

Overwhelmed, Stressed Women – Everything to Everyone

by Michelle Kelley, LCSW



Most of us know these scenarios all too well: Someone needs extra help at work on a big project and the deadline is coming up quick; the kids forgot to remind you about the school bake sale they signed up for, and it's tomorrow; your husband doesn't seem to mind the dust bunnies on the floor or the piled up laundry, until he needs a clean and ironed shirt in the morning; and the dog is waiting by the door – and whining – again.

What is wrong here?

I'm the first to admit it: I struggle with asking for help or just saying "no." Many women do. I bet you're one of them! But why is this? Is there something different in our DNA that compels us to accept more and more responsibility? Or are we a product of a generation gone by when women were expected to do everything – with a smile on their face?

Recently I was at home on a call with my business coach. I was completely focused on our conversation when I just happened to notice that my dog's shed hair had decided to congregate under my kitchen table. So, not wanting to waste time, I decided that I could clean the kitchen floor and have a thought-provoking conversation on the phone.

Why do we think we have to multitask all of the time?

There has never been a time such as this in history. Women make up almost 50% of our work

force and own 30% of small businesses. Yet we are still more likely to take on the majority of the childcare and home responsibilities.

We're moms, wives, businesswomen, business owners, entrepreneurs, managers, and students. We're taking care of our children and our parents. We're helping our community. We're active in our church. We could drop dead from multi-tasking... but we're making a difference! At least that's what we believe.

We're everything to everyone. But what about us? Have we forgotten ourselves? Aren't we important, too? Remember the old saying, "If momma ain't happy, no one is?"

What keeps us from asking for the help we desperately need? These are what some of my clients say:

- What's the use, nothing changes.
- It's easier for me to do it rather than listen to the excuses.
- It's my responsibility to make everything work.
- Everyone is busy, so why am I special?

Sound familiar? So what should you do?

This is a complex situation that did not arise overnight and there's not an easy solution. However, I am a big believer in developing self-awareness and then starting the conversation. Be sure, the conversation won't end anytime soon, nor should it. Let me explain.

Some of us get so busy we don't stop to ask ourselves why we are doing so much. To be honest, if we have too much on our plate, we may not even recognize it! If we don't notice, why would anyone else notice?

Become aware of why you overpack your schedule. Why do you think that you should always have the time? Why do you believe that it's your fault if things don't run smoothly? Is it because it's what you saw your mother do? Is it because you can't say "no"? Is it because you think it is expected of you? Are you trying to prove you can do it all? Why?

Then ask yourself if your reasons – or excuses – are real or perceived.

It is so important to start with yourself and assess whether your work and personal responsibilities, as well as your time and energy, are balanced enough. Chances are they're not (which is why you're reading this article).

You matter! Validate your own needs and know that you have a right to ask for help. This is where the conversation comes in. Talk about how you feel with your family and co-workers, ask for their help and accept it when it's offered. Start a support group for overwhelmed women... well, okay, I know everyone is too busy and stressed to attend. :)

Here are some suggestions to help stressed, overwhelmed women have some peace of mind (isn't that what we all want?):

1. Reevaluate your busy schedule. Prioritize it and let things go undone (yes, I know this is hard). Put the big rocks in the bowl first. What are you willing to give up? That's also a great question to ask each person in your family.
2. Ask for help. Be specific if you have to. If others don't know every little thing you do, they won't know how they can help.
3. Communicate often - clearly and directly. Don't wait until

resentment builds up and frustration becomes overwhelming. This is when you can become irritable and even rude to the ones you love.

4. Deal with problems in the moment. This is always best unless you feel that your emotional state will prevent you from being kind or clear.

Of course, the holidays can be a very stressful time for women and we know why. We tend to take on too much responsibility for everyone else's happiness. Expectations can be unrealistic. This holiday season consider doing things differently.

- Ask another family member to host.
- Ask others to bring dishes if you decide to host.
- Have dinner at a restaurant.
- Order a precooked meal.

There should be no shame involved. The idea is to lighten your workload so that you can enjoy the holidays as well. What a novel idea!

Which brings me to, do you have trouble saying "no" to people and their demands in your life without feeling guilty or selfish? If so, you are not alone.

Women seem to struggle more than men when it comes to people-pleasing and setting firm boundaries. I realize that many of us were raised to be sugar, spice and everything nice. Unfortunately, when we try to live up to such an unrealistic standard, we often end up stressed, overwhelmed and exhausted.

But we knew that already, didn't we?

Healthy boundaries are essential

for peace of mind. Here are some examples of holding boundaries:

- No, I can't help out this time – maybe next time.
- No. Actually, I have already made plans for next weekend.
- No, I'm not comfortable with having a bunch of people over to my house.

Remember, "no" is a complete sentence especially when setting boundaries with difficult people. We do not owe anyone an explanation for why we say "no" to their request and we are not responsible for someone else's emotional state. We are only responsible for our own.

The media and society portray the ideal woman as someone who can rise with the sun, rush to the kitchen, whip up a gourmet breakfast, hand squeeze the orange juice, get the kids out the door, jump in the car and go to work looking glamorous, with a smile on her face. Absurd!

So I ask you, when will real women start to openly challenge the distorted image of the ideal woman?

My vision of an ideal woman is a woman who knows how to *be realistic, say no, ask for help, delegate or hire when possible...* and definitely, *get away from time to time*. Never underestimate the power of ME time, however you define it.

What is your new vision of an ideal woman and can you become her? Yes, you can.



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