

Help!

I Can't Say NO

 Diane Gasal

How comfortable do you feel saying “no”? Many of my clients say they are overwhelmed with all they have on their plate. They’ve identified their struggle to say “no” as a contributor, and it is something they’d like to change. If that resonates for you, I’d like to share some perspectives that may help.

Before we begin though, if you’ve noticed it is hard for you to say no, congratulations! I say that because awareness is the first step to making a change. Now, what can you do about it?

Here are the most common obstacles I see that keep people from changing this behavior:

1. You don’t know how to say no.
2. You believe yes is your only choice.
3. You see yes or no as your only choices.
4. This is really a symptom for something else.

Let’s take a look at each one.

1. You don’t know how to say no.

Sometimes it is just a matter of finding the right words, comfortable words. Notice how others decline requests, and notice what sounds good to you. I like to use words that have integrity, truth, and strength. Let’s say someone invites you to dinner tonight, and you want to decline. Here are some ways to say it:

Good: “I’d love to come to dinner with you. I can’t come tonight because I need to prep for a meeting in the morning.”

Better: “I’d love to come to dinner with you. I have a meeting in the morning, and I’ll feel better if I walk in totally prepared. So, I’ll pass for tonight and hope you’ll invite me again next time.”

To me, the second one has more truth. The word “can’t” in the first example is not really true. The truth is you can, and you are choosing not to. The same probably goes for “need.” It is likely you want to be prepared, you don’t need to be prepared (your life does not depend on it).

The second one is also more empowering. I avoid using words like “can’t” and “need” because they tell my subconscious I am weak. To me they are victim words that imply I do not have the power to make my own choices. I like to replace them with empowering words and phrases like “I want to do this,” or “It is important for me to do this.”

Finally, I like the phrase, “I’ll pass.” I learned that one from my parents, and I’ve always thought it sounds good. To me, it sounds softer than “no,” yet it is still clear that I’m not coming to the event.

In this example, the conflict was preparing for a meeting. Some people feel okay saying no if they are doing something for someone else (such as their employer); however, they don’t feel okay declining requests to take care of





Illustration by Scott Thuen for The Partner Channel

themselves. The same idea applies. Here is how it might look:

"I'd love to go to dinner with you. Lately I've put so much on my plate that I committed to get some rest tonight. So, I'll pass for tonight and hope you will invite me again next time."

Think about the values that are most important to you (such as integrity, truth, or strength), and practice how you can respond to various requests. When you find the words that work for you, it is just a matter of practice, and you'll be set. Now let's move on to the next potential obstacle.

2. You believe yes is the only choice.

When I ask people if it is hard for them to say no, they sometimes say, "It depends on who is asking." For some, it is hard to say no if their manager is asking. For others, the challenge is around customer requests. If the request is coming from certain people, they automatically interpret it as a command.

When I talk to clients about this, they often don't realize it is happening. Something in their life experience led them to certain beliefs. For example, "The customer is always right. If a customer asks for something I MUST give him what he requests." Or, "The boss is the boss, and I have no right to question her requests."

Notice whether you have any beliefs along that line. Here are some questions to get you started:

- » Who are the people in my life from whom I think I get commands rather than requests?
- » Is it true? Or am I assuming the requests are commands?
- » If I'm unsure if it was a request or a command, how can I find out?

Is it possible your boss is asking you to do something, and you better do it if you want to keep your job? Yes. Just be aware it is also possible you are jumping to that conclusion when it is not true; you may have a choice. Yes is usually not the only choice, regardless of who is asking.

3. You see yes or no as the only two choices.

In reality that is rarely true. You can usually toss in a third option which is my personal favorite: renegotiate.

For example, if your manager says, "Do you have a minute?" you can say, "I am deep into this report right now, but I should be done in about an hour. Can we talk then?"

Or, you can do the more advanced version of this which is to gather more data before you renegotiate. Here is an example:

Customer: Can you send me a transcript from our conversation today?

You: (Initial thought in your head...Oh brother, that's going to take time, and I'll have to pay someone to turn this into a transcript.)

You: I want to be sure we are sending you something helpful. Can you tell me more about what you'd like the transcript for?

Customer: We covered a lot of ground today, and I want to be sure I can explain it well to my team. So I want to review the transcript before I meet with them.

You: Ah, I understand. I actually need to do something similar for our team. I'm planning to look at my notes and write up a summary of the conversation anyway. How about if I send you that instead?

Customer: Yes! That would actually be even better. Thank you.

In both those cases, you are technically saying no to the original request. However, it doesn't really feel like no to either party because you are coming up with a yes that works for both of you.

Renegotiate is also a good one if you get an instant feeling of stress when someone makes a request. Maybe you feel pressure to answer right away. Asking for time to think about it is one version of renegotiating. "I understand what you are asking for. I'd like some time to think about it. Can I get back to you on that tomorrow morning?"

If all the ideas above are not doing the trick for you, it brings us to the final category.

4. This is really a symptom for something else.

If you already know how to say no and realize you have choices, yet you continue to say yes when you don't want to, you may be looking at a symptom rather than a problem. Humans are funny that way. There are many things driving our own behavior, and some of them are buried pretty deep and hard to see.

I'll share some patterns I've seen for others in hopes they will help you notice what's really going on for you. Here are questions you can ask yourself.

» **Am I saying yes because I'm not clear on my values?** Values show you who you really are. They are not to be confused with morals or ethics. Values are not something to judge; they just are what they are. When you accept and honor your values, your life flows more smoothly. For example, let's say "solitude" is an important value to you, and your coworker places "connecting" the top of his list. If you go to a conference together, it's likely your coworker will ask you to attend all sorts of social functions because that is what he values. If you decline some of those invitations because solitude is important to you, you are making choices that align with your values. But if you are not clear on your values and don't consciously honor them, it is easy to get sucked into what other people value.

» **Am I saying yes because I like to be needed?** Sometimes people try to fill a gap in their life. Perhaps the gap is around self worth. And "feeling needed" can temporarily feel like it is filling that hole. Unfortunately, this path to fill the hole will never be enough, so the need to be needed just keeps growing. When you start to believe you are worthy from the inside, the need to be needed starts

to dissolve, and your ability to say no gains strength.

» **Am I saying yes out of guilt?** I did an Internet search for "guilt." It was interesting to see that some people, such as Tibetans, don't even have a word for guilt. The Internet has a number of good ideas to understand guilt and how to keep it from running your life. Until you learn ways to recognize guilt for what it is, and learn other ways to process it, you will continue to get a payoff for saying "yes" just to alleviate the greater pain of guilt.

Sometimes we choose habits that don't work for us in an attempt to fill some other

need. When we can see the root cause and start to change that, the habits start to resolve themselves.

If you are overwhelmed with a full plate, here is the good news. You get to choose what you put on your plate. You can choose to say yes, no, or renegotiate. You deserve a satisfying plate filled with meaning. I wish you the best on your journey. 🌟

If you would like tools to help you clarify your values, or more specific exercises to help you say no, I'm happy to send you some tools at no charge. Feel free to contact me at Diane@dianegasal.com.

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