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“I Hate Asking for Help”

It's the four-letter word no woman likes to utter. How to ask for what you need **By Cynthia Hanson**

It wasn't until Kathleen Hornstein realized that she couldn't move her legs that she finally broke down and asked for help. A 34-year-old Pilates instructor and mom of two, Hornstein was pregnant with twins, and despite being overextended and overtired, she had barely slowed down and prided herself on being able to handle anything that came her way. Then, during her second trimester, as she sat on the basement steps one day talking to her husband and her brother while they hung drywall, she suddenly discovered that →

she couldn't stand up. "It felt like my hip and thigh had dislocated," recalls the West Chicago, IL, mom, now 39. "I was shocked—and scared!—and glad people I could count on were there." Minutes later, Hornstein was able to support herself again, but the brief experience of dependence was a wake-up call for her: "Mybody—and my life—were undergoing rapid changes. I realized I'd need to reconsider my attitude about asking for help if I wanted things to run smoothly—especially after we became a family of six."

Hornstein's reluctance to reach out is all too common in our culture, where self-reliance is a revered, ingrained habit, says life coach M. Nora Klaver, author of *Mayday! Asking for Help in Times of Need*. "Being on the receiving end of a helping hand seems harder for women because we're raised to be caregivers," she says. "Asking for care ourselves feels like a personal failure." In a recent survey of 100 former clients, Klaver found that seven out of 10 had wanted help

explains. "It may often take a life-changing event like pregnancy or a medical emergency to teach us that even the most competent women can use a little help sometimes."

But why wait for a crisis? We've culled the top five excuses women make to justify their reluctance to ask for aid—and the experts' analysis of what's really going on behind these bogus rationales. Read on, then grasp a helping hand.

EXCUSE #1 "I DON'T WANT TO LOOK WEAK"

On his first day of kindergarten, Joy Stewart's son brought home a raft of paperwork, but only one document gave her pause: the emergency-contact form, on which she had to name someone who could pick Joshua up at school if she or her husband couldn't be reached. "My family and friends aren't available during school hours, so I didn't have many options," says Stewart, 41, a real estate agent and mom of two in North Wales, PA. "I wanted to ask my neigh-

bor Nancy but we weren't close—we just smiled and waved across the cul-de-sac. I figured she'd see me as pathetic and think, Why is Joy asking me? Doesn't she have any friends?"

Turning to others in times of need should not be a source of shame. Rather, it's a sign of strength and smarts because it means you know what you can and can't handle and that you're planning ahead to get everything done regardless. "But asking for help can reveal things about yourself that you may not be proud of or happy with," Klaver says. "In Joy's case, she didn't like admitting that she didn't have anyone she could call on to help her out." To avoid falling into a similar trap, remind yourself that asking for help strengthens social bonds. "When you make yourself vulnerable, others open up in return," Klaver points out.

EXCUSE #2 "I DON'T WANT TO IMPOSE ON MY FRIENDS"

Stewart agonized for two weeks, and then, finally, the day before the form was due, she mustered the courage to approach Nancy. Not surprisingly, Nancy happily agreed to be her emergency contact. "I wish I'd asked sooner, because it would have spared me a lot of angst," Stewart says. "I wasted so much energy—and if Nancy had said no, I wouldn't have had any backup plan." A bonus to Stewart's outreach: The two women now are friends and regularly chat together.

When Sharon Marcus moved to New York City from San Francisco, her good friend Anita volunteered to come paint her new apartment and do minor repairs. Marcus wanted to learn those skills and knew she would enjoy working with her friend. Still, "it seemed like a terrible imposition to ask her to take time off from her job, fly across the country, and spend a long weekend working on my new place," says Marcus, 41, an English professor. She fretted for a week about whether or not to take Anita up on the offer.

She needn't have, says Reynolds. "Ultimately, it's up to the other person to decide whether your request crosses the line." Most people like to be helpful, especially if you've given them a hand in the past. If you're not sure, then before you reach out, ask yourself if the friendship →

Accepting a helping hand requires an active leap of faith that everything will turn out OK

at least once during the previous week but hadn't been able to bring themselves to make the request.

Like Klaver's clients, most of us deal with our daily burdens and serious crises on our own, often winding up isolated and overwhelmed. The alternative would be to admit to ourselves—and others—that we're not perfect. But we'd rather keep up the appearance of being in control, says psychologist Marcia Reynolds, Psy.D., author of *Outsmart Your Brain*. "Our resistance is about maintaining our own self-concept," she

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could withstand a “no.”

When Marcus finally followed up, Anita gladly agreed to help; as it turned out, she was eager to see her friend. The two enjoyed a whirlwind weekend of painting and reminiscing, transforming Marcus’s apartment. Marcus also learned enough to go it alone with a paintbrush and small tools. “Anita’s help actually made me need less assistance on other projects,” she says.

Whenever you ask for a significant favor, acknowledge that it’s a big deal (“I know I’m asking a lot”) and give the person permission to decline up front (“I understand if it’s too much and you can’t do it”). And of course, give assurances that you’ll return the favor when *she* needs it.

EXCUSE #3 “I’LL LOOK INCOMPETENT”

When she took her job as director of career services at a liberal arts college, Kim Heitzenrater knew there’d be a learning curve. Nonetheless, during her first three months, whenever students asked her questions about applying to graduate programs, she researched the information herself, even though it would have been much faster and easier to check directly with faculty advisors. “I was afraid that if I asked too many questions, the dean would think he’d made a mistake in hiring me,” says Heitzenrater, 40, a mother of two in Sewanee, TN.

While Heitzenrater’s attitude is common, particularly in the work-

place, not tapping others’ knowledge is counterproductive, says Karissa Thacker, Psy.D., a New York City management psychologist who specializes in career issues: “Everybody *expects* you to ask technical questions.” Heitzenrater ultimately reached the same conclusion. “I wasted too much time looking up everything myself,” she admits. “If I’d asked my colleagues for help early on, I would have gotten up to speed on the job faster and developed relationships with them sooner.”

Asking your boss and coworkers for assistance—tips on shortcuts, a deadline extension, even feedback—doesn’t signal incompetence. On the contrary, says Thacker, “You may feel vulnerable, but what you’re really



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saying is, 'I want to do the job right, and I understand the value of teamwork and cooperation.'"

To switch your mind-set, first, recognize that today's workplace is more collaborative than it used to be. Even if you haven't been formally assigned to a work team, it's likely that you'll need an occasional assist from your peers to do your job. Second, practice asking for help (and giving it) every day so that it starts to feel natural, Thacker recommends.

EXCUSE #4 "IT WON'T GET DONE RIGHT IF I DON'T DO IT MYSELF"

"Some women won't accept help because it means surrendering control," Reynolds says. Case in point: Lori



Reidel, 52, of Cincinnati, who didn't trust other parents to drive her son, Logan. She chauffeured him almost everywhere, even though it meant paying for extra gas and losing the time and flexibility that come with carpooling. "But if I'd let Logan ride in someone else's car and something happened, I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself," Reidel explains. "Primal parental fear is understandable," comments Reynolds, "but that unbending attitude is unrealistic and unhealthy for child *and* mother."

Accepting a helping hand requires an active leap of faith that everything will turn out OK. "You must stand up to the fear and mentally take it down," Reynolds explains. "Tell yourself, 'This is an irrational fear. I will accept help for one week; if I can't handle it, then I'll make a different choice next week.'" Another mental trick: Remember other occasions when you felt anxious about letting go but that turned out fine—the first time you left your child with a babysitter, for instance. →

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When her son, now 14, started seventh grade, Reidel heard about a new carpool down the street, and she took a deep breath and joined. The result has been win-win: Logan has become pals with the other kids and Reidel has gained more time—and more trust in the other parents.

Relinquishing lesser tasks may be easier, but it also requires an honest evaluation of costs and benefits. Is it better to let your 9-year-old make his bed badly or to take the time to do it yourself? After a party, does it make more sense to let guests help you clean up or to stay up by yourself washing dishes? Finally, Reynolds says, ask yourself this, “Is it the end of the world if my son’s bed looks sloppy or my margarita glasses aren’t perfectly lined up?” Focus on what you stand to gain—a lighter workload; more time for your kids; a chance to bond with your friends.

EXCUSE #5 “I WAS RAISED TO BE SELF-SUFFICIENT”

When her husband went away on a five-day business trip last September, Isadora Fox, 39, of Austin, couldn’t bring herself to call on a neighbor—even just to watch her 4-year-old daughter, Sasha, for 90 minutes while she prepared for two big exams. Fox, who works part-time as a writer while she studies to become a nurse-practitioner, also had three major deadlines and sole responsibility for driving Sasha to preschool, swimming, gymnastics, and a birthday party. To get everything done, she stayed up until 2 every night, even though she was five months pregnant. “I *chose* to be a mother, go back to school, and work part time,” Fox says, “so I thought I should suck it up and handle every-

thing myself, because this is what I signed up for.” Instead, she collapsed with a nasty sinus infection.

Subduing an independent-to-a-fault streak takes soul-searching. Try to shift your focus from self-reliance to self-care, understanding that doing what’s best for you will give you strength to care for others. Edit your mental self-talk about independence by telling yourself it’s nothing but a self-imposed, self-limiting mantra.

That strategy worked for Fox. “I started thinking about how I do favors for other people,” she says. “I don’t think worse of them for needing some assistance, and I’m sure that none of my friends and neighbors would mind helping me.” A few months later, when her husband was away during her final exams, Fox asked a friend to babysit for three hours one night while she studied. “I still won’t call someone for help because I’m just tired,” Fox says. “But I will in an emergency—and being eight months pregnant and in the throes of finals counts!”

And what of Kathleen Hornstein? Today, she usually doesn’t hesitate to request the assistance she needs either, whether it’s sending her husband grocery shopping, tapping her daughter to fold laundry, or asking a neighbor to babysit her 4-year-old twins. The result: She’s more relaxed and less frazzled. Better yet, Hornstein says, is seeing the positive impact her requests have had. “My kids are learning responsibility and getting a feeling of accomplishment when they do small chores. And from carpooling, I’ve gotten to know other moms and deepened some existing friendships. I had to learn to ask for help, but now, I can’t imagine living my life any other way.” ■



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