

YOUR BODY IS SCREAMING AT YOU

The Hidden Cost of People-Pleasing

By Jazmine L. Ramzy

My stomach hurt.

Sharp, twisting pain that doubled me over while I was making dinner. I'd had it on and off for months. Sometimes mild. Sometimes debilitating.

I told myself: *It's probably just stress. It'll pass.*

I took antacids. Drank more water. Tried to eat "better" (whatever that meant).

It didn't pass.

My doctor ran tests. Bloodwork. Ultrasound. Endoscopy.

Everything came back normal.

"It might be IBS," she said. "Try this medication. Manage your stress."

I took the medication. It didn't help.

The pain continued. And I kept ignoring what my body was ACTUALLY trying to tell me.

Then one day, my therapist asked a question that changed everything.

"What were you doing when this started?"

I thought back.

Eleven years ago. Before I had children. Before marriage. Before I knew what it meant to carry grief while pretending everything was fine.

My closest friend--my roommate, my coworker--had passed away.

One day she was here. The next, she was gone.

I was devastated. Shattered. The kind of grief that makes the world feel like it's tilting on its axis.

But I didn't stop. I couldn't stop.

I went to work the next day. Customer service. Smiling at strangers. Answering phones. Solving problems that felt impossibly small compared to the enormity of what I'd lost.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," my manager said. "Take as much time as you need."

But what I heard was: *Don't be a burden. Keep it together. They're counting on you.*

So I said, "I'm okay. I can work."

I wasn't okay.

Then, a few weeks later, I got promoted.

It should have been exciting. A recognition of my hard work. A step forward in my career.

Instead, it felt like drowning with a smile on my face.

More responsibility. More people depending on me. More pressure to perform.

And underneath it all: grief. Exhaustion. The weight of pretending.

That's when the stomach pain started.

At first, it was subtle. A dull ache. Easy to ignore.

But it grew. Week by week. Month by month.

I kept going to work. Kept saying yes when I wanted to say no. Kept pushing through.

My therapist kept asking questions: "What are you feeling? What do you need?"

And I kept searching for the root cause.

Self-betrayal, she said. People-pleasing. Ignoring my own needs to meet everyone else's expectations.

I heard her. But I didn't fully understand--not yet.

Not until the day a customer called an ambulance for me.

THE DAY EVERYTHING STOPPED

I was at work. A normal Tuesday. Helping a customer at the counter.

And then the pain hit.

Not the dull ache I'd been managing. Not the twisting discomfort I'd learned to push through.

This was different. Sharp. Searing. The kind of pain that makes your vision blur and your knees buckle.

I tried to smile. Tried to finish the transaction. Tried to say, "I'm fine."

I couldn't.

The customer--bless her--saw my face go white. Saw me double over. Saw the truth I'd been hiding for months.

"I'm calling 911," she said.

"No, no, I'm okay--" I started.

"You're not okay," she said firmly. "Sit down."

The ambulance came. The paramedics checked me over. My vitals were fine. No heart attack. No emergency surgery needed.

"Probably stress-related," they said. "But you should follow up with your doctor."

I went home that day feeling humiliated. Weak. Like I'd failed somehow.

But that moment--that collapse--was my body's final warning.

STOP. You can't keep doing this. You're destroying yourself.

And for the first time in months--maybe years--I listened.

THE RESEARCH: YOUR BODY KEEPS THE SCORE

Dr. Gabor Maté, author of *When the Body Says No*, spent decades studying the link between repressing emotions and chronic illness.

His findings are stark:

People who habitually ignore their own needs, suppress anger, and prioritize caregiving for others over themselves have significantly higher rates of:

- **Autoimmune disease** (lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, MS)
- **Chronic pain** (fibromyalgia, migraines, unexplained pain)
- **Digestive issues** (IBS, Crohn's, ulcers)
- **Cancer** (particularly breast cancer and other hormonal cancers)

Because suppressing your truth doesn't make it disappear. It creates physiological tension.

- Swallow your anger to keep the peace
- Ignore your intuition
- Put everyone else's needs above your own

Your nervous system goes into survival mode. Cortisol floods your system. Inflammation increases. Your immune system becomes compromised.

And eventually, that suppression manifests as DISEASE.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score*, puts it bluntly:

"The body remembers what the mind tries to forget."

Translation: You can say you're "fine" all you want. But your body knows the truth. And eventually, it will make you listen.

THE 7 MOST COMMON WAYS YOUR BODY SAYS "STOP"

1. DIGESTIVE ISSUES (Stomach pain, constipation, bloating):

Your gut is often called the "second brain." When you're constantly "swallowing" your feelings, your digestive system rebels.

2. CHRONIC PAIN (Back pain, headaches, muscle tension):

You're carrying too much. Doing too much. Expecting too much of yourself. The crushing weight is literal--it manifests as pain.

3. AUTOIMMUNE DISORDERS:

When you can't say no to others, your body starts attacking itself. Sound familiar? It's not a coincidence.

4. SKIN ISSUES (Eczema, psoriasis, acne, rashes):

Rage and shame that can't get out any other way shows up on your skin--the boundary between you and the world. When you feel violated by your own inability to say no, your skin responds.

5. EXHAUSTION/FATIGUE (Exhausted no matter how much you sleep):

You're not just TIRED. Not physically worn out. Spiritually depleted. Running on empty because you're always giving it away. There's nothing left.

You can't live for everyone else and still have energy left for yourself.

6. ANXIETY (Constant worry, panic, feeling unsafe):

When you abandon yourself repeatedly, your nervous system stays in fight-or-flight. How can you trust the world when you can't even trust YOURSELF to protect you?

7. INSOMNIA (Can't fall asleep, can't stay asleep):

The feelings you didn't deal with during the day only come out at night.

MY WAKE-UP CALL: THE DAY I COLLAPSED

After the ambulance incident, I had to face the truth.

This wasn't just stress. This wasn't just IBS. This wasn't something I could medicate away.

This was my body's final warning: *STOP betraying yourself.*

I talked to my therapist. Really talked. Not just surface-level "I'm fine" conversations.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. And then, quietly: "Rest. Space. Permission to grieve."

She looked at me. "So why aren't you taking it?"

Because I didn't think I deserved it. Because I thought pushing through was strength. Because saying no felt selfish.

"That's the people-pleasing trap," she said. "You think your worth comes from what you do for others. But you're destroying yourself in the process."

I sat with that. Let it sink in.

And then I made a decision.

I took a sabbatical.

Not a week. Not a weekend. A real, extended break from work.

It felt terrifying. Selfish. Wrong.

But my body had been screaming at me for months--and I finally listened.

THE PEOPLE-PLEASING TRAP: WHY WE DO IT

Most of us learned people-pleasing in childhood.

We learned:

- Love = being good, helpful, easy, not a burden
- Conflict = danger, avoid at all costs
- Our worth = how valuable we are to others (only valuable if we're useful)

So we ignore our needs. We say yes when we mean no. We burn out. Get sick. Collapse.

And even then, we wonder: *Why? What happened? She was handling it all just FINE.*

We were never fine. We were just pretending.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I STARTED LISTENING TO MYSELF (Instead of Everyone Else)

After the ER visit, after the conversations with my therapist, I decided: NO MORE.

No more "maybe." No more "I'll think about it" when I already knew the answer was no.

Week 1: I felt TERRIBLE.

Guilty. Selfish. Like a bad friend. A bad employee. A bad person.

The voice in my head said: *"Who do you think you are, saying no?"*

But I noticed something else: I had MORE ENERGY. More space to breathe. More clarity.

I could read again. Be productive in ways that mattered to me. Take a walk that wasn't just exercise, but actually enjoyable.

Week 3: My IBS symptoms started to ease.

Not completely. But noticeably.

Month 2: I felt ANGER.

Not the polite, managed kind. Raw, messy anger at all the years I'd spent betraying myself. Anger at the grief I'd never fully processed. Anger at the people who'd expected me to keep going when I was falling apart.

It was uncomfortable. But it was real.

And for the first time in years, I felt like myself again.

THE 7 SIGNS YOU'RE BETRAYING YOURSELF

Based on Dr. Harriet Lerner's work in *The Dance of Anger*, here are the warning signs:

1. You say YES when you mean NO

You agree to things you don't want to do, then feel resentful.

2. You constantly apologize

"Sorry!" "My fault!" becomes your default, even when you didn't do anything wrong.

3. You put everyone else's needs first

"What do you want?" becomes "Whatever you want is fine."

4. You can't relax without guilt

Rest feels selfish. Doing nothing feels like failure.

5. You ignore physical symptoms

"I'm fine!" you say, even as your body screams otherwise.

6. You've lost touch with what YOU want

It's been so long since you asked yourself what you actually desire, you don't even know anymore.

7. You feel resentful but can't explain why

If you checked 3+ of these boxes, your body is trying to tell you something.

Are you listening?

HOW TO STOP BETRAYING YOURSELF

(A 5-Step Practice)

STEP 1: NOTICE & PAUSE

When someone asks something of you, notice your body's response.

- Does your stomach tense?
- Does your jaw clench?
- Do you feel heavy?

Your body KNOWS the truth before your mind catches up.

STEP 2: NAME THE FEELING

Don't rush to "I'm fine" or "It's okay."

Name what you actually feel:

- Resentful
- Overwhelmed
- Exhausted

STEP 3: ASK THE TRUTH QUESTION

"If I could answer with ZERO consequences, what would I say?"

No guilt. No judgment. Just truth.

STEP 4: SAY IT OUT LOUD (To Yourself First)

Speak it out loud:

- "I don't want to do this."
- "I need rest."
- "I'm grieving and I need space."

Saying it makes it REAL.

STEP 5: SAY NO (With or Without Explanation)

Not: "I wish I could, but--"

Try: "No, I'm not available."

Or: "That doesn't work for me."

You don't owe anyone an explanation for honoring yourself.

WHY SAYING NO IS THE MOST RADICAL THING YOU CAN DO

Dr. Gabor Maté tells us:

Saying NO:

- Is how we SURVIVE, not how we break relationships (real relationships can handle your boundaries)
- Protects our health, our energy, our spirit
- Models self-respect for others

Never saying NO:

- Destroys us from the inside out
-

THE INVITATION**CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF RIGHT NOW**

Take a deep breath.

Ask yourself:

- What does my body need?
- What am I ignoring?
- Where am I betraying myself?

Not what you SHOULD do. Not what's "good" or "right."

What's TRUE.

And if the answer is rest, grief, space, or no--honor it.

You don't need permission.

You don't need to wait until you collapse.

You can choose yourself now.

Your body is screaming at you.

Are you ready to listen?

Jazmine L. Ramzy is a writer, recovering people-pleaser, and someone who learned the hard way that listening to your body isn't selfish—it's survival. She's the author of *Shut the Fk Up* and *Be Grateful: The Art of Radical Self-Honesty*. Find her at [@jazzylashay](#) on social media.