

Learning How to Say “No”

By BNET Editorial

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As children, we are encouraged to please adults and are rewarded for doing so. If we are “good,” we get attention and treats. If we are “bad,” we get ignored or punished. The implicit message is that if you please people, your passage through life will be smooth and fruitful. However, some people use this reluctance to say “no” for their own gain. They drop work on your desk, send you on errands you don’t have time for, and get you to do their dirty work, while they skip away happy and unburdened.

Learning to say “no” is an important skill that enables us to set boundaries and stay in control of our lives.

What You Need to Know

I have been asked by my boss to take on some urgent work. I already have a huge amount to do and am in danger of missing the deadlines as it is. What is the best way to say “no” to her?

Start by acknowledging her request so that she realizes you are not simply dismissing it out of hand. Having done this, add that you are already working on a number of important projects, which leaves you no time for additional work. Your best bet may be to get your boss’s agreement that you drop one of your other tasks. You could do this by asking for his or her help in deciding what your new priorities would be.

Surely there are occasions when I just can’t say “no?” What can I do to minimize the damage?

If you are compelled to say “Yes” to something you would prefer to decline, tell the person who has made the request that you will assist them on this occasion but next time you will have to say “no.” Also, put some boundaries around your agreement. For instance, “Yes, I can help you on this occasion but will only be able to spend an hour on it.”

I feel guilty when I say “no” and end up apologizing profusely. It makes me look really weak, and I often end up doing what I don’t want to do anyway. How can I avoid this?

Being apologetic does not convey the impression of status or confidence so practice saying less rather than more. The art is to get to “no” without either of you losing face. Be brief. Be bold. Be gone.

I try saying “no” but always say “yes” in the end. I seem to crumple in the onslaught of arguments about why I should do something. How can I protect myself from this?

It might help if you envisage yourself as a confident, assertive person who is able to repel unwelcome requests for help. If you *feel* uncertain and disempowered, you will appear as such to others. Your signals will be picked up instinctively, even if you feel as if they are not obvious, and the person who is making the demands of you will persist in demolishing any arguments you might have, knowing that you will cave in eventually. Break that cycle.

What to Do

Do Not Feel Guilty

Saying “no” can often make us feel guilty. Inside, you might be saying to yourself that you “ought” to help people out if they ask you because if you don’t, you’ll not be pleasing them. What you may also be saying to yourself is that they have more right than you to be pleased; that they’re OK and you’re not. However, you have just as much right as anyone to be pleased and, if you are not being pleased by someone’s inconvenient or unreasonable request, you can please yourself by saying “no” to that person.

Although most people agree in theory that they have a right to manage their time and activities in the way that they choose, it is quite another matter to say “no” in response to a request, particularly if it is tinged with urgency. So the best thing to do is practice your “no” responses when you have time to do so and keep them in reserve for when you need them.

Find a Role Model

Do you know anyone who can say “no” unapologetically and without guilt? Think about your network of colleagues and friends and see if you can identify someone who is assertive and able to bat away

requests for help. Watch them thoughtfully when they are in communication with someone who is trying to impose a task or favor. What do they do that you think you could also do? See if you can take some ideas from them that would sit comfortably with you. Do not try to mimic them precisely; if their style is not the same as yours, you may find yourself getting into situations that will be difficult to for you to get out of.

Practice

Hearing ourselves say something that we are unused to saying can be quite unsettling, so it is best to take the shock factor out of “no” statements so that you do not have to cope with it when you are trying to assert yourself. Start with a simple “no” statement and say it over and over again in as many different ways as you can manage until you have dispelled the strangeness of the sound of your voice saying “no.” You may want to do this in front of a mirror. Notice how you look when you say “no.” Are you convincing? Also, ask yourself how you feel when saying “no.” Do you feel guilty, audacious, rude, or unkind? See if you can track your feelings back to their source to find the reason why this word evokes such a response in you. You may be struggling with messages you were given as a child. Although they are powerful and difficult to get rid of, you could think about letting them go and seeing if you can replace them with a different message that will enable you to assert yourself with alacrity.

Prepare for the Expected Encounter

You will no doubt have someone in your personal or professional environment who takes advantage of you more than others do. In this case, you can probably predict the timing and nature of her request. Run the scenario through your mind and see yourself handling it in the way you would choose ideally. Here is how the conversation may go:

Your colleague comes up to your desk, leans over and says:

“Hi, I have an urgent deadline, which means I can’t finish this report. Will you do it for me?”

You stand up. “No. I recognize you have time pressures, but I can’t assist you this time.”

“Why not? We’re a team aren’t we?”

“As I said, I recognize you have these pressures but I can’t assist you this time. I hope you find a way through, though.”

You sit down. Your colleague goes away.

If you analyze this interaction, you will see that you used **good body language**—you were not aggressive, but you did equalize the power position struck by the difference in physical height between your sitting position and your colleague’s standing position.

You said “**no**” **immediately** and did not dwell on the reason why you were unable to help. If your colleague gave you equal status, she would respect your decision and would not ask you to explain yourself. You are looking for signs of mutual respect: I’m OK and You’re OK.

You showed **empathy** by reiterating her situation. “I recognize...” The implication here is that even though you see that your colleague is in a difficult position, you are nevertheless saying “no.” This is because your position is no more tenable than hers, so it is difficult for your colleague to argue her case over yours.

You have issued **no apology**. Apologizing for not helping someone is considered to be weak. If you are sorry, then surely your colleague can convince you that you do not *need* to be sorry if you agree to them out! Also, you have given **no explanation**. If you get lured into explanations, the person making the request of you has a way in and will try to demolish your reasons for saying “no.”

If the person making the request continues to challenge you on your “no” response, you can reiterate that you understand their situation but that nothing has changed since you responded to their request a few minutes ago. Make **no argument**. If you do, it will only escalate into a hostile exchange. As a result of their disappointment, they may insist on having the last word: “I’m really disappointed in you!” If they do this, your final *coup de grâce* is to look them in the eye, smile benignly and say nothing.

Although it may seem bold to you, you have every right to say “no” in any circumstance you choose, whether it be social or professional. You will not be encouraged to say “no”; indeed, you may be “punished” for saying “no,” as is demonstrated by the statement in the paragraph above. This is called passive aggressive behavior, which is hidden aggression or aggression that is denied. However, it has a habit of spilling out in petulant comments!

What to Avoid

You Resort to Persuasion

People who are not confident in saying “no” sometimes resort to persuading the person that is making the request by saying that they are no good, do not have the right skills, and are not up to the task that is being asked of them. If this is your tactic, try not to demean or diminish yourself as a way of avoiding saying “no.” It is best that you acknowledge that you are the best person to do the job but nevertheless, you will not be doing it!

You Become Aggressive

Some people who are fearful of saying “no” overcompensate by being aggressive. It is important that you really feel that you have a right to say “no.” If you believe this, you will be able to use assertive behavior that honors both you and the person you are saying “no” to.

You Explain and Apologize

Getting involved in long explanations and apologies about why you are saying “no” is a common mistake. The more you explain, the weaker you look. Try to restrain yourself from entering this territory and be as succinct and as polite as you can.

You Whine and Complain

As a means of avoiding saying “no,” some people get whiny and complain about the fact that the request has been made in the first place. It is no good arguing against the request being made in the hope that it will be withdrawn. Confront the situation and assert yourself by responding directly to the request with your response.

Where to Learn More

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OnlineOrganizing.com: www.onlineorganizing.com/ExpertAdviceToolboxTips.asp?tipsheet=16

Web4Health: <http://web4health.info/en/answers/child-say-no.htm>

WomenOf.com: www.womenof.com/Articles/po_1_20_03.asp

Ophrah.com: www.oprah.com/spiritself/lybl/control/ss_lybl_control_08.jhtml

To-Done!: www.to-done.com/2005/06/how-to-say-no

University of Texas: www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/assert/assertive.html

Pace Productivity Inc.: www.getmoredone.com/tips6.html

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