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Avoid Burnout by Evaluating New Opportunities

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Editor's note: *The following post by guest author Camille E. Acey is based*

on her Nov. 2016 talk at SupConf, a conference for customer support professionals.

If I had my way, I'd make quitters out of us all.

Everyone should feel confident being choosy, overprotective, and even ruthlessly methodical ... when it comes to how and when you give away your time and talents.

Being a "yes" person can be a wonderful thing. You get yourself in the wildest and most wonderful of adventures. I'm a yes person by nature, and I know there are a lot of people like me, especially in the customer support space. We like to get in and do stuff, learn things, solve problems. *Can we help? Can we tackle this?* Of course we can!

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However, as we grow in our abilities, opportunities and offers come at us with greater speed and quantity. So that we can live manageable lives and maintain space for the things that matter most, we have to find ways to balance saying "yes" with some things that may be harder to say — like "no," "I quit," or "I need to think about it."

Taking ownership of your life and career is about moving past *yes*, and moving toward balance.

What's wrong with saying yes?

What's wrong with saying yes to everything? Why should we be choosy about accepting commitments?

Saying no helps us avoid burnout.

Social psychologist Christina Maslach, creator of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, defines burnout as "a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment." She outlines six major causes of burnout:

1. Lack of control (feeling like someone else is always at the steering wheel)

2. Insufficient reward (feeling like you gave way more than you got back)

3. Absence of fairness (an unbalanced or opaque system for resolving disputes or making decisions)

4. Conflict in values (not being aligned with the group's leadership or direction)

5. Work overload (too much on your plate)

6. Lack of community (feeling alone in the group)

If you're already noticing any of those, it might be time to think about quitting some things.

Preempting burnout

Quitting is hard to do (I even wrote a post about how to do it), and there are a lot of practical and emotional aspects to it. So how do we preempt

situations that lead to burnout? I've found it useful to evaluate new opportunities by increasing my awareness in four key areas: time, growth, safety and fun.

1. Inventory your time

I'm a big believer in the the power of the inventory — looking at everything I have on my plate before I put anything else on it. I take a plain piece of paper and divide it into thirds. The first column describes the commitment. In the second column I ask, "How long does it last?" In the third I ask, "Do I wanna do it?"

Time Inventory

What Is It?	How long does it last?	Do I want to do it?
Marriage	FOREVER!	I DO!!
Job	not sure	Yes

You can use time inventories for everything — family, jobs, self-care. It's an opportunity to evaluate all your commitments, and also to get a better sense of what you've accomplished, what you currently give your time to, and what you'd like to give your time to in the future.

Time inventories help you avoid conflicts in values and work overload, two of the causes in Maslach's list. Before you take on a new commitment, you want to know how much time it will require of you, whether you have time for it, and if it's the sort of activity you want to give your time to.

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2. Determine growth benefits

It's flattering when people approach you for your expertise: *Hey, you super smart and uniquely capable human being, wanna come join this club of other super smart and capable creatures and be super smart and capable together?* Heck yes!

But wait … what comes after that yes? What makes it something you want to do? It's good to feel validated, but is that validation worth sitting through another long board meeting or leaving your family to travel across the country for another conference? I've found myself coming home from work, cooking dinner, putting my kid to bed, and then pulling an all-nighter for a group I wasn't getting much out of.

Before you accept, ask yourself where can you contribute your knowledge (give) and where you can gain (take). You want to be able to say, "I am here because I came to be of service in my uniquely special way, and also because I want to grow in this specific area of my life or career."

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What do you want to nurture in your life or in your career, and can you do it through this opportunity? By addressing this question, you avoid Maslach's

second cause of burnout — the feeling that you're insufficiently rewarded for your efforts. Growth in your key area should be your fair reward for the time you give over to the effort.

3. Evaluate your safety

The most important element for a productive team is psychological safety. Harvard researcher Amy Edmonson defines psychological safety as "the sense that you won't be embarrassed, rejected, or punished for speaking up." You want to learn more about how a group upholds this (along with physical safety) before agreeing to get involved with them.

How does this group function and how do they communicate, tackle disagreements, conflict, harassment, or threats? If it's a conference, do they have a code of conduct? If it's an advisory board, is there a process in place for lodging and resolving grievances? Who has worked on this project before? Where are they now? How do they feel about the project? Do some legwork here. It's worth your time to ask around ahead of time and preempt feeling a lack of control or absence of fairness, two more causes of burnout.

4. Have fun!

RuPaul is one of my spirit guides. I aspire to live my life according to a couple of RuPaul quotes:

> *"If it's not fun, don't do it."*

Pretty self explanatory.

> *"Find your tribe."*

Find the people who understand you, who support you, and who can reflect you back to yourself.

In evaluating opportunities, ask whether the opportunity connects you with your tribe — is this a space where you can find your people? If it is, you can ward off the last cause of burnout: lack of community.

Reclaim control of your time

This all seems so simple, so why do we still too often feel like we aren't in control of our work and our time? In my experience, it's due to a few things:

- An overblown sense of responsibility/obligation. *"They really need me,"* or *"I can do it"*.

- Fear of isolation. *"If I say no this time, maybe they won't ask me again"*.

- Ignorance of options. *"What else is out there?"*

What else can we do to ward off mindsets that lead to saying yes when we should say no?

- **Self check-ins.** Set a regular time to check in with yourself. Do the time inventory even when nothing new is being presented. Is your career going the way you want it to? If not, maybe it's time to change or quit a commitment. If so, maybe there are some new opportunities to look into.

- **Group check-ins.** Set a regular time to check in with peers. Conduct frank and honest meetings focusing on the four areas of time, growth, safety and fun. Create a regularly scheduled chance to explore new ideas, bring problems into light, figure out whether a relationship or

role needs to change, and so on.

- If you're a leader, **create and nurture opportunities** that genuinely respect people's time and need for growth, safety and fun.

Balance isn't innate or something anyone else can bestow upon us. It's something we have to maintain for ourselves. We need to set regular intervals to check in with ourselves and our teams about our commitments — what they are, how long they last, and whether we want to keep doing what we are doing.

It's perfectly OK to embrace your yes. If you're a yes person, that's wonderful! Just know the signs of burnout, and stay mindful of them. That way, when you're presented with a new opportunity, you can evaluate it across the areas of time, growth, safety and fun.

If saying "yes" to everything is a habit you've had a hard time shaking, check out our guide on How to Break Your Worst Work Habits.

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