



month four

Managing Your Energy: Setting Priorities, Saying No and Asking for Help



Things which matter most must never be at
the mercy of things which matter least.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, poet/philosopher

JK

Who or what receives the majority of your attention, time and energy?

Your husband? Your kids? Your work? Your household? Worries?
Finances? Friendships? Volunteer activities? Hobbies?

One spring when I was in my late twenties—a time when I frequently took evening art classes—I enrolled in a black and white photography class at a local arts center in downtown Austin.

Once a week I rushed from my corporate public relations job, where I handled international media relations, and fought congested traffic to make it to my class at the other end of town. Hurrying in one evening, I apologized to my good-looking, forty-something instructor for being late and told him that although I had hoped to get to the darkroom earlier to

work on my printmaking, it just wasn't possible with my work demands. He shrugged, "Well, it was a choice you made."

"No," I protested (a little too vehemently), "you don't understand! I had to lead a satellite media tour for German press today and had five back-to-back meetings and ten phone calls to return before I could leave." (And this was before email was huge, if you can imagine!)

Again, he stated, smiling, "It was your choice."

I started to protest again, thinking, *this guy is really out of touch with reality*. Then I became silent as the truth of his words—as irksome as they were—slowly seeped in. As hard as it was for me to accept, I did have a choice. We all do. And I had chosen where I lived, where and how I worked, and what my priorities were. I wasn't a puppet on strings; I had set up my life and made the choices that brought me to where I was at the time.

We each have a finite amount of energy, time and resources. Most of us "give away" and waste our energy every day without even realizing it—through lengthy, unfulfilling or sometimes unnecessary phone conversations; endless time on email, the Web or watching TV; tolerating disorganized spaces that cause us to spend hours looking for items; going to social gatherings or volunteer events that we don't want to attend but feel we should attend, and on and on.

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What we often don't realize is that these activities deplete our valuable energy bank.

Not only are these activities unfulfilling—and often draining—but they are zapping

our precious energy and resources and keeping us from spending time on things that truly fuel us—like being with friends, enjoying our children, spending time outdoors or connecting with our partners.



It would be ideal for all of us to have an overflow or abundance of energy—what I like to call energy reserves. So, whenever we hit a crisis or bump in the road, we could navigate these challenges more easily without becoming totally energy-depleted, which can lead to stress, sickness, depression, anxiety or worse.

Think about key areas of your life: your relationship with your partner or other family members, your role as a parent, your financial state, your spiritual health, your friendships, your household, your emotional or physical well-being, your career or community work.

What are your *top life priorities* (meaning what is on your radar right now), and does the way you allocate your time and energy reflect these choices?



GUIDED JOURNALING EXERCISE

Top Life Priorities

Schedule a twenty-minute break to further explore this topic. Have your journal nearby to record any additional ideas or thoughts that come up around this topic. Share your answers with a friend or your partner.

My top (three) life priorities based on how *I currently allocate my energy and resources* are:

(1)

(2)

(3)



Reflect on this list and then create a new list based on how you would like to direct your energy over the next three months. (It's a good idea to update this list every ninety days as life stages and family circumstances continually change.) What in your life is calling for your attention *right now*?

My new top (three) life priorities for the next ninety days are:

(1)

(2)

(3)

The next time you are considering a new work, family or volunteer/community project or commitment, remember that while it may be important, it will take time and valuable energy away from your other priorities. Pause, look at the list above and ask yourself: *Can I afford to do this, or will the added stress be too taxing on my personal or my family's well-being?*

You always have a choice, and when you're an active parent with a busy life and children who need a lot of your energy, you must be cautious before committing to activities that are not on your Top Life Priorities list.



Say Yes to Saying No

Based on the way we as women are socialized—to put others first, to be the nurturers, to be selfless—one of the hardest things for many of us to do is to say *no*.

Often it's helpful to look at why we have such a hard time with this. The explanation is different for each of us and has a lot to do with how we were raised and who we are as individuals. Consider the list below and see if any of these points resonate with you.

Common reasons many women have trouble saying no or asking for help:

- Fear of disappointing others (do you suffer from the disease to please?)
- Fear of failure
- Fear of the reaction of others
- An inability to receive support (you may ask, *do I deserve this?*)
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of being judged or criticized (for some, asking for help may be viewed as a weakness)





Creative Ways to Say No

To encourage you in your newfound skill, here is a great list of nine creative ways to say no. I promise, the more you say no, the lighter and more free you'll feel and the easier it will become to draw clear boundaries that support you.

- (1) **Just No:** “Thanks, I’ll have to pass on that.” (Say it, then shut up.)
- (2) **The Gracious No:** “I really appreciate you asking me, but my time is already committed.”
- (3) **The “I’m Sorry” No:** “I wish I could, but it’s just not going to work right now.”
- (4) **The “It’s Someone Else’s Decision” No:** “I promised my coach (therapist, etc.) I wouldn’t take on any more projects right now. I’m working on creating more balance in my life.”
- (5) **The “My Family is the Reason” No:** “Thanks so much for the invite, that’s the day of my son’s soccer game, and I never miss those.”
- (6) **The “I Know Someone Else” No:** “I just don’t have time right now. Let me recommend someone who may be able to help you.”
- (7) **The “I’m Already Booked” No:** “I appreciate you thinking of me, but I’m afraid I’m already booked that day.”
- (8) **The “Setting Boundaries” No:** “Let me tell you what I *can* do ...” Then limit the commitment to what will be comfortable for you.
- (9) **The “Not No, But Not Yes” No:** “Let me think about it, and I’ll get back to you.”

(This list is adapted in part from *Work Less, Make More—Stop Working So Hard and Create the Life You Really Want*, by Jennifer White.)



Tips to Help You Manage Your Energy More Effectively

- Become proficient and comfortable at saying no. Practice it. Challenge yourself to say no at least once a week to a request that is not directly aligned with your Top Life Priorities. Many mothers agree that having a child is often incredibly freeing in that they become clearer on their priorities and find it easier to say no to non-essential activities that pull them away from their family.
- Ask for help—frequently! Successful, balanced people have robust support systems. And support is only a phone call away. Asking for support takes practice if you are used to being highly independent. Successful parenting requires interdependence (and isn't this something you want to model for your child?). Start small—do a child care swap with a neighbor. I promise, the more you ask for and receive help, the easier it gets. And you'll be an inspiration to your friends to practice asking for and receiving help as well!
- Challenge “shoulds” when they surface in your mind. They are always a red flag that you're about to do something not because you want to, but because you feel pressure from an outside influence to do so. Pause and reflect before you take action and ask, *what is my motivation for taking on this new activity?*
- Give yourself permission to change your mind at any time! Period. Too many of us are continually committing to things we think we *should* do instead of things we *want* to do. You always have the right to let someone know you have reconsidered a request and really can't take on another commitment at this time.





TAKE ACTION

Personal Planning Retreat

Do you want more clarity and focus in your life? A short time away alone might be just the thing you need to sweep away the mental cobwebs and get crystal clear on your life direction.

Consider setting aside an entire day—completely void of all distractions—for a personal life planning retreat. Use this time to get clear on your priorities and to think about how you want to allocate your energy and resources over the next ninety days (*this is a great time to work on the previous exercises*).

Spend some time thinking about and listing what activities fuel you (which ones give you energy, nurture you, fill you with passion) and what activities drain you (those things that create a physical tightness or discomfort in your back, belly or neck every time they cross your consciousness). Often these drains are things like a financial issue that must be handled, a tough conversation that has been postponed, a disorganized space at work or at home or a project that has been on the back burner for too long. I like to approach these items with an aggressive housecleaning mindset, giving myself three options to eliminate these drains:

- (1) I can **do it**—set deadlines for completion of the project
- (2) I can **delegate it**—ask for help if needed or outsource the task
- (3) I can **dump it**—make the decision that I'm ready to walk away from this task and release that it just isn't going to happen (at least not this year!)



During your personal planning retreat, you can revisit old goals or dreams, enlist books for inspiration (see the “Recommended Resources” at the end of each chapter or the reading list at the end of the *Guide* for recommendations), work on exercises, journal, draw/paint or create a collage that represents your vision for how you want to experience the next three months. Do whatever motivates you and helps you gain clarity.

A primary goal of this mini-retreat is to give your analytical thinking a rest and give your creativity and your inner compass the opportunity to have a voice.

Some tips to help you get the most from your retreat

- Spend at least four hours away (a twenty-four-hour retreat would be ideal).
- Choose a location that is inspiring and conducive to contemplation—a quiet park or natural setting; a friend’s vacant house; a retreat, yoga or spa center or even a quiet coffeehouse are good places to go (but get out of your own house!).
- Focus on what you want to create for the next ninety days of your life.

I recommend taking personal planning retreats two to four times a year, if at all possible. These retreats are a wonderful, nurturing way for you to invest in yourself and your future. They may just be one of the best gifts you’ll ever receive! Have fun, and make this your own.





SELF-RENEWAL TIP FOR THE MONTH

“Love Your Body” Bath

Purchase some lavender essential oil* at a local natural foods store or from an aromatherapist or massage therapist (lavender oil actually has many uses in addition to the calming effect that is inherent to this flower). In the evening, after the house is quiet, draw a hot bath and add some lavender oil. If you like, pour yourself a cool glass of water or make a cup of hot peppermint tea to enjoy while you bathe. Breathe. Relax. Take your time lingering in the warmth and appreciating your strong, wonderful, miraculous body and all that it does for you and the many ways that it nurtures your family. Think of all the things you appreciate about your body and its many abilities—your strong back, your agile feet, your amazing hands and fingers, your beautiful breasts, your soft skin, your sweet belly and your miraculous eyes and ears. After your bath, choose a favorite lotion and take a few minutes to gently give yourself a foot and hand massage, acknowledging your hands and feet for all the work they do. Try taking a “body appreciation bath” once a week. It’s a great way to end a busy day.

*You can also visit www.auracacia.com to purchase essential oils.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The Joy Diet, by Martha Beck (www.marthabeck.com)

Slowing Down to the Speed of Life: How to Create a More Peaceful, Simpler Life from the Inside Out, by Richard Carlson and Joseph Bailey

The Speed Trap: How to Avoid the Frenzy of the Fast Lane,
by Joseph Bailey

Work Less, Make More: Stop Working So Hard and Create the Life You Really Want, by Jennifer White

The Power of Intention, by Wayne W. Dyer





THE POWER OF SELF-CARE

One night, after discussing reasons why and ways to say “no” during an evening session with my Personal Renewal Group (PRG), I paired off with another self-employed mom. We compared current work projects, including those that were eating our time (already at a premium as we both work from home with limited child care) without financial or personal reward. I told my PRG buddy about an upcoming project for a high-profile company—a financially lucrative assignment about which I was not terribly excited. I shook my head as I told her, “but I can’t say no to it.”

On the drive home I thought more about our conversation and what was really important to me. I decided that I could say no to this project and thus free up more time for my sons, both of whom really needed me that month. I called the clients the next day and told them that I had several prior commitments and could not do their project but would be happy to help them find the right person for the job. While I didn’t get a big paycheck that month, I got something better—peace of mind.

—Anne, mom to Champ, five, and Hays, nineteen months



I walked away from my life as a music business executive for a more balanced existence. I created a career that supported that, but my thinking about self-care and time were still driven by the corporate machine. After my involvement in my Personal Renewal Group, I realized that I had to come first, even before my daughter. I began to see that the life I desired was possible. It all begins within me, and balance follows. Don't get me wrong, that perfectionist is still inside me, but I am so much more willing to look at my motivation and my deepest desires before I commit to things. The greatest gift I have learned in the last year is that saying "no" brings abundance. The more I say no to opportunities that don't feed my desire for balance, the more opportunities that support me make themselves available.



I feel like I have reached deep down inside myself and found a nice warm spot to reside. Much of the worry I used to have about life has lessened; I have started taking the time to truly appreciate the gifts I offer my family. Tapping into "me" through self-care has been a blessing.

—Wendy, mom to Ruby, six

