

“Say Yes to No”

It's a hard lesson to learn, but saying “no” can be one of the major keys to taking control of your life

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It's Friday afternoon and you feel the guilt rising as you glance up at the office clock. You are running very late and your children will be last at crèche for the third time this week. Fixing up the spreadsheet to help out one of your colleagues took far longer than you expected. She was so grateful though when she left earlier, singing your praises. Now it looks like Sunday will see you frantically completing your own work instead of enjoying a relaxing day with your husband and children. You mentally revise your to-do list. You still need

to pick up your niece as you promised to have her stay the night to give her parents a break. On top of it all, you need to shop for tomorrow as the whole family is descending on you for lunch. You love them dearly but sometimes you wish someone else would host a family gathering for a change. As everyone says, you have a real knack for entertaining, so why do you feel so resentful right now? As you stagger to the car weighed down by a pile of files, you wonder, is this the price of being nice?

Is this you – the person that everyone turns to for help and advice?

You pick up the slack where needed and, in many cases, are genuinely happy to do so. When someone needs you, you drop everything to come to their assistance. You want people to like you and will avoid conflict all costs, so you regularly agree to things even though you lack the time and inclination. You like to help out and gratitude from others makes you feel good. There are a lot of rewards around being this kind of person but have you taken time to consider at what cost to yourself and those closest to you?

We sometimes feel guilty if we don't help people out when they ask. Saying no can be very difficult. Saying yes to others means that you succeed in avoiding most conflict situations. The danger comes in when you are unable to put your needs and priorities above those of other people. If you constantly agree to things you really want to say no to, it can lead to feelings of frustration and resentment. You may feel stretched in many directions, leading to stress, illness and imbalance in your life. You may also fail to achieve your own goals and objectives, as your focus is almost entirely taken up by the needs of others.

It may be that you need to make a mind shift. Saying no is not rude or unhelpful, and does not mean you are being selfish. It is necessary to say no in order to create and maintain balance in your own life. It's about choice. Choose to say yes to those things that bring you fulfilment and energy, or allow you to use your skills and talents. Choose to say no to the things that drain your energy or go against your values.

The good news is that saying no is a learned skill. With practise and determination you can get into the habit of saying no more often. You must first be clear on your priorities, values and goals and then you will know when to say yes and when to say no.

It is your right to say no but even when the request is unreasonable it is

necessary to be polite and respectful when you do so.

So, how do you say no in a way that isn't aggressive or disrespectful? Saying no is not about making excuses or being untruthful. It is about setting boundaries whilst maintaining the dignity of others. Your voice should be clear and direct – don't mumble or ramble on with long involved explanations. If you are face to face with the other person, smile and shake your head to put emphasis on your words. If the person refuses to hear your no, then calmly repeat it until they do. This can be useful when saying no to those pushy sales people who won't take no for an answer.

If you struggle with the word no, there are other ways to decline a request. It's easy to say “No, I can't make it on Saturday as I am having dinner with the neighbours,” if you really are having dinner with the neighbours. However, if you are looking forward to a quiet night at home, don't make up an excuse as untruths are always exposed. Rather say “I won't make the party on Saturday, but thanks for thinking of me and I hope you have a wonderful time.” If you speak confidently and with conviction people rarely ask why you are declining.

You can also say no by delaying the yes – for example a simple “Sorry, I can't do that right now.” This method is very useful in the workplace. If you find yourself constantly completing or following up work that falls under

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another person's area of responsibility, look at your underlying motives. What are you getting out of the situation? It may be a sense of competence or the praise that comes from being known as someone who gets things done. People learn by doing, so if you are always there to do it for them then there is no reason for them to learn. You will find yourself stuck in a vicious circle that leaves you feeling good for a while but a victim in the long run. Next time the same person stands by your desk with a request for assistance consider your choices. You have a choice to do their job for them at the expense of your own or you could suggest an alternative time when you could coach them through learning for themselves. You could say, “I will be able to help you with that tomorrow afternoon but right now I have deadlines I need to meet.” Chances are, by then that person would have found someone else to assist or have done it themselves. If not, you can set time aside to show them how to do it on their own next time.

If your boss makes unreasonable demands, what then? How do you say no to the person who pays your salary? It will not be good for your career to refuse outright but sometimes she may need to be reminded that she too needs to prioritise her demands. Try something like, “I would be happy to work on that now, as long as you don't mind the other project waiting until tomorrow.” Or, “Would you prefer if I delayed my current task in order for this one to be done now?”

Take time to consider what you are saying yes and no to in your life. Do these things reflect your priorities? If your life is out of balance you need to revisit the number of things you say yes to and consider whether you could say no in future. Each time you say yes to something you are in effect saying no to something else. Say yes to no, and see how dramatically the quality of your life at home and work improves! ■