Achieving Happiness in Veterinary Medicine III

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The Word We're Afraid to Say
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It starts when we are children. We're not allowed to say "No." We must hug our Aunt, eat our food, brush our teeth, and go to bed . Yes, children need to obey, but are we pushing things too far? Do we really want to raise our children to become adults who can't say "No"?

As vet students, we say "Yes" to EVERYTHING. The more cases we take, the more grunt work we complete, the more nights we stay up without sleep, the more we "succeed." Don't complain. Be a team player.

As baby vets, we want to impress our bosses, colleagues and clients. We work through lunch, stay late and generally bend over backward to please everybody. We're so happy to go from student loans to a paycheck that we're willing to take on more than we should.

Once we gain some experience and confidence, we lose that enthusiasm. Suddenly saying "No" when you have been the go-to person for "Yes" feels to everyone else like you are changing the rules mid-game. Attempts to create boundaries are interpreted as having a bad attitude or being lazy. At this point, many of us change jobs or start our own practice.

For me, the fear is that if I say "No", someone will get their feelings hurt, be angry or just think I'm less than awesome. What I have to remember is that people say "No" to me ALL THE TIME. Think about it: phone calls, emails and texts are not returned, company policy dictates I

can't have what I want, and my doctor's office doesn't have appointments available on my day off.

If you are saying "Yes" all the time, you are actually saying "No" to yourself. I discovered quickly that saying "Yes" made you the person everyone asked for a favor. After all, why go through asking someone who will whine and complain when you can pile more work on the person who makes it easy?

When I lecture on Compassion Fatigue, I ask the audience to say it with me: "No!". Say it again: "No!". This was the hardest lesson for me to learn. Harder still is saying it without explanation or apology. The word "No" is the most powerful weapon in your self-care arsenal.
Here are some things that can help you set boundaries and say "No".

1. **Give options:** Present the person asking with three options. Make sure all three are acceptable to you. If Mrs. Smith wants an appointment in the triple-booked 2:00 slot, offer her a drop off, 4:00 today or 2:00 tomorrow.
2. **Problem solving:** Please stop letting people dump problems on your desk for you to solve. The best rule you can have in a staff meeting: No problem can be presented without at least two potential solutions. Unless a problem is an emergency, don't jump to solve it. Often people will magically discover their own solution if you don't immediately fix their issue for them.
3. **Let people be angry:** This one drives me crazy. I am often silently angry with people. However, if someone is angry with me, I'm desperate to apologize and restore peace. Resist that impulse unless you know you've really wronged someone. If they are mad at you because you set a boundary, it's better than the alternative of being mad at them while they walk all over you.
4. **Be honest:** If you are in the weeds, say so. Ask for help. Practice this phrase, "I'd be happy to if you wouldn't mind _____". Let's say your child asks you to fix their toy. "I'd be happy to if you wouldn't mind putting those towels away for me". Offering options and trades is a great way to put the ball in someone else's court. That way THEY are turning YOU down rather than the opposite. It's just another way to make "No" a little easier.
5. **Start small:** "No, I'm not in the mood for Italian food tonight", "No, I'm not interested in that movie", "No, I'd rather stay home and cook tonight" (If I say that last one, check me for a fever). If a text isn't important, make yourself wait an hour to return it.

6. **Turn off the phone:** Even if you just turn it off for 5 minutes, you'll be empowered and break a few of the iron bands fastening you to technology. Use that five minutes of silence to breathe deeply.
7. **Tighten your circle:** Make time for people and activities that bring you joy. Avoid or eliminate those people and activities that cause you stress. This isn't 100% achievable, but you can reduce your exposure to negativity easily. Unfriend, unfollow or hide social media contacts. Refuse to allow complaint-fests in your staff meetings. Don't return calls to people who are just out to suck the life out of you.
8. **Treat yourself:** When I have a day off, I usually schedule myself to tie up loose ends, do chores and then quilt. I rarely get to the quilting part, so I've recently started allotting myself 3 hours in the morning to quilt before doing everything else. I typically manage to get more done because I'm happy and relaxed.
9. **Listen to your body.** You have two options: rest when your body says it's necessary, or rest because you're sick. Pushing through the pain or the illness gets you nowhere. You'll pay for it one way or the other!
10. **Stop letting others decide for you:** If someone asks you where you want to eat, tell them. If you are seeing so many patients in a day that you can't practice good medicine, stop and reevaluate. If you have an employee in your office whose behavior determines whether everyone has a great or horrible day – fire them. If your boss is that person, find a new job.

When you say "No", pat yourself on the back for showing some self-respect. If you cave and say "Yes", give yourself a break. If you find someone keeps asking you favors and then doesn't help you out in a bind, say "No" to save yourself some resentment. Like anything else, it takes practice. Once you become friendly with my favorite two-letter word, your life will never be the same…….in a good way!