

If you haven't heard of Nedra Glover Tawwab, you probably don't spend too much time on social media. Tawwab is a new kind of psychotherapy influencer, whose books, posts, and Instagram live videos exploring boundaries, assertiveness, and family cutoffs have struck a widespread, cultural chord. After she was featured in a 2017 *New York Times* article on noteworthy Instagram influencers, the number of people following her account rose from 2,000 to 100,000 in a matter of months. Now, that number is 1.6 million.

If you *have* heard of Nedra—as her followers refer to her—you're probably aware she's being heralded in the mental health world and beyond—including on *CBS Mornings*, *Oprah Daily*, and podcasts like *School of Greatness* and *Therapy for Black Girls*—as the queen of boundaries. Unabashedly stylish in bright lipstick, hoop earrings, and colorful floral prints, Tawwab has a knack for homing in on issues that are both familiar and perplexing. In her books, posts, newsletters, and Instagram reels, she invites therapists and nontherapists alike to question our culture's most cherished beliefs about relationships and well-being. Through seeming paradoxes like *healthy ultimatums*, *toxic forgiveness*, and *premature resilience*, she encourages fresh conversations about what it means to be our best, freest, and most authentic selves.

These and other koan-like phrases are signature Tawwab; they upend common assumptions and invite a nuanced view of what it means to be connected with ourselves and others. For instance, in a field where *resilience* is a prized buzzword, Tawwab asks us to consider the subtle ways that conciliatory statements like “at least you learned to problem-solve and take care of yourself” diminish another person's right to experience their feelings and own their stories. Similarly, despite a longstanding ethos encouraging us to move past pain through forgiveness, she highlights the detrimental effects of pretending to be unharmed or over something just to keep the peace. And she asks, do enough of us give those we care about healthy ultimatums—following through on the boundaries we set by attaching them to reasonable

consequences? In other words, are we comfortable telling a cherished friend, “I don't want you to share my personal business with others. If you do, I'll stop telling you things”? Tawwab thinks not—a fact she discusses at length in her *New York Times* bestselling book, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*, which has been praised as “a roadmap for establishing limits” and “the boundary bible.”

Tawwab wrote *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* in 2021 after noticing the common thread of

BY ALICIA MUÑOZ

Sitting Down WITH Nedra Glover

Flexible Boundaries and Drama

boundaries running through many of her sessions with clients. “It's not that clients came to me *specifically* to work on boundaries,” she says. “And I can't remember ever telling someone, ‘You have boundary issues.’ Mostly, when people talk about boundaries, they say things like, ‘My coworker keeps asking me to go to lunch and I can't say no,’ or ‘My mom talks about my sister to me, and I don't like it.’ On the surface, these may seem like minor issues, but the cumulative effect of not having control over your boundaries can be really big.”

Her latest book, *Drama Free: A Guide to Managing Unhealthy Family Relationships*, takes boundary issues a step further. In it, she explores what it means to navigate difficult family relationships with maturity, and—as a last resort—to end them. With her concept of *gentle cutoffs*,

A woman with a large, voluminous afro hairstyle is sitting on a light-colored couch. She is wearing a white short-sleeved top and blue denim jeans with frayed hems. Her hands are clasped together, and she has brightly colored nail polish. She is smiling warmly at the camera. The background is a wall covered in a colorful, abstract pattern of blue, yellow, pink, and purple shapes. A green plant is visible in the foreground, slightly out of focus.

Tawwab

Free Relationships

she spotlights yet another common misconception, one many therapists espouse in our individualistic culture: that toxic people should be cut out of our lives, no questions asked. Instead, she invites us to recognize all options for dealing with these transitions, including a gentle ending, where a relationship quietly fades without a lot of fanfare or drama. If you choose this route, you may decide it's best not to share what's happening with the person you're cutting off, defying another therapeutic mainstay: that everything we do in relationships needs to be discussed and explored. With a gentle ending, you don't overthink or overtalk it. You just let it happen, as you would with a former colleague whose happy hour invitations you no longer want to respond to, or a friend from high school you no longer feel emotionally invested in as your world broadens. How simple—and liberating.

A NEW ERA

In an article in the November/December 2022 issue of this magazine on the growing influence of women in psychotherapy, Lynn Grodzki and Margaret Wehrenberg talk about the dawn of a new era, where women therapists are no longer restricted to formal, traditional paths to leadership, such as acceptance to PhD programs, directorship roles on well-funded research projects, and positions in academia. These paths have long been defended as upholding standards of excellence, but historically, their gatekeepers have been white men, and they've acted as guardrails, reinforcing heteropatriarchy, structural racism, and the status quo.

Nowadays, the internet offers alternate pathways to leadership. From Brené Brown's 2010 viral TED Talk on the power of vulnerability to millennial psychologist Divija Bhasin's website on mental health myths, more women are accessing avenues to influence that function independently of peer-reviewed journals, selection committees, and acquisitions editors.

Of course, not everyone is thrilled about this. In fact, traditionalists complain that therapists on TikTok and Instagram are undermining the field by packaging clinical information—and misinformation—in trendy videos and shallow soundbites, leading naïve consumers astray.

For Tawwab, platforms like Instagram—far from being detrimental—destigmatize mental health and enable her to transcend geographical limits and offer psychoeducation, new perspectives, and inspiration to

of development—they're important, but how do they relate to us in 2023 and to our clients? The world has changed a lot since 1902 and even 1992. We need new pioneers. We can't blindly rely on other people's theories, much less those of people who lived in a different time. Not every client will meditate or talk about their feelings. Not every client will do homework. I have to take what I've studied, whether it's CBT, EFT, or the Gottman theory—and apply it to the person in front of me.

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millions. According to Grodzki and Wehrenberg, women like Tawwab have been hugely successful at "reaching the public at large and bringing mental-health topics and conversations to the mainstream" precisely because they're accessing multiple avenues to authority, both traditional and nontraditional. With her popular books and personal appeal, Tawwab—herself a seasoned expert in relationship issues—is poised to shape the field of psychotherapy from the inside out. But she's also—as a social media influencer—poised to shape it from the outside in. By nudging our field toward democratizing mental health, you might argue, she's already begun that process.

"All these theories we've learned," Tawwab says, "Maslow's hierarchy, Freud's unconscious, Erikson's stages

The right theory is the one that helps my client, and often it's a mix. We have to think about our clients as people and about how our theories serve them."

TRAUMA ISN'T THE END OF THE STORY

Tawwab grew up in Detroit and attended public schools. She went to Wayne State University for her undergraduate and graduate degrees. Although she'd always felt drawn to social work, she decided to major in African American studies and sociology because she'd grown up believing that ultimately social workers took kids away from their families and homes. But after getting her BA, while she was considering graduate school, she returned to the idea.

"My plan was to practice on a macro

level, lobbying and creating policy reform, but after working at a community grant agency, I realized it wasn't for me. Soon after, during an internship at a shelter for runaway teens, I saw my first client. In that session, light bulbs went off. There's something transformative about listening deeply while someone opens up and shares their story. That first client sealed my fate as a therapist."

Watching Tawwab navigate interviews on television or hearing her riff with ease on a podcast, it might

ed to know, 'How did you get here?' I've always been curious about the process of becoming who we are and how we can make different choices."

One way Tawwab coped with stress growing up was by looking for explanations and solutions. Originally, she found answers to psychological problems like addiction, depression, and anxiety in a clinically unorthodox place: daytime television. "My after-school routine included watching Ricki Lake, Oprah, and Jenny Jones. Their shows gave me the terminology to understand things going on in the lives of neighbors and relatives. And people started talking to me about their issues. Given my age, it was certainly inappropriate, but it was also interesting.

"Because I started watching talk shows so young, being on them now is a little nostalgic. Recently, on *Tamron Hall*, I realized, 'Oh, I would've loved watching this as a kid.' My upbringing made me responsible and analytical and resourceful. For

a long time, I thought this was a great thing, but looking back I'm not so sure. When I see my own kids really being kids, I get a sense of what I might've been missing."

In the interview that follows, Tawwab offers her perspective on boundaries, uncomfortable conversations, cutoffs, being weird, and her new book, *Drama Free*.

PSYCHOTHERAPY NETWORKER:

When you went from 2,000 to 100,000 followers in such a short amount of time, and then had the bestselling book and media exposure, were you prepared? What changed for you personally and professionally?

TAWWAB: I wasn't prepared because I didn't know it would happen. Professionally, it was a mas-

sive shift. I had to pull away from accepting many new clients and really think about how I wanted to organize my time to make space for interviews, writing, and showing up on Instagram and in the media. Whenever I did take a new client, I noticed they'd have this perception of how I practice based on my Instagram posts and my "Nedra Nuggets" newsletter, sort of like, "Well, give me the nugget," and I was taken by surprise, like, "What? I'm not doing nuggets in therapy." Nonetheless, I still show up as myself both in the media and in the therapy space. Only in therapy, I'm in more of a listening role, noticing patterns and sometimes sharing feedback. I'm not sitting there as some wise, infallible being—which some clients expect.

As for personally, I'm still figuring that part out. I've started going to therapy more to help me process some things that aren't the norm for other people in my life, like when someone I don't know sends me a mean DM, or someone from the fourth grade reaches out after seeing me on TV, or when I get to meet a celebrity I'm really, really excited about. It's like I'm in a constant state of "Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!" to the point where I don't want to overwhelm my friends and family who are busy raising their kids, dealing with their jobs, going about their lives. I discuss these things with my therapist because I freak out a lot, about things good and bad, and I'm conscious that not everything has to be shared in a way that might overwhelm my support system.

PN: I know *Drama Free* focuses on navigating family relationships and gentle cutoffs. What's the difference between a gentle cutoff and, say, ghosting somebody?

TAWWAB: I think of cutoffs as estrangement, which can be physical and emotional. Sometimes we can't be emotionally present with people, and that's a level of cutting ourselves

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be tempting to decide she must have absorbed her self-confidence, poise, and mastery of boundaries in her early home environment. People get this wrong about her a lot, she says, assuming she grew up in a two-parent home without stress. In reality, she was raised by a single mom, and was exposed to addiction and undiagnosed mental health disorders in both her home and neighborhood. She's publicly shared that her Adverse Childhood Experiences score is a 7, but with a caveat: "I never thought of trauma as the end of my story."

"There was a woman," Tawwab reflects, "who lived next door to us who I now realize was schizophrenic. I kept wondering, 'What happened to her? What's her story?' When I saw people with addictions, I want-

off from them. Or we can stop sharing certain aspects of our life with them. Often, when we're severing ties completely, we're saying, "I don't want physical or emotional interaction with you." But that can get complicated within families, especially if there will be events or holidays you'll want to attend. Chances are, you'll be tied to this person, especially if it's a parent, in some way, so what level of disconnection do you want? Do you want it to be physical? Do you want it to be emotional? Do you want it to be both?

Just because we don't have contact with someone doesn't mean we'll never see or think of them again. We have to do away with this idea of, "I hate them, and they must disappear forever." That's not reality! Within families, we'll continue to connect with family members in some capacity, but you get to determine what you want that to look like, and how much distance you want.

Of course, there are people who are dangerous and we shouldn't be around, as with relatives who are physically or emotionally abusive. But mostly there will be some level of engagement—and you get to choose how much and when.

PN: What's the biggest problem you've seen with family cutoffs?

TAWWAB: They're issued as ultimatums. It usually starts when people say to a parent, "This is how you treated me in childhood, and you need to apologize and atone," and the parent is like, "What? I was an excellent parent!" Then they're shocked and come back with, "I have a thousand examples of your terrible parenting." When the parent defends themselves or pushes back, the reaction is to cut them off.

A gentler approach is, "This is my parent. They may not be in a space to recognize how they've impacted me and who they are to me." Some of our work as therapists is to help clients with the discomfort and disappointment of coming to grips with this.

Clients need help letting go of the



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fantasy of changing people. We can nudge them toward acceptance of who others are in their lives and help them see their options. You *can* have a relationship with an addict. You *can* have a relationship with someone who mistreated you in childhood. You *can* have a relationship with someone you don't like. You *can* decide on the degree of connection you're comfortable with. And maybe that ends up being no connection at all. You get to choose.

PN: Can you speak to those therapists on Instagram who are just trying to get to 100 followers? They've got a message to share, and they want to attract clients. How do they grapple with being what a therapist is expected to be and being genuinely themselves online?

TAWWAB: There's some separation between who we are as therapists and who we are in our personal lives, but that separation shouldn't be a huge gap. We have our own personality. We have our own ideas about our appearance. It makes sense to dress work-appropriately, but in terms of color schemes or wearing your hair a certain way or wearing makeup or any of those things, you have to be who you are.

In school, we were told how to dress as therapists, like "Don't wear shoes that show your toes. Make sure your shirt is always buttoned to the top. Don't put a table between you and your client." Basically, "This is how you have to show up to be taken seriously as a therapist." We were taught to conform to one way of showing up, as if that would

make us great at what we did.

Therapists need to allow themselves to have their personality and be who they are as much as possible—online, offline—within ethical boundaries, of course. It's what keeps us engaged in our work. It's what attracts the type of clients who energize us, the ones we can help. The good news is, when you show up authentically, the people who aren't drawn to you won't come back, and that's okay, because you're not the therapist for them.

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PN: What do you think the field of psychotherapy should be focusing on most?

TAWWAB: I think we all need help dealing with discomfort. We need to normalize it more, so we don't spend so much time trying to escape it, especially basic, everyday discomforts, like when the people you love annoy you. Nobody talks about that. It's like we think we're not supposed to be annoyed. But our partners, our children, our coworkers annoy us all the time. How will you manage yourself when you get annoyed by people in your life? There's been so much work around, "If you're feeling anxious, change your thoughts. Give yourself positive self-talk or leave the situation." But avoidance rarely helps us. Positive thinking about terrible

situations rarely helps us. What could be helpful is learning to manage our uncomfortable emotions while we're experiencing them.

Anger, sadness, annoyance, and frustration are here to stay. What will you do when you feel discomfort? I've been talking about jealousy more in my work because it's one of those things we don't want to feel. Here's the thing: you *will* feel jealous. It's okay. What will you do? Will you say, "Oh, they got a new car, now I'll get a new car." Do you want to knock them off their perch and say, "I'm going to scratch their car to get rid of my jealousy?" What type of person do you want to be when you feel jealous? You *could* admit to yourself, "That's nice for them, and I'm not in a place to have that, and that makes me feel bad." If we move toward embracing our discomfort and getting away from talking ourselves out of what we're feeling, we'll find more peace. Because there's no escaping what you need to feel. There's no scented candle that's going to make you un-mad.

PN: I've got a pretty good scented candle for that at home.

TAWWAB: (laughs) Lucky you!

PN: Are you saying that sometimes we need to allow more permeability to our boundaries because we're human? Sometimes we're going to get annoyed, and it doesn't mean we always need to push things and people away?

TAWWAB: Yes. We tend to think about boundaries as fixed rules, these things we *must* do, but a healthy boundary allows for flexibility; it's not rigid. The biggest misconception about boundaries is that they're cut-

offs, but a cutoff is just one type of boundary. There are thousands of types. Boundaries are a choice. You do them for *you*, to help you feel safe. But if I say, "Hey, when you come over to my house, please take your shoes off," someone might push back and say, "I refuse to take my shoes off." I may decide to be flexible and let them in anyway. Or I may not. A boundary is *your* thing. It's not a hard-and-fast rule.

In the last few years, the relationships I've ended have been ones in which I was very clear about my boundaries and another person refused to respect them. I've had to say, "Hey, don't call me five times in a row if it's not an emergency," even though that may sound offensive to someone who thinks I should just answer my phone whenever they call. In my view, repeatedly calling me is unfair when I may actually be doing something.

PN: How does embracing our discomfort help us have more uncomfortable conversations?

TAWWAB: We might be highly bothered by something but stay silent based on what we deem to be appropriate for a certain setting or person—which often turns small discomforts into huge issues, to the point where we're like, "I want a divorce. I want to quit this job. I don't want to talk to this person anymore." There are usually many smaller conversations we've missed having, due to our discomfort that would have helped us not get to that point.

PN: What about white privilege and sexism and all the forms of systemic entitlement our clients live in the midst of all the time? Those are often uncomfortable conversations many of us avoid. How do you address that as a therapist? Do you address it, or does it depend on your clients?

TAWWAB: I'd address it when it's problematic for the client. I'm always listening to discern, "Okay, this is what you want to focus on. Oh, your

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body language changed, so this is a problem for you,” or “This is something I can explore with you to see if it’s a problem.” It’s not about what I see as a problem: it’s about what the client sees as a problem.

There are some things, of course, like addiction or emotional abuse, where we may have to interject and say, “What do you think these behaviors you’re engaging in accomplish?” or “When this person says that to you, how do you feel about it?” But it’s always about staying focused on the client.

PN: How do we have more uncomfortable conversations?

TAWWAB: We begin by practicing healthy boundaries so we can feel safer and more comfortable within ourselves and in our environments to start talking more about what bothers us. Sometimes we don’t recognize we’re bothered right away, but when we sleep on it and wake up and notice we’re still frustrated, then we can say something. It can be as simple as saying, “I don’t know if you should word it that way” or “I’d prefer if you’d pay me back by Monday.” If we spoke up more often, we’d have fewer conflicts. But we’re a culture that goes quickly from “Oh, it’s not a big deal” to “Oh, my gosh! It’s on fire!” We go from passive to aggressive with very little in between.

PN: Are you saying there are ways to say things that are respectful and don’t feed this polarization where, “I’m bad, you’re good” and “I’m right, you’re wrong?”

TAWWAB: Yes, but we also need to remember that your discomfort isn’t my responsibility. In my culture, there’s a fear of not speaking up so as not to seem like the angry Black woman. We have to allow people to speak in diverse ways. This is the essence of open communication. Deal with your own discomfort

around all the different ways people show up. If I’m feeling threatened by how you express yourself, I may need to search my soul to figure out why someone saying something non-threatening threatens me. We need to ask ourselves, with honesty and genuine curiosity, “What’s *really* going on in this situation? Am I attributing a certain way of presenting to a certain gender, to a certain racial group, to a certain person with a particular background?”

There are times we assume things like, “Oh, this person is being mean,” and we’re mistaken. We need to ask ourselves, “Is that person being mean, or are they saying something loudly?” Just because they’re a loud person doesn’t mean they were yelling at you. Don’t expect everyone to conform to being exactly like you.

PN: It sounds like you’re not a big believer in conformity.

TAWWAB: All my life, people have told me, “You’re weird.” I think it’s because I’ve always had a level of animation to how I speak, and I’ve felt a sense of urgency about how I want to do things. I’m particular about who I am. I don’t change for the setting. In high school, I used to bring a thermos of hot tea to school every day. I was the only kid with a thermos. My classmates would laugh, and my response was, “I like to have hot tea all day.” I read self-help books in high school. I still have an Iyanla Vanzant book on my bookshelf from my 16th birthday. I’d walk around school with my thermos, reading Iyanla Vanzant, sipping tea, happily weird. I’m committed to being this unique version of myself. When you’re called weird, it’s one of the highest compliments you can get because it means you’re a version of a human others haven’t experienced before. It’s a wonderful thing to embrace that.

My mother jokes I should be left-handed because I picked up everything with my left hand as a kid.

But at the time, being left-handed wasn’t seen as a good thing—it was almost viewed as a disability. So I was conditioned to use my right hand, and I always got a C in handwriting. Now I wonder, *What would my life be like as a left-handed person?* The reality is, I wasn’t allowed to explore that possibility.

PN: That’s a good metaphor for the ways we all struggle with fitting in while being ourselves. Any final thoughts on what we should keep in mind as therapists working with clients also struggling with these opposing forces of authenticity and conformity?

TAWWAB: We’re here to encourage our clients to get curious and rediscover themselves. We’re here to say, “I wonder when you stopped honoring what you want. There’s something that happened that’s disconnected you from yourself. Can we explore that?” I haven’t met a child who doesn’t know what they want. I’ve met many adults who don’t know what they want, because the world has talked them out of knowing it.

As therapists, we’re in a powerful position. We’re here not so much to reparent our clients, but to help them recover from the trauma of unbecoming themselves. Therapists are here to help people get back to being themselves—which is a beautiful job and role. 🍵

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