Are YOU a

Experts share easy ways to put yourself back at the top of your priority list, which reduces stress, boosts confidence and sparks joy

From taking on even more volunteer work—despite your full schedule—to agreeing to drive your friend to the airport at the last minute, you always put others first. But consistently prioritizing everyone else's needs while ignoring your own not only affects your sense of self, it sows the seeds of resentment, straining your relationships and leaving you emotionally exhausted.

"People-pleasing is a protective mechanism that comes down to fear of being rejected—it's a type of transactional 'social exchange' in which we go out of our way to help people in order to garner approval or feel accepted," says therapist Carly LeBaron, Ph.D., author of *Shattering the Porcelain: Overcoming Perfectionism and People-Pleasing and Becoming the Real You*. "But when our needs constantly go unmet, our stress levels increase and we end up feeling like others are taking advantage of us."

This impulse to people-please is especially strong in women, owing to societal pressures that tell us how "nice girls" are supposed to behave. "While men get permission to stand up for themselves, women are deemed 'aggressive' when we're actually being assertive and authentic," says LeBaron. Being honest about your needs lets loved ones see who you really are and grow closer to you as a result. Read on for easy ways to outsmart four common people-pleasing traps—and watch your energy, self-esteem and happiness soar!

people pleaser?

ALWAYS APOLOGIZING?

Swap 'sorry' for 'thanks'

After waiting patiently in line at the bakery—as patrons who arrived after you are served—you finally approach the counter and say, "I'm sorry to bother you, but…" Says LeBaron, "Apologizing for no reason is like saying you're ashamed of taking up *space*, which lowers your self-esteem."

When you feel like apologizing, express gratitude instead. "Rather than say, 'I'm sorry I was late,' for example, try, 'Thank you for waiting,'" urges LeBaron. "Over-apologizing tells others, 'I'm a burden,' but showing *thankfulness* fosters relationships and bolsters your sense of self." To discern when an apology is truly warranted, ask yourself if you've actually done something wrong, she advises. "If you bumped into someone walking on the street, an apology is likely appropriate. But if, say, your boss doesn't like one of your ideas, and you say 'sorry,' pause next time, and say, 'Let me think of another idea.'" The more mindful we are about our apologies, the more meaning they carry, and the more confident we feel.

HAVE A HARD TIME SAYING NO?

Be 'softly' assertive

At the last minute, a friend asks you to help her move into her new place. Though you want to say no, you're afraid of disappointing her. "Standing up for ourselves is so hard because it makes us feel guilty," says Sharon Martin, author of *The Better Boundaries Workbook*. "But 'no' isn't a bad word—it just signals our needs."

Practice expressing yourself with baby steps, urges LeBaron. "Going from passive to assertive is a big change—but it's vital to speak your truth even if your voice shakes at first." Start by being "softly assertive" with phrases like, "I'm not able to do X, but have you tried Y person?" Or "Let me check my schedule," to give you time to think. Eventually, you'll be able to say no without hesitation. And when you do, resist excuses, adds Martin. "Just say, 'That doesn't work for me.' Giving justifications is like saying you're doing something wrong, when 'no' is enough; *your* needs are enough."

FEEL RESPONSIBLE FOR OTHERS?

Prioritize self-care

When your brother asks to borrow money again, you give in despite your reservations. "There are times when it makes sense to take care of people, like looking after your elderly parents," says Martin. "But constantly stepping in for perfectly capable adults only leads to you resenting them."

You may want to fix others' problems, but allowing them to forge their own path is ultimately an act of kindness. "Ask yourself, 'Is this someone I'm legitimately responsible for?' If the answer is no, letting them make their own decisions is the best thing you can do for them—and it allows you to live *your* life," says Martin, adding that making time for self-care actually encourages others to take care of themselves. That's because when they see you treating yourself with respect, they'll also show you respect, and subconsciously wean themselves off coming to you for all their problems. And when you prioritize your needs, you'll no longer leap into the fray to take care of people who should develop their own resilience.

AFRAID TO SPEAK YOUR MIND?

Focus on *your* 'spark'

When a friend suggests going to a restaurant you're not a fan of, you bite your tongue because you don't want to ruffle feathers. It's just one example in a lifetime of self-censoring, and it makes you feel invisible. Says Martin, "Being able to disagree starts with giving yourself permission to make your voice heard."

Agreeing with people to avoid conflict erodes our sense of self, which is why it's so helpful to take stock of our wants, says Martin, explaining that women can go years subverting their opinions until they don't consciously realize what they want. "For example, every year you may have gone on vacation where your husband wanted, without thinking twice—but is there somewhere you've always longed to see? Is there a dream you've never expressed because you didn't want to rock the boat? What gives *you* a spark?"

To speak your mind, start with two words: "I disagree," suggests LeBaron. "Once you get used to this phrase, you'll be able to elaborate: 'I disagree for X reasons' or 'That doesn't work for me; why don't we do Y instead?'" Finding your voice is the ultimate step that transforms people-pleasing into self-nurturing.

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