

The "Just Because You Can" Syndrome

By Mary Ann Bailey, MC

Do you often find yourself in the middle of a task or project that you don't want to be doing? Do you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the list of things you have taken on in your personal and/or professional life? At the end of the day do you feel exhausted, overwhelmed, and/or resentful?

If you have answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may be suffering from what I call the "Just Because You Can" syndrome. This is a common syndrome whose symptoms include:

- The tendency to jump in and assume responsibility for things just because we know how to do them.
- The inner belief that we are somehow obligated to do the task.
- Knowing that we can do it faster and better than other people.
- Thinking on some level that we have no other choice.

Many of us have an automatic response mechanism that kicks in anytime there is a task or project to be done. We reflexively step up to the plate and assume responsibility for the job because, in our minds, it is the right thing to do, and because if we don't do it, who will?

On the surface, this kind of gesture may seem noble, but it can often lead us to do things we don't want to do, as well as getting us involved in tasks that we don't even have to be doing. This inefficient use of our time and energy can eventually wear us down, leaving us feeling completely frazzled.

How to Avoid This Syndrome

So, how does one avoid falling victim to this syndrome? How can we reach a balance between being responsible and getting things accomplished, and taking on too much and becoming totally burned out?

The first step is to stop the automatic response mechanism. Put a pause between, "There is something that needs to be done" and "I am the one who has to do it". In that pause, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do I truly want to do this?
2. Do I truly need to do this?
3. What will happen if I don't do this? (Look at both the positive and the negative.)

It is important to be honest with yourself as you answer these questions because it is very easy for the "voices of should" to pop up and confuse the issue.

Example:

Let's say that you have been asked to chair the annual fundraising event at your child's school. You have done it the past 2 years and really don't want to do it again. But as you think about saying no, voices start chattering in your head saying things like: If you don't do it, who will? You've done it already so it won't be that hard. Just think of all the people you will be letting down if you say "no".

You are familiar with these voices and know they will eventually wear you down, so you respond with your own arguments for taking on the project. You tell yourself that you will do it just one more time, that you are really good at this and the school deserves the best, and that it doesn't really take that much time and you not really that busy.

Because saying "no" is so difficult for a lot of us, we use these kinds of arguments to make us feel better about doing something that we really don't want to do. This unpleasant scenario can be easily avoided by turning down the volume on the voices, taking time out, and going back to the questions in the exercise. Let's see what happens in this example.

1. Do I truly want to do this?

The honest answer is "no". I have done it for 2 years and I am burned out and I really don't want to be saddled with the responsibility for another year.

2. Do I truly need to do this?

Once again the honest answer is no. There is no life and death situation here. There are plenty of other people who can step in and run the event. There will be no harm incurred if I say no.

This is an important question because we have the tendency to give ourselves more power than we really have. We often believe that we are the only ones who can do something. This belief not only puts an incredible burden on us, but it also sells the rest of the world very short.

3. What will happen if I don't do it? (Positive and negative)

I know that I will feel guilty for a while, but I will also be very relieved. I will have more energy and will be willing to participate in a smaller way. I will have more fun and will not end up being resentful. Also, if I don't do it, someone who may really want the chance, will get the opportunity to learn how to run the event.

After going through the questions, the logical outcome in this case would be to respectfully decline the invitation. A simple "no thank you" up front will save you a great deal of turmoil down the road.

There will always be things that we'll have to do that we don't want to, but they may not be as numerous as we think. If we are willing to look closely at our own thoughts and behaviors around taking on responsibilities, we may find that we are the ones who create most of our own overwhelm.

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