

Improving Your Ability to Say “No”

Objective

To improve your ability and confidence to say “no” to others in order to reflect your own needs and values.

You Should Know

Saying “no” is a necessary component in asserting yourself, setting limits, and respecting your own opinions and emotions. Although saying “no” is essential in all kinds of relationships, you may feel uncomfortable asserting yourself, or worry about making the other person angry or upset.

There are physical consequences when you submit to others’ demands while ignoring your own needs and feelings. It can reduce your body’s immune system, increasing your chance of infection, developing ulcers, or placing you at greater risk for heart disease. Saying “yes” when you mean “no” can also make you feel helpless, which can contribute to depression and anxiety.

The exercise below can help you develop the skills and confidence to say “no” in order to reflect and honor your needs and values.

What You Should Do

When you consider saying “no” to a request from another person, first examine how the request affects you: your emotions, values, needs, and desires. Think of a current situation where you are being asked to do something you prefer not to do, or do not feel comfortable doing. Answer the following questions, and provide explanations, where possible.

Am I emotionally and physically able to give the person what he/she wants? Yes or No _____

Am I willing to give the person what he/she wants? Yes or No _____

Will I feel bad about myself for saying “no”? Yes or No _____

Am I saying “yes” because I am afraid to say “no”? Yes or No _____

Am I being asked to do something that opposes my rights or values? Yes or No _____

Will I regret saying “no” in the long term? Yes or No _____

Do I fully understand what I am being asked? Yes or No _____

Do I need more time to think about it before making a decision? Yes or No _____

How to Say “No”

There are two simple steps for saying “no.” You will notice that they are respectful both to your feelings and to the person making the request.

1. Validate the other person’s request. Show that you are paying attention to what they are saying, and repeat back what you heard. This helps you focus on the substance of the request, instead of making assumptions about its context.

2. State your preference for *not* doing what the person has asked, or state your discomfort in doing what was asked. For example: “I agree that the neighbor’s dog barks too much, but I don’t feel comfortable confronting them in a way that would hurt our friendship.” Or, “I know that you’d like us to go out together with your friends tonight, but I’m tired. I’d prefer that you join them while I stay home and rest.”

Can you think of a recent situation where it would have been helpful to use these two steps to say “no”? Describe the situation.

What do you think would have been different in that situation if you had used those steps?

Next, think of some recent situations where you wanted to say “no” but felt unable to do so. Consider the statements you would have used to say “no” if you had used the two steps. Complete the chart below.

Request That Was Made	How You Felt About the Request (<i>uncomfortable, disrespected, unwilling, angry</i>)	The Statement You Would Have Used to Say “No”

Now, return to the *current* situation you identified on page 1. Practice using the two steps in your response to this person.

What can you say to validate the person's request?

What can you say to explain your preference for *not* doing what the person has asked, or to describe your discomfort in doing what was asked?

Reflections on This Exercise

Can you think of any upcoming situations at home, work, or with friends or partners, where using the two steps will be helpful? Explain.

Is there anyone who can help you practice the two steps to prepare for those situations?

After you have practiced using the two steps to say “no,” describe your experience. Include information such as how you felt, the other person’s response, and the outcome.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
