

How To Get Better At Saying “No”

You don't have to let the guilty voice in your head get the best of you.

By *Mikaela Kiner* 3 minute Read

You're running around with a million things to do, and you've barely made a dent in your to-do list. Then someone asks you to take on a project you definitely don't have time for, and you answer “yes” without thinking.

Learning to say “no” is an ongoing challenge, but it's a skill you can refine every day. Just like you diligently polish your writing and presentation prowess, you need to apply the same level of discipline when it comes to declining a request or invitation.

Why It's So Hard To Say No

Why is it that saying “no” can feel socially awkward and disingenuous? When [*Fast Company's* Michael Grothaus tracked how many times he said](#) “yes” and “no” in a week, he found that he said “no” twice but responded “yes” to over 50 requests. “I say ‘yes’ to everything because I don't want to come across as mean, lazy, boring, or uncaring,” Grothaus wrote in 2015.

You might feel similarly without even realizing it. Here's a possible thought you might have (subconsciously or otherwise): “If I say that I can't help with my team's annual charity food drive, I'm pushing work onto others who are likely as busy as me.” You're assuming that if you decline, you're being impolite, so you really *should* just help out because others are, and it's the right thing to do.

The thing is, that “should” indicates that you're prioritizing being polite over being genuine. You've probably experienced that burdened feeling other times you've wanted to turn something down. Rather than going with your gut, you say “yes,” and then immediately feel the conflict. It's sometimes helpful to ask, “If I *don't* do this, will it matter in three weeks, three months, three years from now?” This way, you'll get a more accurate picture of whether your lack of participation is genuinely critical.

It might not feel like it, but you're largely in control of how busy you are. When you accept a meeting or an assignment that you don't really have the bandwidth for, you might escape the discomfort of expressing your regrets but you give up the time to think, rejuvenate, and take care of yourself.

When To Say “Yes” And When To Say “No”

It helps to have a definitive system to be able to say “no” in a way that feels right. One thing you can do is create a list of your top priorities, and only say yes to projects that move you closer to them.

Personally, I find it helpful to run through a mental checklist before accepting anything. Here are the questions I usually ask myself:

- Is this urgent, or can it wait?
- Can someone else besides me do it?
- If I say “yes” to this, what am I saying “no” to?

If it does become clear that you should say no, remember that you don’t have to provide an explanation. Just be upfront, polite, genuine, and, if appropriate, offer an alternative solution. Here’s a good example: “I wish I could meet, but I don’t have a lot of free time this quarter. Would a quick phone call work instead? Let me know, I’d like to help.”

If you’re prone to overcommitting, this approach can help you determine what to take on and what to decline. I also like to keep in mind the following quote from entrepreneur [Derek Sivers](#): “If it’s not a hell yes, it’s a no.” As [Grothaus pointed out](#), the outcome of saying no is seldom as bad as what you think it might be: “The sky won’t fall, your family won’t stop loving you, and your boss won’t fire you—heck, everyone will probably respect you and your time more if you say ‘no’ more often.”

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