

Recently, a WTS mentor sent the following note to our mailing list voicing a common theme:

*Subject: Feeling overwhelmed*

*Has anyone else ever felt this way? I feel like I'm just not doing a good job. How do you put things in perspective?*

Several people answered the message and those responses are compiled and condensed here. Many of the exact responses are included here to give it a personal touch. You'll notice that the main theme of the responses is about setting boundaries.

---

*Set up some boundaries regarding your mentee. We all are helpers though I had to put a halt on giving my own \$ for things such as food, transportation, rides, etc. Instead I gave recommendations for resources for these items. Also, timewise, I suggest setting a time weekly to visit or take mentees to lunch, etc. Try to stick to that. It's really is all about spending time with these wonderful people but always keep in mind self-care as well.*

---

*I try to remember that I simply cannot fix many of the real problems, I can't erase immigration laws or poverty or trauma or war, but I can provide some brightness and relief which may make a day better. I focus on small, fun activities, or small, fun purchases. You are NEVER obligated to spend any money, but I think when we do spend, we feel it needs to be on "essentials". I've found fun gifts - an ice cream, a birthday cake, hair extensions, a dress - bring us both some joy, brighten one day, and that is something important.*

*It's also absolutely essential to be able to say no to requests you are unable or unwilling to fulfill. You owe it to yourself and also to your*

*mentee, who does not want to become a burden in your life or a source of resentment! We have a weird cultural thing here where we don't ask for help unless we are desperate, at which point, people have to comply or feel terrible. This definitely varies between African cultures, but in some cultures, help is freely requested, freely given, freely refused. Which is a lot simpler if you can let go of the guilt and baggage (I know, easier said than done). Wouldn't it be a nice world if we could just all ask for what we need, help if you can, say no if you can't, then we all just move on with the relationship? I haven't mastered this yet, but I'm getting better, learning a lot from my mentees!*

*A talk I regularly give myself is that I am not savior-of-the-world, and it's pretty egotistical for me to assign myself that role. I'm just here to be a good friend to all the people in my life. I can be sympathetic and loving and make folks feel heard in their suffering, without taking over and trying to fix everything. It's a long learning process!!*

---

*As a mentor and as a retired psychotherapist, I want to reinforce others' suggestions. I am forever grateful for the professional trainings I received on establishing boundaries. The mentor must decide what the limits to giving are, certainly in terms of material help, but also as far as time and effort go. To emphasize, we cannot solve our mentees problems which come from traumatic experiences or from the cultural shock of being an immigrant. To do the small things which can make an individual feel that they have a friend, that they are in a safe place, that they are welcomed, may be all we can do.*

---

*I'm so glad you posted this. I think we ALL feel overwhelmed at times. I've been working with refugees since 1986 and I regularly feel this way.*

*My theory is that I often feel overwhelmed because asylum seekers face overwhelming challenges. They've seen/experienced horrific things beyond my imagination. I once had a Sudanese "Lost Boy" at my house for dinner and later learned he was walking around with a bullet lodged in him!*

*They find themselves in a foreign land, broke, traumatized, friendless, homeless, and unable to read, write, converse, or work. One family fled their Portland apartment their first night when the smoke alarm went off. Though the alarm was soon reset, they were stuck on the sidewalk for the night. They didn't have a key, phone, or friends. Fortunately, a Good Samaritan rescued them, but it had to be scary.*

*I'm a helper. Making everything "all better" is my specialty. But I can't. The challenges (psychological, financial, cultural, political, physical, etc.) are too great to be fixed quickly. Some can never be fixed.*

*So, I try to set limits and small goals. What can I do in one hour per week? Can I give them reason to smile just once? Can I be one friend? Can I teach them one English expression? Can I help them open a bank account? Is there one hand-me-down I can part with? Can I give them one experience they wouldn't otherwise have (the library, the ocean, a high school play, a concert in the park, a car wash, sledding, sailing, grocery shopping, tea at a friend's, soda at a bar, etc.)? You can roll your eyes at me, but yes, tomorrow while my current mentee is worried about funding a medical procedure for his wife in Africa, I'll be taking him to a Bowdoin hockey game.*

*I'm not everything they need. I'm not a social worker, immigration lawyer, psychologist, doctor, translator, teacher, dentist, accountant, preacher, landlord, mechanic, or employer. No, on the grand scale, I ain't much.*

*But I'm not nothing. I'm possibly their very first friend in America. And I may be someone they remember for the rest of their lives. I know, I still hear from the courageous, persistent, patient champions I helped thirty years ago. In fact, I got a WhatsApp text from one this evening. They remember our friendship. It's not nothing to them.*

*Welcoming the Stranger gives me a chance to make a difference for people in need. Though it's occasionally challenging, when I set limits and small goals, it's deeply fulfilling. I wish you the joy that I get from helping asylum seekers and I hope these thoughts help you.*

---

*Themes / helpful questions to ask yourself / developed over the last two support meetings we had:*

- *THE RELATIONSHIP: What am I offering as mentor? What do I hope for? What have I gotten myself into?*
- *BOUNDARIES: What is my role? Am I an educator, pal, parent? How much do I suggest, push or accept?*
- *COMMITMENT: What is reasonable to offer? What am I willing to accept? Where do I draw the line? When and how do I end a relationship?*

- *RESPONSIBILITY: Who is responsible for what? How do I understand and allow for cultural differences, PTSD and personality differences?*
- *BURNOUT: "Yikes, this is really getting me down" department. How do I identify and address this?*
- *BUDDIES: Should we set up a "mentors for mentors" system?*

---

*I know this can happen, especially for people who have mentees who are either single or here on their own (left their families behind). It's always good to remember that most people have other communities outside of us - usually people from their own country, their church or school. We are just an add on - not people's primary connection.*

*If aren't already connected you might ask them more about what they could do to get more involved in the community. If they have time (not working yet), they could volunteer someplace where they might meet people (Hope House for example) or join a church or go to more English classes.*

*If they don't go to [In Her Presence](#) on Saturdays I would highly suggest you figure out how to get her involved - same with any women we work with.*