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The Don't Lose Podcast

With Karen Thrall

Season 1

Episode 4: Don't Lose Your Color-Coded Friendship Boundaries

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Transcript:

00:03 Hi, I'm Karen Thrall. Welcome to the Don't Lose Podcast, where we talk about stories that have meaning, life lessons, and something worth thinking about. I'm filming this week from beautiful Revelstoke, BC, surrounded by mountains and rivers. Today's episode is called Don't Lose Your Color-Coded Friendship Boundaries, and we're talking about how relationships evolve in both our personal and professional lives.

00:47 I've often struggled with what to do when a relationship starts to feel different. Sometimes I feel hurt, confused, pressured, drained, or even deeply grateful and connected. But what happens when you notice the relationship changing?

01:16 Years ago, a friend showed me a program for elementary school students that used colors to help kids understand kindness, friendliness, bullying, and how to respond. I thought it was brilliant, and it made me think this applies to adults too. So I expanded the colors. Today we're talking about green, blue, yellow, orange, red, grey, and black. As you listen, think about the people in your life and where they might fit.

02:40 Green is the deepest circle. These are the people you trust completely, the ones who see you on your worst days and still love you. They know the everyday version of you, they journey with you, and you can fully be yourself. This group should be small. These people have earned that place in your life through trust, consistency, and time.

03:48 Blue relationships are also strong and lasting, but they may not be part of your everyday life. They may live far away or simply not see every side of you, but the connection is still easy and trusted. You confide in them, share things you wouldn't share with most people, and there's a natural bond. Both green and blue relationships require emotional investment, and there's reciprocity. It isn't one-sided. There's a mutual sharing of life.

05:20 Yellow is for people you genuinely adore, but timing, geography, or life circumstances keep the relationship from becoming deeper. These are the people you think, "If we were neighbours, we'd probably hang out all the time." You may only talk once a year, but when you do, it feels easy. They hold a special place in your heart.

06:29 In the workplace, yellow might be the colleague you love having lunch with or working alongside. You have great camaraderie, maybe you go for happy hour, and you enjoy each other. But your lives outside work are different, so the friendship doesn't necessarily move into weekends or vacations. You still value and appreciate each other.

07:17 Orange moves us into more social or professional relationships. You might have a great boss who mentors you and plays a huge role in your career, but there isn't necessarily emotional intimacy. Or you might have people you love seeing at parties. You laugh, connect, and have a great time, but you keep your cards a little closer. The relationship is warm, but there is more distance and less emotional investment.

08:46 Years ago, I heard someone say, "We may not be friends, but we can be friendly." That stayed with me. Not every good relationship has to become a friendship. Some relationships are perfectly healthy at the surface level, and that can be enough.



09:27 Red is what I call the barista relationship. It's simple, polite friendliness. Someone knows your coffee order, you smile, say hello, and treat each other kindly. Red is old-fashioned kindness. Anyone can sit there. And there may be people in your life who actually belong there, even if you've been trying to keep them in a deeper circle.

10:18 During COVID, many people started rethinking relationships. When routines disappeared and people weren't socializing the same way, some friendships naturally drifted. It raised a question: am I investing in this relationship because it still fits, or simply because I always have?

10:47 Relationships evolve. You may have a colleague you never want to stop working with, and then one of you leaves. At first you stay connected, meet up after work, and make plans. Eventually it may fade. That doesn't mean the relationship failed. It may simply have belonged to a particular season of your life. You can still hold that person in your heart and appreciate what the relationship was.

11:34 Give yourself permission to let relationships change. This was hard for me. I felt pressure to maintain relationships at a level they were no longer meant to be maintained at. If someone didn't respond, I would wonder what I had done wrong. But the colors helped me see it differently. Maybe we're just not blue anymore. Maybe we're orange now. That realization brought relief because I didn't have to perform or force something that had naturally changed.

12:29 Grey is the holding place when you don't know what to do with a relationship. It isn't the same anymore, but you haven't figured out what it is now. This happens at work all the time. Maybe a peer becomes your boss. Maybe someone gets promoted and the dynamic changes. You both may try to maintain what you had, but the relationship has shifted. That's okay.

13:17 People often feel friction or uneasiness when a relationship changes because they're trying to keep it in an old category. Sometimes the answer is simply to let it become more casual. What I like about orange and red is that I can still be fully myself. I'm genuinely interested in the person, I'm kind, I'm present, but I'm not emotionally investing in the relationship the way I would with green, blue, or yellow.

14:26 Black is different. Black is where there is bitterness, anger, betrayal, broken trust, or deep hurt. Sometimes someone needs to be there for a while. What I want to propose is that black doesn't have to be permanent.

15:07 The work in black is forgiveness. Eventually you may be able to say, "You're flawed. You made mistakes. You hurt me. I've hurt people too. I can forgive you." But forgiveness does not automatically restore trust. Trust takes time to earn and even more time to rebuild. If both people aren't willing to do that work, you can forgive someone and still decide not to trust them.

16:15 That's where red can become the goal. I don't automatically trust strangers, but I can still be kind to them. I've moved people from black into red when I reached a place where I had neither love nor hate, just neutrality. I can see them, say hello, wish them well, and know that the emotional investment is gone because I've moved on.

17:05 So now, when someone is in black, I think, "For a little while." I work toward forgiveness and eventually toward red, where there is no intimacy, transparency, or emotional investment, but there can still be friendliness. We don't want to keep people in black forever. We want to carry on with our lives and allow them to carry on with theirs.

17:44 Look at the people in your personal life and at work. Where do they belong right now? You may feel relieved to move someone out of green because keeping them there has become stressful or complicated. Relationships have a life of their own. Let them evolve without shame or guilt. Enjoy people for where they are in your life now.

18:22 Thank you for listening, and I'll see you next week. And don't forget: don't lose your color-coded friendship boundaries. You can follow me on Instagram and YouTube at Karen Thrall Inc, and you can find the podcast on your favourite podcast platform.



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