

How *One Word* Can Dramatically Reduce Your Stress

By Trina Swerdlow, BFA, CCHT

Do you often feel overextended and exhausted from wearing way too many hats in your life? Maybe the hats you wear (or roles you embody) include parent, tutor, chauffeur, coach, cook, employee, volunteer, spouse, lover, and friend. If you are spreading yourself thin with a to-do list that feels overwhelming and is prompting you to need underarm perspiration shields, then you may want to continue reading.

So, you might be wondering, which single word contains the power to help reduce some of the stress in your life? While you think about it, you might scan your vocabulary for the magic word. I'll give you a hint; the magic word is a teensy-weensy one-syllable word of only two letters. Although small, these two little letters carry a BIG message. The stress-reducing word is *no*. Yep, you read it right, plain and simple—*no*. Saying "no" (or its gentler cousin, "No thank you") can be a gift to your health and well-being when administered as needed.

In my private practice as a Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist, I see a lot of stressed clients who have a difficult time saying "no." These clients often have a strong "pleaser side." People with a strong pleaser side are "others oriented." They focus on meeting other people's needs and often neglect or abandon their own needs in the process. If we add to the mix, perfectionism, we are describing people who are rarely satisfied with their accomplishments or behaviors. Simply doing their best is never enough.

For example, the Perfectionist Pleaser's mantra is "What will people think?". Perfectionist Pleasers often ruminate about things they have said to someone—things they later regret. These thoughts begin with, "I should have..." and "If only I had..."

Cynthia, a thirty-year-old mother of two young children, was referred to me by a local physician for stress management. When Cynthia walked into my office, her sunken posture made it clear that she was overwhelmed and exhausted. Her shoulders looked as though they were carrying the weight of the world. Cynthia had chronic insomnia, and she was anxious.

During our first session, Cynthia and I explored the various stressors in her demanding life as a mother, a wife, and a woman who worked part time outside the

home. It quickly became apparent that Cynthia had a strong perfectionist side that included "the need to please." In other words, she said, "yes, yes, yes," to endless requests from her spouse, her two children, her boss, her friends, her sister, her parents, her PTA chapter, and her needy neighbors. My head was starting to spin a bit while listening to all the commitments on Cynthia's overly packed plate.

After telling me about her many commitments, Cynthia's delivery became slower and slower...like a car running out of fuel and careening toward the nearest curb. When she paused, I acknowledged her amazing skills to multi-task, to juggle activities, and to meet other people's needs. The pleaser in Cynthia lit up when I complemented her seasoned abilities to give to others. After exploring her role in the family as the eldest child and the "perfect daughter," I gently asked, "Do you focus on getting a few of your own needs met during each day, too?" Upon hearing these words her eyes welled up with tears. "Maybe that's why I'm here," she whispered, "to figure out *what my needs are*...and to learn how to get some of them met."

Cynthia was right. Our early work consisted of numerous relaxing hypnotherapy sessions. She loved laying on the soft, sage-green sofa in my office and going on inner adventures. During her first hypnotherapy session, I invited Cynthia to claim a sacred place where she could relax deeply. Her sacred place was a cozy cabin in the forest that was surrounded by giant redwoods. In her imagery, she could hear birds singing in the distance and smell a light pine scent in the air. Her cabin's living room contained a rustic fireplace that was surrounded by comfy overstuffed chairs. When she settled in and experienced this calm and relaxing imagery, she began to expand her contracted muscles and breathe deeply.

Cynthia practiced returning to the imagery of her sacred place when it was time to sleep each night. She reconnected to the sights, smells, and sense of safety she experienced in her sacred place. Her bouts of insomnia quickly became less and less frequent. She was delighted (*and so was I*).

The next phase of my work with Cynthia (now that she was more rested) was to assist her in reducing her daily stress. We addressed her feelings of resentment and guilt (for not doing everything perfectly) that were related to her overscheduled life. Then, we

brainstormed how she could scale back on some of her current commitments and *just say no* to new requests that she didn't have the time or energy to fulfill.

Cynthia and I role-played numerous situations and used humor in the process. She refined her assertiveness skills and was thrilled to feel empowered by finding her voice. As she reduced some of the demands in her life, Cynthia's sleep continued to improve and her anxieties lessened. As a result of our work, her sense of personal worth became less and less dependent on her ability to please others.

So, as you look at your own life, do you find that you are overextended and often running on empty? If you decide, like Cynthia, that your life needs more balance—then remember these five benefits of saying "no":

- Reduce stress and increase health
- Downsize resentments (and feelings of being a victim)
- Model the healthy behavior of self care for your loved ones
- Offer others an opportunity to accept responsibility
- Open up time to try interesting, new activities

Saying "No" Gracefully and Without Guilt

Changing your behavior is no small task. At first, new behaviors often feel awkward and sometimes scary. Initially, the people around you may not appreciate your new behaviors. That's why getting support can be helpful. Consider asking a close friend or a professional, like myself, to be your power partner. Role-play and practice saying "no" with your power partner. If you feel as though your stress levels would go down and your joy levels would go up, then I encourage you to consider flexing your *just say no* muscle on a regular basis. When you choose to protect your time and health, keep in mind that you are not rejecting the person who is asking for something. You are merely saying "no" to a request. Here are a few tips to consider while you are increasing your skills:

- Ask yourself, "What is my intention for saying no?" In other words, am I saying "no" to practice personal care or to protect my time with family and close friends?

Or, am I saying "no" to avoid rescuing another person who can take care of him or herself?

- Buy yourself time if needed. When saying "no" feels confusing, too charged, or you need time to consider the request, simply tell the requestor that you will check your schedule and get back to him or her, or that you need to speak with your spouse/partner before committing. Giving yourself a chance to "sleep on it" can help to clarify what decision you want to make. Remember that saying "no" is your personal right.

- Use a positive I-statement: "I appreciate the invitation Judy; however, I need to say no, due to my crazy schedule." Keep in mind that when you say "no," you can choose to offer an explanation or not (except of course in certain situations, like at work). When you offer an explanation or a reason for saying "no," you are leaving a door open for someone to argue with you or attempt to talk you out of your decision. Various situations call for various styles of saying "no."

Finally, one of the gifts of learning to say "no" is that—when you do say "yes"—you can say it *wholeheartedly*. That way, your yeses will become more and more in alignment with the life-sustaining priorities in your life. As a result, you will reduce stress by trading your race against time...*for more quality time*.

Name and client details changed to protect confidentiality

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