

How to Say "No" to Always Saying "Yes"

Eliza was an expert, no-holds-barred, genuine “accommodator.” Need someone to work extra days? Ask Eliza. Someone who’ll clean up the place because you’ve scheduled an open house? Sure. She’ll even bring the cleaning supplies.

Need someone to babysit your kids while you go away for a week-end? Eliza will do it.

Stay late? Cook extra? Loan money? Run an errand? Give up her bed, her book, her best outfit? You bet.

“I thought I had to do anything and everything people asked,” said Eliza, 46. “Even if they didn’t ask, I’d find ways to accommodate them. And if I couldn’t, I felt guilty.”

Somewhere along the line, Eliza learned that her needs weren’t important. In fact, she had been accommodating others for so long and doing it so well, she didn’t even know what her needs were.

What she did know was that she was unhappy, that she sometimes felt angry and almost always felt guilty. She realized she allowed people to use her, but she didn’t know how to say no.

“To me, self-care had something to do with giving myself breast exams,” she said. “If someone mentioned boundaries, I thought they meant property lines.”

“Self-care is an attitude toward ourselves and our lives that says, I am responsible for myself,” wrote Melody Beattie, author of *Codependent No More*. It doesn’t mean you become selfish, cold, and dispassionate. But you first become compassionate with yourself.

To practice self-care you must continually ask the question, “What do I need to do to take care of myself?” To be sure, self-care can take the form of gifts to yourself and pleasurable

activities, but it can also mean work. For example, you may need to change some behavior or take care of some responsibility. Sometimes just saying “no” is the hardest thing you have to do. Especially early on when new behaviors are as foreign as clothes are to cats.

Self-care also means asking others for what you need and want, everything from returning an iron that doesn’t work to requesting certain sexual pleasures from your partner.

Practicing self-care means you become your own best friend, confidante, personal counselor and spiritual advisor. One thing is true: practicing self-care will always improve any situation you are in.

Following are some self-care qualities:

Being financially responsible. This means being aware of your financial situation and taking responsibility for living within it.

Taking care of yourself physically. Eating healthfully and exercising; practicing preventive health care. Being in touch with your body.

Having fun, playing, and laughing. You’ll feel better physically if you include laughter and fun in your life.

Setting and maintaining boundaries. This is what I will or won’t do. This is how far I will or won’t go. This is what I will or won’t tolerate.

Maintaining nurturing relationships. Spending your time with people who are kind, loving, honest and appreciative. Giving and accepting compliments, hugs, love.

Affirming and nurturing yourself. Seeking professional help when you need it. Remember, you don’t have to do it alone. *

10 Ways to Avoid Holiday Stress

From the rising of the moon on Halloween eve until the setting of the sun on Super Bowl Sunday, the holidays create more opportunities for anxiety to get a foothold than a tile roof makes for Santa’s reindeer. Here are 10 ideas to help you keep your own footing during the upcoming season.

- 1. Take good care of your self.** Eat healthfully, get plenty of rest, exercise.
- 2. Make lists and set aside specific times to accomplish certain tasks.** Prioritize. Consider scratching a few items off your list.
- 3. Ask for help.** It’s more fun to do things together—from decorating the house to wrapping presents.
- 4. Make a budget and stick to it.** No matter what. If you use your credit cards during the holidays then spend the rest of the year paying them off, try not charging anything this year.
- 5. Shop online.** Give gift certificates.
- 6. Look for ways to share day care arrangements if the kids are out of school.** Maybe this is the year the older ones get a job, or perform volunteer work.
- 7. Remember to play.** Have fun. Share special time with the children or other family members.
- 8. Make houseguests as self-sufficient as possible.** Let them help. Don’t give up your own bed unless you must.
- 9. Plan well in advance.** If family gatherings cause tension and anxiety, consider alternatives that can lessen the effects.
- 10. Take a walk;** breathe in the fresh air. Find a place where you can be quiet and restful. Go there often. *

A Letter From *Margaret Hood Black*



Summer's over, so you can breathe a little easier now that things are back to "normal." Right?

Maybe for a few days. But before you know it, here come the holidays. And right along with them, the stress that appears to be their inevitable sidekick.

You can nip holiday stress in the bud (and reduce your stress throughout the year) by learning how to say "no" and committing to practice good self-care, as discussed in the page 1 feature article.

This issue's Top 10 suggests additional ways to avoid some of the anxiety and tension that often accompanies the holiday season. Feel free to add your own solutions to this starter list. A bonus: less stress during the holidays means you'll be less likely to suffer the "holiday blues" after it's all over.

The quiz in this issue invites you to take a look at your relationship communication skills. More stress from the holidays and a busy final quarter of the year doesn't have to mean more strife in your relationships. A commitment to good practices can lead to some wonderful holiday memories and clear communication throughout the year.

The feature on page 3 explores one of the most important relationships you have—the one with your internal critic—and suggests ways to befriend it. Finally, the page 4 article looks at the "serious" importance of fun playtime in your life and how to get more of it!

If you have questions about any of the articles, or would like more copies of the newsletter—or if there's anything else you'd like to talk about—please don't hesitate to call.

Do Your Communication Skills Help or Hurt Your Relationship?

Anyone who's ever been in a relationship—that means pretty much all of us—knows that while cruising along life's highway in tandem with someone else, bumps are bound to appear. Potholes sometimes. Even roadblocks. Skillful driving, plenty of fuel and a good roadmap are needed to stay the course. That's what good communications are all about.

Take the following quiz to find out how you fare in relationship communications skills.



Yes No

- I don't assume my partner can read my mind or vice-versa. I say what I'm thinking and feeling, and when I have questions about something, I ask.
- I acknowledge my partner for being, not just doing. I say, "What I appreciate about you is ..."
- I'm specific about issues I want to discuss.
- I stay in the present rather than bringing up the past and try to resolve one problem at a time.
- I try to bring up concerns or objections as soon as they occur, or at the first appropriate opportunity.
- I focus on the positive aspects of our relationship, rather than dwelling on the negative or hard times.
- I speak in "I" messages rather than "you" messages, saying "I feel hurt," rather than "You hurt me."
- When I'm wrong, I apologize. And when my mate apologizes, I accept.
- I don't blame my mate when I'm having a bad day or take it out on her/him when something goes wrong.
- I don't criticize or show contempt for my partner.
- I never become physically aggressive or threaten harm.
- I don't shout at my partner. If things start to escalate, we take time outs.
- I don't call names or label actions (that's a "man's issue" or a "woman's thing," a "stupid" mistake).
- When something needs to be talked through or resolved, I don't avoid my partner or withdraw. I don't avoid issues, either.
- I keep my communications as simple and clear as possible, rather than sending double messages like "I need your help/leave me alone."
- I listen. I make time and stay present.
- When issues come up that we can't work through alone, or communications break down, I'm willing to ask for outside help.
- I say I'm sorry. I say I forgive you. I say excuse me. I say please. I say thank you.
- I say I love you often.

Not everyone can answer yes to all the questions all the time, but if you've got more no answers than you'd like, it might be time to tune up your communications skills. *

Quieting the Never-Ending Chatter of the Inner Critic

Jabbering away inside the heads of most human beings is an internal monologue that goes on and on at about 45,000 words per day. A common term for this ongoing monologue is “self-talk.” Self-talk consists of a variety of voices—the cheerleader, the worrier, the taskmaster and a whole gallery of others, some uplifting and cheery, others nagging and mean. Sadly, for many people, chief among this cast of characters is the Inner Critic.

The Inner Critic’s voice may be loud or hushed, shrill or whiney. Its primary characteristic, however, is the negative quality of its messages. *You’re not good enough. Who do you think you are? You can’t do that.* And, oh, the name calling: *You’re stupid, you’re lazy, you’re dumb*—on and on, in a litany of criticism and judgments that can cause shame, anxiety, depression, and sheer exhaustion. If we heard someone talking to another person the way our Inner Critic talks to us, we might be tempted to intervene.

The Inner Critic never lets a mistake go by unnoticed and, like the celebrated elephant, it never forgets. With never-ending commentary, the Critic has an opinion about nearly everything we do, think, feel and say.

Though part of what we say to ourselves may be echoing what we heard as we were growing up, more often the Inner Critic’s voice began as our own early attempts to help us avoid rejection and shame by criticizing and correcting



behavior before others could reject or criticize us. By adulthood the voice has become like so much background noise; it’s present, but we aren’t consciously aware of what we’re hearing.

Hal and Sidra Stone, co-authors of *Embracing Your Inner Critic*, compare the noisome voice to a radio station playing inside your head that broadcasts a running monologue of self-critical statements.

The Inner Critic is the chider that drives us to perfectionism. It is the compulsive comparer that constantly judges and measures us against images in magazines, on television and in movies, our friends and co-workers, even strangers on the street. It is also the collector of negative comments about us by others. The flawless editor, marking out any compliments, and holding onto only the criticisms which it reiterates in a “see, I told you so,” voice.

The voice of the Inner Critic didn’t spring up overnight. Like weeds in a garden, it’s been insinuating itself over a period of time. Its roots go deep. There is no quick fix or magical cure for silencing this voice or retraining its purposes to serve us in healthy ways. Like all good and solid change, it takes time, patience, persistence, and sometimes outside help.

The accompanying article offers suggestions for how to quiet the Inner Critic and make it into a friend. ✱

From Foe to Friend: How to Tame the Inner Critic and Make It an Ally

We may never eliminate or please the Inner Critic, but we can learn how to avoid or minimize major critical attacks and make this voice our ally, even our protector. Here are some strategies:

Become aware of the voice of the Inner Critic. Often negative self-talk has become so much a part of the ongoing chatter in our mind we don’t even hear it. Pay attention to the things you say to yourself and the messages you give yourself.

Identify the voice of the Inner Critic. Who does it sound most like? Parent, grandparent, teacher, husband, wife? A little bit of all of them? Tracing back some of the messages the Inner Critic grabbed onto and magnified will depersonalize the voice and help you understand that it is a voice in your head and not truly you.

Notice when your Critic attacks come. Is the voice stronger at certain times of the day or night? When you perform a certain task or engage in a particular activity? Do you hear more criticisms and comparisons when you’re with certain

people? When you identify these Critical times, you’ll be able to manage your Critic more effectively.

Change negative messages to affirming messages.

Write down the messages your Inner Critic gives you and turn them around. If your Critic says “You’re clumsy and awkward,” write “I’m graceful and balanced.” Make a list of these negative-to-positive messages in your journal. Tape the positive ones you like most to your bathroom mirror. Affirmations work!

Examine the evidence. When the Inner Critic says, “You never do anything right,” challenge it by making a list of things you do right. Be specific. Don’t be modest. Let your list be as long as it wants.

List your assets. Make a list of your good traits. Put down everything you like about yourself that is good. The entries don’t have to be grand; list simple things: “I care for my family; I’m loving and giving.” Can’t think of any assets? Ask your friends, they’ll have suggestions.

Don’t let the Critic have the last word. Be still and let something more authentic come through. When we listen beyond the first, loud critical words, we may hear the calm and quiet voice of our inner wisdom. ✱

Time to Add More Play to Your Life: Here's How (and Why)

In 1931, John Maynard Keynes predicted that increased productivity would allow his grandchildren to work only 15 hours a week.

In fact, we're more than twice as productive as we were in 1964. And yet, the average married couple works longer than similar working couples did 40 years ago.

Our high tech life with its accelerated pace has fostered a culture that seems to be always working, always rushed, always connected. With cell phones interrupting the theater, laptop computers at the beach, internet connections at every other café, and home offices that beckon us all hours of the night and day, it's hard to separate "play" from "work."

Yet to maintain balance in our lives, and for our ultimate well-being, play is important. Lenore Terr, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of *Beyond Love*

and *Work: Why Adults Need to Play*, argues that play is crucial at every stage of life. In play, we discover pleasure, cultivate feelings of accomplishment, and acquire a sense of belonging. When we play, we learn and mature and find an outlet for stress. "Play is a lost key," Terr writes. "It unlocks the door to ourselves."

When we are completely involved in play, our cares and worries disappear. Sailing, playing a game of tennis, or being thoroughly engrossed in a good novel, we feel pleasurable and light-hearted. There is nothing like play that allows us to be present in the moment.

In addition, "play" that is physical in nature contributes to our health and longevity. And right now, one in three American adults report no leisure-time physical activity.

If you feel like you don't have enough play time in your life, try these suggestions:



Turn-off. Turn off the television, computer and cell phone for at least two hours a day.

Let your mind wander. Recall what you used to enjoy doing or what you always wanted to do before we became so technology-oriented.

Include others. Invite someone over to play, just like you used to when you were a kid. Nothing planned, nothing structured. Let your play evolve naturally.

Think physical. Go for a walk, ride your bike, rent some skates, break out the croquet set from the basement, go for a swim or a run.

Pretend. Pretend you don't have any cares or worries. Pretend you have all the time in the world to laugh and play and enjoy. Pretend there is no moment other than this.

Any time you have the choice of whether to work "just one more hour" or give yourself over to play, consider what Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it." *

For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 713-562-7819.

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