

Boundaries that protect

Sustainable strategies for teacher wellbeing

- Dr Matt O'Connor

A bit about me...



Why does this stuff matter?



Teaching is a multi-skilled, uniquely human profession

At best – it is your livelihood

At worst – it can cause you significant harm

What we'll cover today



- Setting and sticking to boundaries
- Embedded wellbeing (as well as 'first aid' self-care)
- Protecting your capacity to continue doing meaningful work

The aim is to **prevent/limit the likelihood** of problems, not (just) get better at coping with the consequences

A brief caveat for today

Boundaries



Barriers to boundaries

Boundaries can be **HARD** to implement and stick to!

So what gets in the way of setting boundaries...

- Role overload and unclear expectations
- School (and society) cultures that unintentionally reward overworking and self-sacrificing
- People pleasing
- Perfectionism
- Feeling responsible for everyone and everything
- Difficulty disappointing others
- Feeling guilty for protecting your own time and wellbeing



Role overload

- Teaching roles have expanded over time – both because of **organisational (and societal) expectations** and also **our own ways of doing thing**
- The challenge is not just workload, it is also
 - Constant task-switching
 - Emotional labour
 - Competing priorities
 - Managing uncertainty
 - Holding responsibility without full control
- Some/many of these things can be (somewhat) managed by us...



How our stuff can make more stuff

- You are a whole person – **strengths and challenges** - all combined!
- Your approach to work = what the school tells you to do + how you decide to do it
- We lean on our strengths but we can also **overuse them**
- **Self-reflection** supports thoughtful and flexible use of our strengths

Over-using strengths



High consideration of others	Quality focused	Empathic and caring	Reliable	Independent and self-reliant	Motivated and goal-oriented
• Saying yes too often • Difficulty disappointing others • Taking responsibility for everyone's experience • Prioritising harmony over sustainability	• Spending excessive time on tasks • Difficulty letting work feel "good enough" • Over-preparing, over-checking or over-working • Unrealistic standards for yourself	• Absorbing too much emotional distress • Difficulty emotionally switching off • Feeling personally responsible for student outcomes	• Becoming the person everyone goes to • Others increasingly depending on you • Quietly carrying more and more load	• Struggling to ask for help • Feeling like you "should" manage on your own • Continuing to cope privately even when overwhelmed	• Self-worth becoming linked to productivity • Difficulty separating performance from identity • Feeling like there is always "more" you should be doing



Holding your boundary

- It can suck. REALLY suck.
- It does not always go well (initially, and sometimes, at all)
- Holding boundaries does not mean you are uncaring
- Clear communication usually reduces problems over time (even though it may feel uncomfortable to start)
- If making changes to boundaries, anticipate professional/interpersonal pushback
- Get support to implement boundaries and/or deal with the consequences

Just because you can, doesn't mean you should

What do healthy boundaries look like?



Shades of grey (even more than 50!)

Avoid 'all or nothing' thinking and aim for something more flexible

Time boundaries

- Protecting breaks where possible
- Not responding immediately to everything
- Leaving work at work sometimes

Workload boundaries

- Prioritising effectively
- Letting some things be “good enough”
- Using systems and efficiencies

Emotional boundaries

- Caring without absorbing everything
- Supporting without over-owning

Communication boundaries

- Being clear and consistent
- Managing expectations respectfully

Embedded wellbeing



Embedded wellbeing Vs Self care

	Embedded wellbeing	Self care
What is it?	Integrating healthy and supportive behaviours into your day to day	Used in response to a stressor and designed to soothe/recover
When	Before stress builds	After stress hits
Where	In the flow of daily work	Often at home
Whose responsibility	Shared by individuals and the system	The individual
Main focus	Prevention and sustainability	Recovery
Feels like...	A long-term investment	A short-term recharge



What does being well at work look like for you?

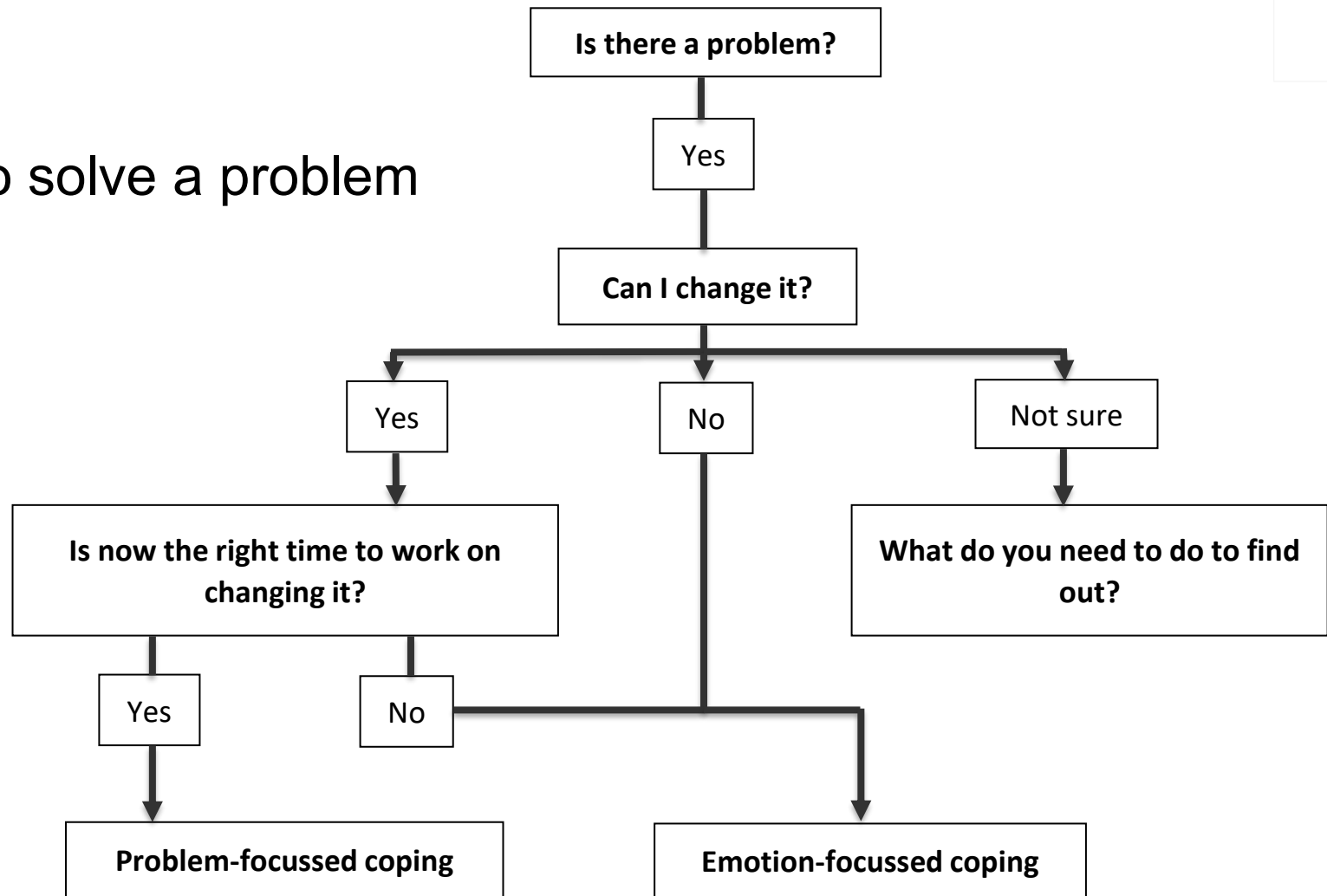
- Role clarity
- Psychological safety
- Supportive colleagues
- Predictability and structure
- Reasonable expectations
- Efficient systems and processes
- Feeling valued and supported
- Using your strengths intentionally



What DO you have control over?

- How you set and maintain **boundaries**
- **Workflow and organisation** – your systems and processes
- **Communication** style
- How and where you invest **your energy**
- **How you look after your own wellbeing** - the supports you access, asking for help, problem solving

How to solve a problem





Systems and processes

- Good systems and processes help with **efficiency and effectiveness**
- They aren't just for work – they can also help create **consistency in your wellbeing practices**
- For work tasks - most people don't use technology and more efficient processes well because:
 - They don't know it **exists/what it is capable of**
 - The **cost** (time and money) to set it up/implement it is too high
- Just because you've "**always done it that way**", doesn't mean you can't change!

Time per day	Time per week (5 days)	Time per year (40 weeks)	Difference across the year
30mins 0.5hrs	2.5hrs	100hrs 12.5 work days	
25mins 0.4hrs	2.1hrs	84hrs 10.5 work days	Reducing 5mins/day 16hrs 2 whole work days
20mins 0.3hrs	1.5hrs	66hrs 7.5 work days	Reducing 10mins/day 33 hrs 4 whole work days OR Nearly an entire work week

Being well outside (and inside) work



A little bit a lot is better than a lot a little

Some suggestions to do/don't do...

- **Don't smash yourself through the term** because you know you have holidays (wellbeing doesn't work like that!)
- **Build things into your routine** as much as possible (this is also about boundaries)
- **Use self-care liberally**, but if it is in response to injury, see it for the first aid response that it is and consider what (if anything) can be done preventatively

Anything is better than nothing



Thank you!



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