

# Yes, It's OK To Say, "No"

## Overcoming over-commitment overwhelm

by Sue Johnston

"No!" It's a small word with big consequences. It's a word that many of us need to use more often. It can be a step towards emotional freedom or, at the very least, a life with fewer grumpy moments.

It's taken me a long time, but I've been a lot more productive and happy since I learned that:

- o "No" is not a dirty word.
- o I am in control of how I spend my own time.
- o Saying, "No," increases the value of the things we say, "Yes," to.

This discovery came when I took a long, hard look at my "To Do" list. I noticed that a lot of things just stayed on the list, week after week. I just couldn't seem to get around to them. I highlighted activities that had lingered on the list for more than a month. They were, without exception, things I *wanted* to do. They'd just sunk to the bottom of the list, and were submerged under an ocean of things other people wanted me to do.

### Are your dreams submerged?

Take a look at *your* To Do list. Highlight the things you really want to do. Have they been there a while? Is there a whopping great pile of obligations standing between you and the things you want to achieve? Do you say, "Yes," to others' requests but, "No," to your own?

I hear the cry, "But it's hard to refuse when someone wants my help!" Why is that? It's not as if we don't know how to say, "No."

When we were two years old, we never had a problem with it. "No" was our favourite word, and saying it was our job, back then. It signalled the beginning of our lives as individuals.

But somehow, over the years, we learned that "No" is a bad word. Being agreeable worked better. It was more socially acceptable. We took to heart phrases on posters plastered on the schoolroom walls reminding us that, "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

I don't disagree. Giving and doing things for other people is essential, both for our world and for our spirits. As Albert Camus wrote, "It is normal to give away a little of one's life in order not to lose it all."

Yet we can go too far. It can wear us out. We give so much that we have nothing left to give – and nothing left for ourselves. If we use up our energy but don't refuel, it leads to exhaustion, crankiness, burnout, and mistakes. That doesn't help anyone.

### Does saying, "No," make you feel guilty?

In a world where friendships have taken on roles once performed by families, and voluntary organizations perform functions governments no longer fund, a lot of people are asking for our time. "Giving back" is important. But there's only so much time to go around.

Even if we had three lifetimes, most of us couldn't get to all the things *we want* to do, let alone what *other people* want. Still, a lot of us try. Saying, "No," makes us feel guilty. We want to be "nice."

We fail to make the distinction between being nice and true service. When we say, "Yes," to please others, to gain approval, or to avoid confrontation, it can be stressful. The task can become a chore, an obligation rather than a pleasure. We may even resent the other person for asking and be angry with ourselves for agreeing.

When we say "Yes" based on a thoughtful desire for service to others, our heart is in the task, our experience is more satisfying, and we harvest inner rewards.

In her book, [\*The Disease To Please\*](#), author Harriet Braiker says millions of people are so addicted to approval and so fearful of confrontation and rejection that their "Yes" habit has serious emotional and physical consequences.

These "people pleasers" think they're good at making others happy, but their real talent lies in making themselves miserable.

### Can saying, "No," be generous?

Patty Breitman, author of [\*How To Say No Without Feeling Guilty\*](#), suggests that saying, "No," is a generous thing to do. It frees us from making insincere commitments, and it ensures we commit to things we can put our hearts into. We don't say "No" to everything; we say "Yes" to the things that matter.

Every time we agree to one thing, we are refusing something else. We make tradeoffs. We don't get enough sleep or exercise, don't spend enough time with friends or family, or don't get to the project we really wanted or needed to work on.

I'm not advocating that we turn down all requests that come our way. Not at all. What I do believe is that we need to understand what we are saying "Yes" to, and why. That makes our "Yes" valuable.

### Practice makes perfect

So how can you say, "No," effectively, so that you can really mean it when you say, "Yes"?

First, you have to practise. It sounds crazy, but you're trying to break years of bad habits. You need to create new connections in your brain. Recall a moment when you felt strong. Imagine it, savour it, and recreate the feeling in your body. Then say, out loud, "No, I can't do that for you."

Tip: Don't say, "I'm sorry I can't do that," or "I'm afraid I can't do that." Chances are good that you are neither sorry nor afraid. You're strong and powerful. Just say, "No, I can't do that for you." If you absolutely must modify the phrase or you will die, say, "It's unfortunate, I can't help you."

OK, now you know your mouth can actually say the word "No" – and, with continued practice associating your memory of feeling strong with the "No" phrase, your brain is building a connection between that word and feeling powerful and in control. That's the first step.

The next step is to learn the various varieties of "No" and the appropriate context to use them. As an example, we'll use a request for help doing publicity for a charity event.

1. The **Direct No** – "No, I can't help you promote that event." This simple phrase can be used any time you lack the time or the will to do something.
2. The **Reflecting No** – In this softer version, you acknowledge the content and feeling of the request. "I know you've been counting on me to help you promote that event, but I just can't do it this year."
3. The **Reasoned No** – Give a brief and genuine reason for refusing, without opening up negotiations. "No, I can't help you promote that event. I have two big projects due in March."
4. The **Broken Record No** – This is used when someone is trying to wear you down by begging, flattery, or trying to sweeten the pot. It can be hard to ignore the whining, but it's possible. It goes something like this:  
"No, I can't help you with this event."  
*"But nobody does publicity as well as you do."*  
"No, I can't help you with this event."  
*"But I promise the committee will be better organized this year."*  
"No, I can't help you with this event."  
*"I'll buy you lunch."*  
"No, I can't help you with this event."  
*"What about dinner?"*  
"No, I can't help you with this event."  
*"But who else can do it?"*  
"I don't know, but I know I can't help you with this event."
5. The **Pain Now or Pain Later No** – This is one of the kindest things you can say if you really don't think you have the time to do something. "I'm not sure how things will shape up with my schedule, so I'd rather say, "No," today than have to disappoint you later, when it will be harder to find someone else."
6. The **No Sandwich** – In this one, you recognize the value of the relationship, refuse the request, and thank them for asking. "I know this event is really important to you, but I just can't see a way I can help promote it right now. I do appreciate your asking me."
7. The **Yes If No** – This is the negotiator's no. You state the conditions under which you can meet the request. "Yes, I can help you promote that event if you can give me all the info – and I mean *all* - by October 12<sup>th</sup> and someone else looks after ticket sales."
8. The **Sleeping No** – "I'll let you know tomorrow, after I've had time to think." Thinking about the request overnight will remind you that this is *your* decision. You may actually decide to say, "Yes."

Saying, "No," helps you stay in control of your time and your life. It doesn't mean that you're selfish or uncaring. Far from it. It means you care enough about other people to want to be fully engaged and committed, contributing 100 per cent, when you meet their requests.

When you learn to say, "No," if you can't feel great about an activity, "Yes," when you do say it, really means something to you and everyone around you.

Even Mother Teresa, understood. She said, "It's not how much we give, but how much love we put into giving."

Said after thoughtful reflection, "No" is definitely not a dirty word. Nor should it arouse any guilt when you say it. Saying "No," gives more meaning and power to the things we agree to do.

Who wouldn't say, "Yes," to that?

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