I could be wrong, but it seems the word “multi-tasking” became part of our vocabulary about the same time the concept of “downsizing” became part of the workplace. As employees were being laid off, those who kept their jobs suddenly found themselves with an increased workload and additional responsibilities. In an attempt to rise to the challenge, employees found themselves working on multiple tasks simultaneously in order to try to keep their heads above water. And so the practice of multitasking was introduced to help meet the ever-increasing demands on employee time and attention. However, what we have since learned is that multi-tasking takes more time in the long run and increases errors. An article on the American Psychological Association website suggests that the process of trying to do too many things at once and shifting between tasks can negatively impact productivity as much as 40% http://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask.aspx.

For those of us who work in the helping professions, I believe there are other factors that motivate us to take on too much. And the primary reason has to do with that part of us that also brings us to our chosen profession in the first place, which is our capacity for empathy. We recognize when someone is in need, and that motivates us to want to help. We care and we want to do something about it when people are in need.

However, this focus on caring for others can overshadow a recognition of our own needs. The importance of self-care within the helping professions has taken root and
has become part of our conversations about job satisfaction, employee retention and over-all employee health. We help people identify things they enjoy doing outside of work, offer fitness classes, and educate about healthful diets. However, I believe the greatest area of need has to do with recognizing and knowing our limits and the ability to protect ourselves by communicating when we feel we cannot do more. We face many challenges in doing so, but one significant challenge is not being able to accurately gage when we have too much on our plates before agreeing to take on more.

Often we are the only ones who know all that we are juggling. In addition, for each of our responsibilities, there is a level of magnitude that involves the complexity and emotional intensity associated with each responsibility or task. However, it’s hard to hold all of this information in front of us when someone is asking for our help. We often respond reflexively and agree because we are helpers. Without appropriate time to reflect, we pile this new responsibility on the back of our cart without conducting an inventory of all that is already there. We then amble down the road, often finding that we are dropping things from our cart and stumbling breathlessly as we try to move our load forward.

So how can we become better at assessing our workload before taking on more? To begin with, we need to be able to ask for time to consider a request before taking on an additional responsibility, especially if we sense that we are already overloaded or are reaching our limit. Next we need to create an assessment system that takes into account not only the number of tasks and responsibilities we have, but also the intensity level of each, being mindful of how many tasks are of high intensity. We can start by making a list of all of our current responsibilities and assigning each an intensity level (1 being of the lowest intensity, and 10 being the highest.) Creating this list can help us get a better perspective on all we have to do. The intensity rating provides us important information to consider regarding the total impact and weight of all our responsibilities and tasks. Finally, we can add another designation to each item noting whether it is a permanent or temporary responsibility. Using a system like this can help us step back and accurately assess our workload before agreeing to take on more.

This reflective, self-care approach can be used individually or with an administrative/reflective supervisor. It can help us slow down the process in order to make the best decision, with an eye on keeping everything manageable. We all play a role in maintaining an early childhood workforce that is of the highest quality. We can do our part by attending to self-care so we continue to be healthy, happy, and effective in our work.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- What are some of your thoughts and feelings when someone asks you for help?
How do you know when your plate is full and cannot take on additional responsibilities or tasks?

Is it easier to refuse requests from certain people? What are some of the reasons it is easier to refuse requests from some people and not others?

What are some areas of personal growth that can help you maintain a more balanced workload?

References/Additional Resources


* A version of this article was published in the “Official Newsletter of NMAIMH”, March 2017