

4.2 Coping – proactive choice

Slide 1

As early-career researchers, it is common to be asked to be involved in many things that could enhance your career, add to your CV or, frankly, enable someone more senior to delegate something to you from their to-do list! You might want to do all of these things too – they might be interesting, lead to other opportunities and keep lots of variety in your work.

Too many things can lead to overwhelm and poor time management.

Being proactive and clear with yourself about what you should be choosing to say yes to is an important skill to practice and can help you to feel more assertive and in control of your time.

Slide 2

Imagine you were an emergency room doctor, with a constant flow of cases coming through the doors at you. You can't treat everyone at once; you need triage criteria to help you assess which are most urgent and important.

It's useful to think about the concept of having triage criteria for your work and career opportunities.

Obviously, those opportunities aren't usually a matter of life and death, but we can use the triage principle effectively to prioritise what we choose to spend our time on.

Slide 3

Think about your medium or long term goals: what do you want to have done, learnt, or have on your CV this time next year, or in 3 to 5 years' time? What do you want life and work to feel like? If you watched the presentation on optimism (focussing on the future), which is another video included in this online resource, you might want to use the outcomes of that exercise to help you here.

Now, think of three rules you could set for the opportunities you will say yes or no to, or the tasks you say yes or no to spending quality time on.

If you can say yes, then you know that this task or opportunity will lead you towards that future goal. Saying no means it will be a distraction or delay.

Slide 4

Try to frame the rules as questions, such as:

- Will it enable me to build my networks?
- Will this mean I am able to spend more time working from home?
- Will this mean that I develop a new leadership skill?
- Could this lead to some funding?
- Will this raise my profile or enhance my reputation?
- Will this involve working with people that inspire me or I have fun with?

Now...

Slide 5

Think clearly about how you will use these criteria. Be clear that they will lead you towards your future vision in some way.

When an opportunity is offered to you: don't say yes or no immediately – find out or ask for more specific details so that you can really assess whether it will fulfil your triage criteria.

Will it lead to your desired outcome or goal? Try and apply a rule that it must meet at least 2 of your criteria for you to say yes.

If so, take it on, choose to spend time on it. And hopefully, you will feel more motivated because you are clear about the long-term impact.

If someone asked you to do it, explain why you are saying yes: it will give them useful knowledge about the things you want to do.

If the answer is no,

- Decline it and explain why – that you are focussing on things that will lead to your goals – explain the kind of opportunities you are prioritising. Again, this will make others aware of what you want to do.
- If you can't say no, then ask if the opportunity can be changed in any way to make it more in line with the things you want to do.
- If that isn't possible, say yes, but try and give some parameters: limit the amount of time you can spend or volume of work you can do, or make it clear that this is an exception.

Researchers who use this method have said that their criteria came to them quite easily once they thought about it, and because they are so resonant, they don't need writing down to remember.

When they look at their current commitments, they realise that they would have said no to many of them if they had been applying the criteria.

From now on they try not to commit to anything without having all the information needed to apply the test.

Slide 6

What will your criteria be?

And could you use the same principles to set short term triage criteria for how you will spend a day, or how you will deal with your inbox?