Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life · About 4 minutes

When You Love the Work and Need More Room

Keeping a valued commitment while taking its cost seriously

Nora loves the first few bars of rehearsal. Lately she gets there after spending much of the day making sure everyone else can get there too.

In this fictional situation, she has gradually become responsible for nearly everything around a weekly music group. When someone suggests stepping back, she hears a choice between continuing to carry it all and abandoning something she values. Neither feels right.

Many meaningful commitments become difficult in this way. The activity remains wanted while its surrounding demands grow. Saying that you love the work can sound like a reason you shouldn't need help. Saying that you're exhausted can be heard as an admission that you should leave.

There may be more to understand before deciding either.

What would you keep?

Nora wants to lead the music. She is less sure she wants to spend her evenings coordinating the building and the people. Some of those duties may be part of her actual agreement. Others may have accumulated because she noticed they needed doing.

That difference deserves attention. A responsibility she has accepted may need a careful handover. A task that simply landed with her may need an explicit discussion about who can carry it. In either case, imagining another volunteer doesn't make one available.

Self-determination theory distinguishes action a person endorses from action driven mainly by pressure. It also distinguishes enjoying a task from valuing what the task serves.[1] Nora can choose some uninteresting administration because it supports the music. The theory gives her no obligation to find all of it satisfying or to produce unlimited capacity through commitment.

A useful review might begin with the actual week. Which part does she look forward to? Where does time expand beyond the role she intended? What is being postponed elsewhere in her life? These questions can reveal an arrangement that needs adjustment without turning her affection for the group into a mistake.

She might ask another willing member to manage bookings. The program could become simpler or less frequent. She could keep the present role with more support, or take a break. Each possibility has consequences, and essential duties still need to be covered.

There may be personal difficulty in saying no, but that should not become the automatic explanation. Insufficient staffing, money, illness, or caring obligations can account for overload without a hidden psychological pattern. The practical circumstances deserve examination first.

What has been crowded out matters too. Perhaps friendship has become an appointment repeatedly canceled, or an evening at home is only time to catch up on messages. Acknowledging that cost does not deny what the music has given Nora.

If some space eventually opens, she needn't use it impressively. An unplanned evening can remain unplanned. Rest can serve her life beyond making her ready to lead again.

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Nora's rehearsal gives us a way to ask which part she loves and which part somebody else could take home.

I hope Nora gets to hear those first few bars again with some energy left. That will depend, in part, on who takes the keys at the end of the night.

Companion reading · When There Is More to Carry Than One Life Can Hold

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Gagné, M., & Deci, E. L. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26, 331–362. Source.

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