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MY SO-CALLED MIDLIFE

It's OK to say no

I just can't seem to say no.

Yes, I'll organize the canned-food drive, put together the school newsletter and drive the carpool both ways every day. Sure, I'll watch your kids on a Friday night because you and your husband need a "date night," even though I'm exhausted and I haven't had anything resembling a date night in, oh, I don't know, a decade? Oh, no, I don't mind -- I'll watch your dogs over spring break. I wasn't going anywhere anyway.

I grew up as part of the "Just Say No" generation, turning down drugs, bar hopping without a designated driver and unprotected sex. Why can't I say no now?

Because I'm a woman, says Sharon Lamm-Hartman, president and founder of Inside-Out Learning Inc. in Carefree, specializing in leadership and personal development.

"Women have been taught for years to be nice," she says. Play nice. Talk nice. When we say no, we feel mean. And we worry that no one will like us.

So we say yes under a misguided notion that we'll be able to fit it all in. We can't, and we end up overscheduled and stressed out.

My boss challenged me to say "no" to everything I really didn't want to do. (Well, except to her, of course.)

So I said no when my neighbor called and asked if I would hide a puppy from his [wife](#) for FIVE WEEKS until Christmas. He thought it would be no trouble -- he'd come get it while his wife was at work during the day, and I'd just keep the little yapper crated at night.

(My friend Jane says that's like having a child and asking someone to keep it until it's 3: "Hey, let me know when it's potty trained, and I'll be by to pick it up.")

But when someone from the [Girl Scouts](#) asked me to buy a \$25 raffle ticket for a chance to win two airline tickets, I couldn't say no even though I wanted to. Have you ever tried turning down a Girl Scout? They're so cute. (No, I didn't win the tickets.)

We can say no nicely, Lamm-Hartman says. For example, "I love you and I really wish I could be there for you, but I just can't right now." If you don't know the person well, a simple "No, thank you" suffices. And we won't be blackballed from the PTA.

Lamm-Hartman says women are hesitant to say no because we put other people's needs first. She says we have to reframe our thinking: "If I take care of myself, I'm better able to take care of others," instead of feeling selfish for taking a little me-time.

Focus first on your family, your inner [circle of friends](#) and your job, Lamm-Hartman says. Then you can consider everyone else vying for your time, attention and money.

"If it's not on your priority list, then it's easier to say no," Lamm-Hartman says. "We have to know what's most important to us."

It's never easy to say no -- even when it's your job, says Annette Rogers, submissions editor for Poisoned Pen Press in [Scottsdale](#). (Her publishing company turns down 90 percent of the manuscripts reviewed.) It takes some practice.

Rogers sends an individual letter to every writer she turns down. She's very gentle in the opening, starting with "I'm so sorry to say ..." She doesn't use the word "reject" because that's a knife to any writer's heart. (You have to admire anyone who actually finishes a book and submits it, she says.) Instead she says the manuscript "will not continue in our process."

She's constructive, maybe telling a writer his dialogue was terrific but his lead character unlikable. She might

offer suggestions on the setting. She encourages them all to keep writing and wishes them the best.

It has gotten easier over the years. It's harder to say no in her personal life, when someone unexpectedly asks her to do something.

That's when she takes a breath -- "That gives me a second to marshal my forces" -- and asks for some time to think about it. She then can look at her calendar, or pretend to, and decide whether it's something she really wants to do. Her first priorities are her family and her work.

It takes confidence to say no, and women have to say it like they mean it. Any wavering will sound dangerously close to a yes.

Sometimes I say yes because there's no other way out, like when a friend calls and asks, "Hey, what are you doing Saturday night?"

Me: "I haven't got any plans. What do you want to do?"

Her: "Actually, I was hoping you could watch my kids for a few hours. I'm so glad you don't have plans!"

Now I've learned to say, "I don't know. I'll have to check my Day-Timer. What's going on?"

Once we say no, we have to learn to stop there, Lamm-Hartman says, and offer no other explanation, or a persistent person will work up an alternative: "Oh, you have a party to go to. Well, little Alexander would [love](#) that. You can take him with you!"

If we're feeling guilty about saying no, Lamm-Hartman suggests saying yes to something that softens the no. For example, "I can't organize the book fair this year, but I could volunteer to help for four hours on Thursday."

"The key is, we're saying no the things that kind of burn us out or stress us out," Lamm-Hartman says, "and we're saying yes to the things we value the most."

Like our sanity.

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Know the feeling and I am a guy! Don't have any tips except follow your gut instinct. If I had I could have avoided a lot of trouble. Happy New Year Karina!

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