



Caring for Elderly Parents?

How to Say NO without feeling guilty

Saying NO to a parent's request without feeling guilty is extremely difficult for most of us! However, the ability to set limits with loved ones is a crucial skill needed to maintain emotional, physical, and spiritual health. When caring for an elderly parent, we need all the energy, rejuvenation time and emotional stamina we can muster. In order to keep ourselves full rather than drained, boundaries are necessary to protect our inner reserves and physical health. For without *our* health, we will not be able to help anyone else. This means that it is actually our responsibility to create a balance between healthy self-interest and compassionate giving. Easier said than done, right? My motto on setting limits is, "it is better to feel a short-term twinge of guilt than to carry the long-term weight of deep resentment."

My mother died of ovarian cancer over ten years ago. My brother and I were her primary caregivers during her illness. I gladly took a leave of absence from work and went with her to chemotherapy treatments, surgeries, doctor's visits, and hospital stays. At the time, I was not as clear on my personal boundaries and did not know how to ask for help. I also neglected to monitor my own needs and ended up feeling chronically fatigued, anxious and overwhelmed. The month after my mother's death, I noticed what I thought was a new freckle on my leg, but when I got it checked out by a doctor, we discovered that it was malignant melanoma. I was lucky that it was caught early. My belief is that I ran my emotional self and my body's immune system down during this traumatic and painful time. I had ignored my own physical and emotional needs for far too long. This is certainly not to say that everyone who runs themselves down will get ill, but most people will pay some kind of price when chronic stress is mixed with continuous self-neglect.

Caring for an elderly parent that is in constant need is demanding, no matter how much satisfaction we derive from helping or how useful we may feel. If I had to pick just one skill that is most crucial in supporting caregivers in maintaining their overall sense of health and well-being, it would be **SETTING BOUNDARIES**.

What are boundaries? Boundaries are imaginary lines we establish around ourselves to protect our body, mind, heart, and spirit. They serve as an invisible force field designed to regulate our exposure to people, places, things and situations that are not in our best interest or healthiest for us.

Why do we need boundaries? Having boundaries enables the caregiver to separate their individual wants and needs from that of the person they are caring for. This is vital, because many of us dismiss and devalue our own needs while placing the other person's needs in a place of higher importance. We stop listening to and honoring our inner voice and end up feeling tired, angry and resentful. By setting boundaries, we actually have MORE to give because our emotional and physical tank is full, rather than empty. From this place of strength, we can generously and compassionately offer our time and attention to others.

Why do we have such a hard time setting boundaries?

The simple answer is **FEAR**. If you frequently find yourself saying YES in situations that you would really want to say NO in, fear is most likely a factor. Examples of common fears:

- 1) Fear that not complying with the other person's request could cause harm to or lead to potential loss of the relationship. This restricts our ability to be honest with ourselves and the other person.
- 2) Fear that we will hurt the other person's feelings. Since many of us have been taught to avoid hurting people's feelings at all costs, we repress our desires and comply - hurting ourselves instead.
- 3) Fear that we will look selfish or uncaring. Not wanting others to think poorly or talk badly about us, we try to protect our perceived reputation and don't express our true feelings.
- 4) Fear that we will be overwhelmed with guilt. Because we may be in the habit of over-extending and over-committing ourselves, guilt probably will arise when we start taking care of ourselves. Consider this feeling of guilt a sign of progress and a welcomed replacement to long harbored anger and resentment.
- 5) Fear that your boundary will not be honored or respected and you won't know how to stand your ground. With tools, practice, and support you can gain confidence in your ability to stand up for yourself on a continuous basis.

What boundary is critical?

The boundary I recommend most highly is to designate **Sacred YOU Time**. Set certain times for yourself when others know that you will not be available to them.

Recently, one of my clients, Caroline, set a reasonable boundary with her live-in mother. She informed her mother that she needed decompression time when she returns home from a full day's work. For her, this meant having about 45 minutes of alone time while sitting in her favorite chair sipping tea and reading the newspaper - uninterrupted. She felt horribly guilty saying anything because her mom was starved for attention after not having had much interaction all day. She feared she was the only one who could give her the attention she desired and, that she would be considered a "bad daughter" if she requested any time for herself. I encouraged her to explain the situation to her mother and to find alternative ways for her mother to get connection with others.

Caroline is fortunate, she has two older daughters who live fairly close by and she asked them to share in the caregiving responsibilities. They now alternate days keeping Caroline's mother company in the late afternoon and every other Saturday.

Now, are you ready to take action and designate **Sacred YOU Time**? No matter what time of day you decide on, make sure to communicate this new boundary with love, not as a way to vent about the past. Setting boundaries and saying NO, is a skill that you can master. At first, it may be awkward, but with practice, it will be a natural and empowering experience.

Whether it is family support, professional assistance or community resources, please consider asking for help. Don't let pride stand in your way. It is actually a sign of strength to own up to your limitations. You will be an example for others through your willingness to reach out, as well as a future resource.

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