

A WORKPLACE WELLNESS GUIDE

Staying Grounded at Work

Validation, boundaries, defensiveness, leadership gaps, and creating personal psychological safety

Work can ask us to hold a great deal at once: colleagues who become highly activated, leaders whose behavior does not match the growth or care we hope for, and systems that do not reliably recognize our effort or value. It is possible to stay compassionate without becoming responsible for everyone else's emotions. It is also possible to stay professional without abandoning your own dignity.

This guide offers practical language, reflection exercises, and planning tools. It is not about tolerating harmful behavior or trying to solve a workplace culture alone. It is about choosing grounded responses, clearer boundaries, and small sources of safety and agency while you decide what support or change you need.

You can validate someone's experience without agreeing with every conclusion, accepting disrespect, or becoming their therapist.

START HERE

What This Guide Helps You Practice

Use the sections that fit your role, level of authority, and current workplace reality.

Validate with boundaries

Respond to a coworker's feelings or stress without endorsing harmful conduct, taking on their workload, or becoming pulled into escalation.

Work with defensiveness

Notice when feedback or conflict activates you, lower the urge to argue or take offense, and respond from curiosity and self-respect.

Navigate leadership gaps

Respect a role and use professional judgment without requiring a leader to have your level of emotional awareness or personal growth.

Build personal safety

Create practical pockets of support, clarity, documentation, recovery, and choice when the wider organization does not feel safe or affirming.

PART 1

Validate the Person Without Feeding the Escalation

Validation says, *"I can see this is real for you."* It does not say, *"Every belief, behavior, or demand is okay."*

When a coworker is overwhelmed, angry, panicked, or intensely distressed, your instinct may be to fix, debate, calm them immediately, agree to make the tension stop, or pull away. A more balanced response begins by recognizing the emotion and the impact, then staying clear about your own role, capacity, and boundaries.

A response that can escalate	A validating boundary
"You are right. This place is impossible."	"I can hear that this situation has been really frustrating and discouraging for you."
"Calm down. It is not that serious."	"I can see this feels intense right now. Let us slow down and focus on what would be useful next."
"I will take care of it for you."	"I can help you think through the next step, and I cannot take this on for you."
"You are being unreasonable."	"I hear that you need something to change. I am willing to talk about a specific request when we can do that respectfully."
Silence or over-explaining	"I want to understand. I also need us to keep the conversation focused and respectful."

Validation has three parts

- *Name the emotion or impact: "That sounds exhausting," "I can see why you are frustrated," or "It makes sense that this felt discouraging."*
- *Name your role honestly: "I can listen for a few minutes," "I can help clarify the process," or "I am not the decision-maker for this."*
- *Name the next boundary or action: "Let us identify one next step," "Please send that request in writing," or "We can continue after we both take a pause."*

PART 2

When Someone Is Highly Activated at Work

Your job is to stay clear and humane. You do not have to absorb the intensity or solve the person's inner world.

A highly activated person may speak quickly, repeat themselves, use absolutes, become tearful, send urgent messages, or direct their frustration toward you. You can lower the temperature by reducing the number of issues in the conversation, using fewer words, and choosing one concrete next step. If behavior becomes threatening, abusive, discriminatory, or unsafe, leave the interaction and use the appropriate workplace safety process.

1 Ground yourself first

Feel both feet on the floor, slow your exhale, and remind yourself: "Their intensity is information. It is not an instruction for me to match it."

2 Lower the pace

Use a quieter tone and short sentences. Ask one question at a time. Avoid debating every detail while the person is flooded.

3 Reflect the core concern

Try: "The main issue I hear is that the deadline changed without notice. Is that right?"

4 Offer limited choices

Try: "We can write down the concern, ask for clarification, or schedule a time to revisit this. Which feels most useful?"

5 Set a clear boundary

Try: "I want to continue, and I cannot do that while being yelled at. I am going to step away and we can return at ____."

6 Know when to involve support

Follow workplace procedures when there is a threat, harassment, safety concern, severe impairment, or a situation beyond your role.

Compassion does not require proximity to harmful behavior. Stepping away can be the most responsible response.

PART 3

Respect the Role Without Idealizing the Leader

A leader can hold authority and still have limits in emotional awareness, communication, accountability, or growth.

It can be deeply disappointing when a leader's behavior does not match the standards you value. You may feel tempted to over-explain, seek emotional recognition they cannot offer, become the informal coach, or withdraw completely. A more sustainable approach is to right-size your expectations, communicate in ways that fit the setting, and decide what access that leader has to your energy and inner world.

Respect is not emotional trust

You can be professional, courteous, and prepared without sharing vulnerable information with someone who has not demonstrated the ability to handle it well.

Authority is not expertise in every area

A leader may have decision-making power without having strong conflict skills, trauma awareness, or the capacity to validate your experience.

Clarify instead of mind-reading

Use concise questions: "What outcome are you looking for?" "What is the priority?" "What decision has been made?" "What would success look like?"

Use the appropriate channel

Bring concerns through documented, role-appropriate processes. Consider a trusted mentor, human resources, employee assistance program, union, or professional advisor when relevant.

Choose the level of engagement

Not every gap requires a confrontation. Decide whether to clarify, document, ask for support, set a boundary, adapt your workflow, or plan a longer-term change.

Protect your standards

You do not have to become less thoughtful, ethical, or grounded because someone above you is operating from a different level of awareness.

Right-size the expectation

- *What am I hoping this leader will give me: clarity, recognition, empathy, consistency, accountability, protection, or growth?*
- *What have they actually demonstrated they can reliably offer?*
- *Where else could I seek the support or perspective I need?*
- *What is the most professional, least emotionally costly way to communicate with them?*

PART 4

When You Feel Defensive or Easily Offended

Defensiveness is often a fast protective response to shame, fear, exclusion, unfairness, or the feeling of being misunderstood.

Being defensive does not mean you are immature or uncaring. It may mean a tender place was touched. The goal is not to become emotionless or accept unfair criticism. The goal is to create enough space between the trigger and your response that you can decide what feedback is useful, what needs clarification, and what boundary is appropriate.

Notice the early signs

A hot face, tight chest, urge to interrupt, urge to prove your point, immediate self-criticism, sarcasm, or a sudden feeling of "This is not fair."

Name the protector

Silently say: "A part of me wants to defend because this matters." Naming the response reduces the chance that it runs the conversation.

Separate impact from intent

Your intention may have been good, and another person may still have experienced harm or difficulty. Both can be true at the same time.

Ask for specifics

Replace a global argument with: "Can you give me an example?" "What did you observe?" "What would you want to see instead?"

Buy time when needed

Try: "I want to take this in without reacting. Can I think about it and come back to you by ___?"

Keep your self-respect

Receiving feedback does not require accepting insults, vague criticism, discriminatory comments, or an unfair process. You can ask for respect and clarity.

Curiosity is not agreement. It is a way of gathering information before deciding what belongs to you and what does not.

PART 5

A Five-Step Practice for Dropping Defensiveness

Use this process in feedback, conflict, performance conversations, and moments when you feel personally attacked.

1 Pause the first answer

Do not rush to explain, apologize for everything, or counter with your own complaint. Take one breath and feel your body before speaking.

2 Find the signal underneath

Ask: "What is this touching in me?" It may be a fear of failure, rejection, unfairness, being seen as incompetent, or losing belonging.

3 Reflect what you heard

Try: "What I hear is that the report felt incomplete and you needed more detail by Tuesday. Is that accurate?"

4 Ask one clarifying question

Try: "Which part was most concerning?" "What would a stronger version look like?" or "What information is missing for you?"

5 Choose your response

You might own your part, share relevant context, ask for a fair process, set a boundary, or request time to respond in writing. Choose one grounded next step.

Language for a grounded response

- "I can feel myself getting defensive, and I want to understand before I respond."
- "I hear the impact you are describing. I would like a specific example so I can address it."
- "I can take responsibility for _____. I also want to clarify _____."
- "I am open to feedback, and I need the conversation to stay specific and respectful."
- "I need time to consider this. I will follow up by _____."

PART 6

When the Workplace Does Not Feel Psychologically Safe

Psychological safety means people can ask questions, raise concerns, admit mistakes, and contribute ideas without expecting humiliation, retaliation, or exclusion.

Psychological safety is largely shaped by systems and leadership. It is not your job to fix a culture that punishes vulnerability or ignores people's contributions. Still, you can create personal and relational pockets of safety by being thoughtful about what you share, how you communicate, where you seek support, and what records you keep.

Notice the signals People are interrupted, blamed, shamed, excluded, retaliated against, punished for asking questions, or rewarded for silence and overwork.	Name the impact privately Low safety can lead to hypervigilance, people-pleasing, burnout, guarded communication, sleep disruption, self-doubt, and difficulty thinking clearly.
Create a clarity habit Confirm priorities and decisions in writing. Keep concise notes about agreements, timelines, feedback, and important interactions.	Choose trusted allies Identify one or two people who are discreet, grounded, and role-appropriate. Mutual support is different from uncontained venting or gossip.
Protect your energy Use breaks, realistic availability, role boundaries, recovery practices, and limits on how much emotional labor you provide at work.	Use formal supports when warranted If you experience harassment, discrimination, retaliation, threats, or serious ethical concerns, consider relevant policies and qualified internal or external support. This guide is not legal advice.

If a system does not value you well, its limitation is not proof that you lack value. Your task is to protect your well-being while choosing your options.

PART 7

Build Your Personal Psychological-Safety Plan

You may not control the culture. You can increase clarity, support, and choice in the areas you do control.

Think of this as a practical plan rather than a personality test. The goal is to reduce unnecessary risk, preserve your energy, and keep enough perspective that one difficult workplace does not become the whole story of your worth or capability.

The workplace situations that activate me most are:

Name specific settings, people, tasks, or patterns rather than labeling the whole workplace. _____

The information I will confirm in writing is:

Priorities, deadlines, decisions, feedback, scope, workload, or other key agreements. _____

The people and resources I can turn to are:

Trusted colleague, mentor, employee assistance program, supervisor, union, HR, clinician, or professional advisor as relevant. _____

The boundary that would protect my energy is:

A limit on availability, emotional labor, extra work, interruptions, tone, or after-hours contact. _____

The sign that tells me I need more support is:

Persistent dread, sleep disruption, panic, shutdown, burnout, repeated mistreatment, or another specific signal. _____

My next professional option is:

Clarify, document, ask for support, use a formal channel, update your resume, explore a transfer, or another appropriate step. _____

A weekly grounding practice

- *At the end of the week, write three facts about what you contributed, one boundary you honored, one moment you handled with care, and one support you want next week.*

PRACTICE AND REFLECTION

Activities for a Difficult Workweek

Choose one activity at a time. The goal is to build reliable practices, not to become perfectly calm or endlessly available.

1 The two-column debrief

After a tense interaction, write "What happened" on the left and "The story I told myself" on the right. Then add one "What I need to know or do next" sentence.

2 The validation and boundary rehearsal

Practice saying one validating sentence and one boundary out loud. Example: "I can hear that this is frustrating. I can discuss the next step, and I cannot continue while being interrupted."

3 The feedback reset

Use a low-stakes piece of feedback. Pause, reflect what you heard, ask one question, and wait until later to decide what action you want to take.

4 The leadership expectation map

List what you need from a leader, what they reliably provide, what you can ask for professionally, and what support you need from a different source.

5 The values check

Ask: "What kind of colleague do I want to be even in a difficult culture?" Choose one behavior that reflects your answer without overextending yourself.

Questions to bring to therapy or supervision

- *Where am I over-functioning or under-protecting myself at work?*
- *What feedback is useful, and what feedback is activating an older wound or an unfair dynamic?*
- *What boundary would be difficult but important to practice?*
- *What would a sustainable work life look like for me, whether I stay, adapt, or eventually leave?*

Professionalism Does Not Require Self-Abandonment

You can bring steadiness to difficult work situations without carrying responsibility for the whole culture. You can validate without over-functioning, respect leadership without idealizing it, receive feedback without losing yourself, and create more safety through thoughtful boundaries and support.

Be compassionate and clear

Validation recognizes an experience. Boundaries name what is and is not okay for you to take on.

Stay curious before defensive

A pause and a clarifying question can turn a threat response into useful information and a more intentional next move.

Right-size your expectations

Respect the role, use the process, and seek emotional support from people who have earned that level of access.

Protect your value

An invalidating or low-safety culture can be painful. It does not define your contribution, capability, or worth.

Your growth can include learning when to engage, when to pause, when to document, and when to seek a healthier environment.

Affirmations for Grounded Work

"I can be compassionate without carrying everyone else's emotions."

"I can receive feedback with curiosity while protecting my dignity."

"I can respect a role without requiring a person to meet every emotional need."

"I can use clear boundaries and calm documentation to support myself."

"My value is not determined by one manager, one meeting, or one workplace culture."

A Note From Dr. Natalie Ellis

Workplace stress can touch identity, safety, belonging, and self-worth. Therapy can help you understand the patterns that make work feel especially activating, strengthen boundaries and communication, and consider your options with more clarity. If you are experiencing an immediate threat or safety concern, follow emergency and workplace safety procedures right away.

Ready to explore these patterns more deeply?

Schedule a free consultation with Dr. Natalie Ellis, LCSW-QS

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