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How to master the art of saying 'No'

It's a small word but many of us are afraid of using it…

Nicole Paulie

IT IS JUST one word. It only has two letters in it. "No". You'd think it'd be easy; but for some, they would rather rearrange their entire week or month just to avoid having to say that simple, small word.

When we do this, it leaves us feeling passive, unassertive and overburdened. In the end, you realise you're spending a lot of time and energy on everyone else but yourself. While you think you are being agreeable by saying, "yes," you are still actually saying no – only you're saying no to yourself, no to your time own time and no to your wishes.

Saying no is hard for many reasons. Sometimes you genuinely do want to help out or be a part of something, but because you have too much going on, you just can't. Some people may be afraid of hurting the person's feelings or causing conflict. While others may be experiencing a fear of missing out on future opportunities if they say no this one time.

The art of saying no at work

Saying no doesn't have to end in conflict, nor burning bridges or missed opportunities. There are a few simple ways you can learn to say no assertively in tough situations.

Think about it

For those people who do want to say yes, or are unsure, it's okay to give yourself a day to think about the request. You may need to check your schedule, or see what other things you've got on your plate at the moment. REALLY think about and ask yourself, "Do I have the time/resources to do this right now? If I say yes to this, what will I be saying no to instead?"

"I appreciate the offer/invitation, but unfortunately I can't right now"

If you've decided that you do have too much going on at the moment, let them know. You've let the person know that you do appreciate them thinking of you for the offer or invitation, but you're also letting them know that you may be open to similar opportunities in the future, just not right now.

Don't overshare

Once you've said no, leave it at that. The more reasons you give as to why you are saying no, the more it looks like you're rambling, and the less assertive you appear. If you give a reason *why* you can't do something, the other person may start coming up with alternative solutions for that one roadblock. If they really press you for reasons why, you have every right to just leave it at, "I'm just not able to make it, but thank you very much."

Offer an alternative

If someone wants to meet with you, but right now you can't, offer an alternative time that you would be happy to meet with them.

If they've asked for help, but you either can't contribute much to it nor have the resources, let them know of someone who could be of assistance to them.

Once you've set boundaries, stick to them

When we say no to other people, we are establishing boundaries with them. It teaches people how we want to be treated and what we are and are not willing to do. For some people, there may be an adjustment period as you begin to say no. They aren't used to you declining things.

Mark things off your calendar that you don't enjoy

We all have some obligations that we just don't enjoy. See if you can mark some of these things off your calendar. If there's an upcoming event or networking lunch that you have been invited to, and you genuinely don't want to go, don't. This leaves your time free to accept other invitations and requests that you would actually like or enjoy.

Unless you enjoy it or it helps you to improve on a skill, either say no or change how you view it.

It will feel unnatural at first, but with time, setting up boundaries and saying "no" will allow you to take back time for yourself, and to stop feeling so guilty when you do say no. It's time to say "yes" to yourself.

Nicole Paulie is a counselling psychologist at Ballsbridge Counselling and co-author of the book, "How to be Happy and Healthy: The Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health."