

## Yes, It's OK To Say No!

How to prevent the over commitment that leads to overwhelm

by Sue Johnston



“No!” It’s a small word, yet a powerful word, one with big consequences. It’s a word that can improve our lives and make us more valuable to those we say it to – those we want to help in this world.

At the end of a week in which I – and the feelings I was experiencing – seemed to be on a non-stop rush from appointment to commitment to obligation to ordeal, I stopped to reflect on what was making me feel so beleaguered.

I examined my “To Do” list, and highlighted the things I *really wanted to do*. Almost all the highlighted items had fallen (or were they pushed?) to the bottom of the page. Activities that were important to me had, for months, languished, ignored and forgotten, beneath activities that other people wanted me to do. Ouch

It had something to do with my reluctance to use the word “No.” A little reading and a lot of reflection showed me:

- That NO is not a dirty word
- How to say NO without feeling guilty
- And why saying NO increases the value of the things we say YES to.

### How does it happen?

Look at your own “To Do” list. Are your “Want To Do” activities sinking to the bottom of a seemingly endless ocean of what other people want? Why is it so hard to say “No” to people’s requests for our help?

When we were two years old, saying “No” was never a problem. Saying “No” was our job. It signalled the beginning of our lives as individuals.

As we toddled into our older years, we learned that saying “No” wasn’t really acceptable. We took to heart those slogans posted on the schoolroom walls that said things like, “It’s nice to be important, but it’s more important to be nice.”

It’s hard to argue with such phrases. Giving and doing things for other people is essential for our community – and for our spirits. As Albert Camus wrote, “It is normal to give away a little of one’s life in order not to lose it all.”

But some of us go too far. Saying “Yes” to all reasonable requests can wear us out. We give so much that we have nothing left to give. Worse, we have nothing for ourselves. If we use up our energy, but don’t refuel, it leads to exhaustion, crankiness, burnout, and mistakes. That sort of stuff doesn’t really help anyone – not us and not the people we’ve said ‘Yes’ to.

In our work – whether it’s paid or voluntary – a lot of people are asking for our time, and there’s only so much time to go around. Even if we had three lifetimes, most of us couldn’t get to all the things other people want us to do for them. But a lot of us try. Saying “No” makes us feel guilty. We want to be nice.

I'm not saying we stop being nice; however, we need to make a distinction between pleasing others and true service.

### **Can you be too nice?**

When we say "Yes" to please others, because we need approval, or don't want a confrontation, or don't want to seem selfish, we cause ourselves stress. The task becomes a chore, an obligation, rather than a pleasure. We may resent the other person for asking us to do something, and be angry with ourselves for agreeing.

When we say "Yes" based on a thoughtful desire for service, our experience is more satisfying and we reap inner rewards.

In other words, our heart must be in it. As Mother Teresa said, "It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving."

Millions of people suffer from what author/psychologist Harriet Braiker describes in her book, *The Disease To Please* (McGraw Hill). They are so addicted to the approval of others, and so fearful of anger, confrontation and rejection that they agree to every request – with serious physical and emotional consequences.

These "people-pleasers" *think* they're good at making other people happy; but their real talent lies in making themselves miserable. Is it not better to say "No" to someone's request than to be overworked and stressed, just to appear nice?

Saying "No" is often the most generous thing to do. Asserting ourselves frees us from making shallow and insincere commitments, and it ensures we commit to things we can really put our hearts into.

### **Can you say, "Yes" and mean it?**

This doesn't mean it's right to say "No" to everything. We say, "Yes" to the things that matter to us. We say yes to the things that will inspire some joy in giving.

The cost of saying "Yes" when we want to say "No" can be high. Every time we agree to one thing, we are refusing something else. We make tradeoffs. We don't get enough sleep or exercise, don't spend enough time with friends or family, or don't get to the project we really wanted or needed to work on. Or we short-change everything and quality suffers.

I'm not advocating that we turn down all requests that come our way. What I do believe is that we need to understand what we are saying "Yes" to and why. That makes our "Yes" valuable.

So how do we do it? How do we say "No," effectively, so that we can really mean it when we say "Yes"?

First, we have to practise. This is a new role, so it helps to rehearse. No kidding. Say it out loud, "No, I can't do that for you."

Do that a few times, so you know your mouth can actually produce the words.

Next learn the various forms of "No" and the context for using them.

1. **The DIRECT NO** - "No, I can't help you promote that concert." Used when you lack the time or will to do something.
2. **The REFLECTING NO** – Here you acknowledge the content and feeling. "I know you were counting on me to help you promote that concert. Unfortunately, I just can't do it this year."
3. **The REASONED NO** – Give a brief and genuine reason for refusing, without opening up negotiations. "No, I can't help you promote the concert. I have two big projects due in March."
4. **The BROKEN RECORD NO** – This is used when someone is trying to wear you down by begging, or trying to sweeten the pot.  
"No, I can't help you with this concert."

*"But nobody does publicity as well as you do."*  
"No, I can't help you with this concert."  
*"But I promise the committee will be better organised this time."*  
"No, I can't help you with this concert."  
*"I'll buy you lunch."*  
"No, I can't help you with this concert."  
*"But who else will do it?"*  
"I don't know, but I know I can't help you with this concert."

5. **The PAIN NOW OR PAIN LATER NO** – "I'm not sure how my schedule will shape up so it's better if I say "No" today than to let you down closer to the concert."
6. **The NO SANDWICH** – This is the nicest "No," really "Yes-No-Yes." You affirm the relationship, say no to the specific request, and thank them for asking. "I know this concert is important to you, but I just can't see a way I can help promote it right now. I do appreciate your asking me."
7. **The YES IF NO** – This is the negotiator's "No." You set the conditions under which you can do it. "Yes, I can help you promote that concert if you can give me all the info by March 12 and someone else looks after ticket sales."
8. **The DELAYED NO** – "I'll let you know tomorrow after I've had time to think." Thinking overnight will remind you that that this is YOUR decision. You may actually *want* to say, "Yes."

The practice of saying a considered "No" helps you stay in control of your time and your life. It doesn't mean you're selfish or uncaring. Far from it. It means you care enough about other people to want to be fully engaged, contributing 100 per cent, when you meet their requests.

When you learn to say "No," when you can't feel great about an activity, your "Yes," when you do say it, really means something to you and everyone around you.

I can say, "Yes" to that!

*Sue Johnston © 2003*

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