me a lot of distress and trouble, and I don't know if maybe I should just cut my mother off or if I just need to find a different way. Like, how do you, how do you help people decide? Do I just try setting boundaries [00:49:00] or is an estrangement. More called for,

**Nedra Tawwab:** that doesn't typically come up in that very direct way. What typically happens is they're complaining about the parent a lot, and we start talking about boundaries. Their boundary might be cutting the parent off. Or we talk about other things they can do in that relationship with the parent or with the sibling or whoever the family member is.

I typically do not recommend someone cut off a parent, , because it's a, a decision that you'll have to live with. And so, That recommendation is pretty tough. The only time that I might even consider saying that is if the, the relationship is violent or abusive. That's the only time I could think to say that.

But a lot of these things is so much gray in there that there, there could be room for boundaries [00:50:00] or you might choose to leave it, and it's really up to you to decide because there is. One way to handle a parent who is narcissistic. There is no one way to handle a sibling that, , never listens to you.

There's no one way to handle any situation in the family, and it's really based on an individual's capacity to be in that relationship or.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. I sometimes pose it to clients like, you know, you can, you can cut this person off Complet. or you can keep things exactly the way they are. And I'm holding my hands up now to sort of

show two ends of a spectrum and then what's in between are many, many, many different options.

You know, and like lots of different things that you can try and see how it goes, you know, to try

to get a little bit of flexibility and away from this very, like all or none, black or white.

I find that sometimes. You know, [00:51:00] when people are saying they want to cut someone off as their sort of first line of defense, it's coming more out of a place of avoidance that it feels so hard to figure out how to navigate boundaries and how it's gonna go and how to deal with it if it doesn't go well.

And to deal with the guilt and that the, that, for some people it's like, no, I'm just forget. I'm just gonna cut them off. And that feels like it's a little impulsive or not thought. . Whereas if it's somebody who says, I've tried, here are 15 examples of boundaries I've tried. And this person, you know, it's very evident that this is a very toxic relationship, but it's thoughtful.

They, they've considered it over time, they've tried things and then that feels like it's really the only option.

That it's like the function of the decision about how you're gonna navigate these difficult relationships that I think sticks in my mind a bit.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah, I, I think people have to make their own choices and. I also believe we don't know all of the [00:52:00] client's story, and so it's very hard for me to say based on what you've said, here is a prescription for that. I think you will have to decide what to do. I will say that even cutoffs. Have consequences, the relationship with other family members ha the, the grief or guilt you might feel, um, you know, certain anniversary dates that come up and you have thoughts about this person.

So, you know, that comes with its own set of things to deal with. Now, in many cases, people see it as a relief. They feel much better not talking to this chaotic person or this person who caused a lot of problems. In their life. I will say, , family relationships don't have to be close,

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm.

**Nedra Tawwab:** and so sometimes people are trying to force a close relationship with a family member.

If they don't talk to them every day, then that's the equivalent of [00:53:00] cutting them off. It's like, well, you could talk to that person once a week. I wonder how that would feel. I wonder how it would feel if you answered your phone when you wanted to listen to them complain or , you know, whatever it is that they do.

What would that feel like? It doesn't have to be a regular routine sort of relationship. You can define the frequency.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. Right. And I think the other, the other piece of this that's important that you're saying is if you stay in a dysfunctional relationship, there's gonna be pain that comes with that distress of different kinds if you completely cut them off. , there's going to be pain that comes with that, and if

you maintain the relationship and have boundaries, there's going to be pain that comes with that.

No matter how you slice it, there are going to be elements of this that are difficult and distressing, and so if your sole reason for ex-communication or not setting boundaries, whichever end of that spectrum, it is, if your sole reason for that is to try to stay [00:54:00] in your comfort. That's probably not actually going to be effective.

It's like no matter what you choose, the bad news is no matter what you choose, you're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't. So like

what, in terms of how you feel, right? Because no matter what, there's pain that's gonna come with it. So like what is the thing that really comes from a values driven place?

Like who and how you wanna show up in the world when it comes to these relationships? . You know, even, even if setting a boundary is hard, how can you do that even if you feel, , guilty or you get pushback? , if, if ex communicating someone is the right thing to do for you, how can you do that?

Even though there's gonna be grief that, that may come along with that, but, so not letting the feelings drive, but really letting kind of like the values be in charge of, of whichever direction you take.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yes.

**Jill Stoddard:** , what are some ways that you recommend people handle the guilt and the grief? I imagine this comes up a lot, whether people are setting boundaries. I mean, I think anytime you change a family [00:55:00] system, , there can be some of those difficult feelings, guilt, grief, et cetera, is, are there any tips that you give people for what to do when that shows up?

I mean, I imagine that becomes an obstacle to change in the first place, and then once people really do it, like how do they stick with it if a lot of those feelings show up as a consequence?

**Nedra Tawwab:** we have to reframe the grief. Are you doing a bad thing or do you feel bad about doing a necessary thing? if you feel bad about doing a necessary thing. Is that grief? Is that guilt or is that you feel as if you're letting someone down? You miss the person. You're sad about it not working out. So I think there's a lot of reframing work that we can do to move a person away from the guilt and to move them towards really processing the loss of the relationship or the loss of what the [00:56:00] relationship could.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, it's amazing. I think how often. , we think we can't tolerate letting someone down or disappointing them. You know, it may be that someone is disappointed if we're limiting our, our contact with them in some way, and that maybe that can be okay. Like maybe they can handle being disappointed and we can handle the fact that they're disappointed.

Like, I don't have to convince you they're not disappointed. They may be disappointed, but that's okay. Like that's not your problem to.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yes. Um, you know, real truth is you will disappoint people and they will disappoint you. Many of the people that we that are disappointed at us have disappointed us. and there was no one there to stop you from being disappointed. You had to process it and now they are processing it. I think that's a part of relationships sometimes being disappointed with the other person.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, a hundred percent. Well, we're, we're just about getting [00:57:00] to the end here. I did wanna bring up one other thing that I really appreciated, and it was when you were talking about kind of how to handle. Pushback from other family members. So,

um, , I wrote down one of the things you had written, which was, uh, you had given some suggestions for what you might say.

So if my brother is stealing from me, and that means I need to set boundaries with him, but I'm getting pushback from other family members. One way I might try to defend the decision, I don't know if that's quite the right word, but is to say like, if this were someone I was dating and I told you they were stealing from me, would you say I should stay with that person?

And then it becomes so much more clear like, oh no, you're right. It's not okay to be taken advantage of in that way. , and that was just something I thought I found that really helpful and, and I thought I would share an example of my own, because I actually do have a, a situation in our family where my brother and.

He's in prison and he and I are estranged, but he still [00:58:00] has a relationship with my other brother and my dad. And for a long time my dad was, you know, he was not cruel about it in any way. He was sad that we were estranged and he was trying to encourage me to reconsider the relationship, , which at, at least for right now, I, I'm not willing to do.

And at one point I said to him, you know, dad, I don't try to talk you out of your relationship with. So I would really appreciate it if you would not try to talk me into having one, right? Like as a way to say like,

we can handle this differently and I'm not gonna try to change the way you are doing your thing.

So I would mean a lot if you would respect me, you know, that I'm choosing. And that really, that really hit him. He got it. He was

like, oh, you're right. And

it's a silly example, but I always think about that with pregnancy. Like whenever someone says, oh, I don't wanna have kids. people feel compelled to talk you into having kids.

And I once said to someone, [00:59:00] listen, I don't try to talk you out of having kids. Why are you trying to talk me into it? And then people go, oh, you're right. That would be so weird if you tried to talk people out of having kids.

You know? So this was something that, that really resonated. And then, you know, luckily I didn't, I

didn't hear about.

Again, so I didn't know if you had any other thoughts about how folks can deal with that pushback. I mean, even like guilting, even sometimes gaslighting that can come from other family members, when that one person really does start to set healthy boundaries for themselves.

**Nedra Tawwab:** I will certainly start to use what, what you said. That was a beautiful example, and also as you mentioned in the book, helping people to get outside of the people involved and moving them towards general. In general, if a person did x. , what is the appropriate response? Would you be okay [01:00:00] with this if it were a friend of mine?

And when it goes back to, yes, I would be okay with it if it were a friend but not your brother. It's like, well, for relationships, should we lower the standard for family or should we have a general standard of how we should be treated in relationships?

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I love that there's, I think you mentioned the kind of the, the, the blood is thicker than water type mentality, but in reality, like as humans, isn't it okay for us to just have a basic set of standards for how we expect to be treated by other humans, whether we're related to them or not?

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

Well, there is so much more in this book that of course we didn't have time for. I mean, there's a whole chapter on substance use problems. There's a lot more around specific to mental health, um, . Suggestions for specific struggles with parents, siblings, children, extended family in-laws, blended families.

Um, so really there, I mean, there's just so much more [01:01:00] in here that we didn't get to. So if, for listeners, if you want your family relationships to be drama free, I encourage you to pick up Ned's book that is also called Drama Free, A Guide to Managing Unhealthy Family Relationships. , if people want to get more of you, where can they find.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Instagram is a wonderful place, but also any other social media platform and my website, [nedra.tawwab.com](http://nedra.tawwab.com).

**Jill Stoddard:** And Tawwab is T A W W A B. I always, I always like, wait, is it two Ws and one B, or one W and two Bs? So it's T a ww a b. So [nedra.twa.com](http://nedra.twa.com) and then on on social media. You're at Nedra. Tawwab as well.

**Nedra Tawwab:** Yes, I did not need to make up a name. That one was certainly not

**Jill Stoddard:** It was not taken no I love it. Well, this was such a great conversation, so helpful. I really appreciate you coming back to talk to us again.

**Nedra Tawwab:** You're welcome. Thank you so [01:02:00] much.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hey, psychologists, off the clock listeners, I'm gonna guess that if you got to the end of this episode that you also love to geek out about books in psychology.

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