

Aging Lifestyles: Let it 'no,' let it 'no,' let it 'no'

by Joe_Volz

A couple of years ago we agreed to take part in a neighbor's campaign to win election to the Maryland legislature. Before we knew it, we were standing in the rain for hours handing out her material at the primary election. Then, days before the November election, we spent hours on Sunday making cold calls urging people to vote for our choice. We had fallen victim to "volunteerism" - agreeing to take part in an activity that we didn't enjoy and took us away from things we'd rather be doing. We weren't political animals but we wanted to be civic-minded and "do something."

It's a common failing older people can fall into when they have more time at their disposal after retiring.

How often have you heard people say, "I'm busier now than when I worked" or "I thought I'd have lots of time in retirement and I don't have any?"

We call it taking the perilous path of retirement burnout. Working too hard in retirement. There are various reasons why it is so hard to keep control of volunteering. Sometimes over-scheduling just happens. Consider what occurs when a friend, church acquaintance, or even a stranger calls to enroll you in a worthy cause - to teach a Sunday school class, to raise funds for an animal shelter or to answer the domestic abuse center hot line once a week.

All provide valuable service to a community so it's easy to say "yes" without thinking and then come to regret your hasty answer. Some people only learn the lesson after being overwhelmed with too many activities.

Sarah, for example, felt stressed out. In considering how much time she was donating to clubs and other volunteer jobs in addition to her family responsibilities, she was stunned to discover it was close to 40 hours. She realized she had to cut something out for her own well-being.

But resolving to choose more carefully and succeeding are quite different. When you are accustomed to saying "yes" and other people depend on your willingness to help, it can be difficult to extract yourself.

In every case it starts with the simple word, "no." To soften the blow, it's OK to explain that you have too much on your plate right now. Another possibility is to fudge it by saying, "I can't right now but perhaps in the future." This puts the asker off and doesn't commit you to anything.

Some people always respond by delaying a reply for a day or two. This has the advantage of allowing enough time to consider other responsibilities and whether you really want accept.

Saying "no" can be downright good for people, says the Mayo Clinic in an online article (www.mayoclinic.com). It's not selfish and may be quite beneficial. For instance, "You'll be able to spend quality time on the things you've already said yes to." Husbanding your acceptances also can allow you to try new things, to pursue other hobbies or interests.

Maybe you've always wanted to learn to identify birds or to take up woodworking. Now may be the time, but you have to clear your schedule first.

"'Yes' isn't always the best answer," the Mayo Clinic adds. By over-committing, "you may become sick, tired or just plain old crabby, which doesn't benefit you or anyone else."

Agreeing to do more than is practical feeds right into what we call the "God syndrome," where people convince themselves that they are the only one who can do a job properly. But that's really unfair to others. Though they "may not do things exactly the same way you would, you can learn a valuable lesson by allowing others to help while gaining treasured free time," the Mayo Clinic article insists.

Learning to say "no" is a valuable lesson that carries over to other types of circumstances as well.

Eve is a good example. The mother of eight children, her oldest daughter made her a grandmother when her youngest son was barely 12. Right away she let it be known that she was not available for routine baby-sitting. Initially, her daughter resented her decision. But by the time she herself became the grandmother of 10 she had gained a new respect for her mother. She, too, had no desire to take care of her grandchildren except on rare occasions.

So, if you want to avoid retirement burnout, just ease up a bit like Eve did.

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