

How to Say No... Without Feeling Guilty

Saying 'no' is not easy! It can bring up feelings like guilt ("I should be helping them"), shame ("I'm so selfish; what would people think of me?"), fear ("What will they do if I say 'no'?"), and obligation ("That's my child; it's my job to help them"). This means that we will often say 'yes' in order to avoid those uncomfortable feelings.

Here are a few things to consider the next time you want to say 'no' but find yourself saying 'yes.'

1. Do you want to say 'yes'?

First things first: If you want to say yes; go for it! However, if you feel that saying 'yes' would only be done to please the other person, or that it would put you out; it's time to say 'no'.

2. What would saying 'yes' mean for you?

By saying 'yes' to please the other person, or to avoid feeling guilty, you are compromising your boundaries, and telling yourself that the needs of others are more important than your own, which is not healthy; your needs matter. *(see article: Interaction Styles)*

3. Remind yourself that it is healthy to say 'no'

You have not been put on this planet to serve the needs of others, and it is important for your well-being to know how and when to say 'no'.

4. How are you going to do it?

Phone call, email, SMS, IM, or face-to-face? Find the most comfortable way of getting your message across, but keep in mind that sometimes the method will be chosen for you (i.e. a request being made face-to-face). *If you feel uncomfortable making the on-the-spot decision, refer to #10.*

5. You don't owe anyone anything

You will likely feel the need to justify or explain your reason for saying 'no', or even apologise. You can offer a reason if you want (i.e. "I'll be at work, so I won't be able to help"), but sometimes the answer is 'no' simply because you don't want to, which is okay.

6. Be respectful

Respect the other party but remind yourself that theirs is not the only stance that matters.

7. Provide another option (if you want)

In some instances, you may wish to offer them an alternative (i.e. "I'll be at work, so I won't be able to help on that day, but I'm free the following day if that helps?"), although this is not necessary.

8. Map it out, write it down, and rehearse it

In situations where you have time to consider your options you may like to write them down; do a cost-benefit analysis. This can also be helpful for preparing your response so that you feel more confident giving your answer.

9. Delay your response

Take your time. If the request is time sensitive and you're hesitating on your response, the chances are likely that you want to say 'no,' but you don't know how, or you don't want to disappoint the person asking. If you are genuinely undecided, let them know that you need some time to think*.

10. No reply can be a reply

Try not to rely on this option too heavily. First, it can be quite disrespectful, and second it can reinforce avoidant behaviour in yourself, which is unhealthy in the long term. This response can be particularly helpful as a follow up to a 'no' response, where the person is badgering you to change your mind. This is their responsibility to manage themselves, not yours to manage them. You have given your answer, if they don't like it that is up to them to manage their feelings and problem-solve their own issue.

* *"But what if I ask for time to think and they keep pestering me to make a decision?"* – This may happen, so I offer two solutions:

1. When you ask for time, give them a ball-park time frame for when you will give your response and stick to it. This is a sign of respect, and it means they aren't completely in the dark on when they will hear back from you, which should give them peace of mind while you make your decision;
2. If they continue to badger you about it (and they may), you can do one of two things:
 - i. Ignore them [you gave them your answer and a time that you will respond, you don't owe them anything more], or
 - ii. Let them know that while you respect the fact that they want an immediate response that you require additional time to consider, but if they would like a decision immediately, unfortunately the answer will be 'no.'

Saying 'no' may be difficult, but it is a healthy and powerful tool to have. Give it a go, practice it, and keep working at it until it feels natural.