

Starting with No

“I feel so frazzled!! I got through the holidays okay, and now my brother is sick, my daughter’s teacher has asked me to be her Classroom Parent after the other one quit, and my boss wants me to take on some new responsibilities with an eye toward promoting me! I need a break after the holidays, but it feels like everything has just gotten even more hectic. How can I do it all?”

Maddie was always busy with multiple irons in the fire – full-time work, a family, volunteer work, gatherings with extended family nearby. She was always ready to help others with a smile, a meal, a favor, or money. She usually managed it all with not *quite* enough sleep or self-care, but usually with a willing spirit and open heart.

She would have happily handled all of the events that January had they happened one after another, but lumped all together, it was more than she could manage. As always, she had said yes to everything, but just the thought of it all sent her blood pressure through the roof. Saying yes to everything was no longer workable.

As a starting point, I asked Maddie to consider what appealed to her about the possibilities of each situation, and if anyone else could handle them besides her. She was most excited about the new duties at her job. While others could do tasks, she was confident that she could do them well, and she had been hoping to be considered for a promotion soon. So, someone else *could* do it, but she wanted to be the one in charge of this.

She liked the idea of spending more time with her daughter as the Classroom Parent, but she knew that there were other parents who would probably step up to help the teacher if she didn’t. We thought through other ways she could spend more time with her daughter that didn’t involve an additional volunteering commitment.

Finally, Maddie wanted to help care for her brother, but felt squeamish about some of the at-home medical care he would need. As she thought about it, she realized that she had two cousins nearby in the medical field, and that her uncle was a retired case manager from a hospital, so she was in no way the best person to manage his care. She decided she would be happy to make meals sometimes and hang out with him when she was able, but that, as much as she loved her brother, she did not want to manage his care at home.

As we thought through these issues, Maddie started taking stock of her other volunteer work. She started considering each of her commitments to decide whether she was *interested* in doing them and if she had the *resources* to do them. Over time, she dropped some of her volunteer commitments, and shifted others so that they were less draining for her.

I suggested that she adopt a personal policy for herself until she could stop answering ‘yes’ to every request. I suggested that she start by answering ‘no’ to any request. She could then ask for the question to be repeated. She could decide how she answered the question the second time, but the delay would give her moment to consider her actual interest and available resource.

Maddie found the practice awkward at first. With practice, she found that she felt freer to decline requests she couldn’t, or didn’t want to, do. She also felt much more in charge of her time, and less resentful of the endless needs of others.

So, where does it make sense for you to start at ‘no’?