

More Power to You
Saying “No” Without Feeling Guilty

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Introduction

You can't even count the things going on in your life.

"Tyler's soccer coach asked me to take over this season."

"I've never caught up on that HBO series that's been on the DVR for three months."

"I've got that lunch date next week."

Holy smokes! That's a lot to remember. Where are you in this picture? Do you over commit to others and leave little time for yourself? It's o.k. to say "no" to requests for your time. It's not selfish. It's not mean. If you're burned out, you can't thrive. Setting boundaries is a necessary, effective way to put time and energy back into your "gas tank."

What would it feel like to reclaim your power and take charge of your life? Think about that for a minute. What would you do with all of the extra time? How would you take care of yourself and your family? It can happen. And it's all up to you.



The Science of "No"

"One of our most fundamental needs is for social connection and a feeling that we belong," says Vanessa Bohns, associate professor of organizational behavior at Cornell University.* "Saying 'no' feels threatening to our relationships and that feeling of connectedness."

We worry incessantly about whether people will feel rejected by our decision and we don't want to hurt their feelings. That's because our brains create a stronger reaction to negative memories than positive ones. The evolutionary design is simple—we remember those negative memories so strongly because they help us remember what is dangerous or bad. When I was about three or four, I wanted to eat these beautiful, shiny red peppers on the countertop in the kitchen. My mom told me that they were too hot and that they'd burn my mouth. I begged her to let me eat them. Each time she emphasized that I wouldn't like them and that they were too hot. When she left the room, I snuck one off of the counter and took a big chomp. I remember running around the house *howling* and carrying on about how hot they were. Needless to say, I spit it out. My mom felt bad

for me, but said, “I told you so.” She was right. That experience happened 45 years ago and I can remember it pretty well. It has certainly stuck with me. Can I tell you the first time I ate a cookie or a piece of cake? Nope. No idea.

The negative impressions aren’t always left on others, though. Sometimes we’re the ones who make the situation negative. “We often feel guilty because not only do we think we’re hurting the other person, but because we expect retaliation,” says Ellen Hendrikson, in her *Savvy Psychologist* podcast. “We think ‘she’s going to hate me’ or ‘he’ll get mad’ or ‘I’ll get fired.’ Our brains jump to the worst-case scenario.” We think that the other person will react more strongly than they actually will. We build it up in our minds to be worse than it actually is. Hendrikson continues, “What happens when someone says ‘no’ to you? Do you fly into a rage, burst blood vessels, and froth at the mouth? Probably not, so don’t hold a double standard. You can expect reasonable others to react as you do, that is to say, reasonably.” What would it be like to say “no” without the worry and fear of hurting someone? Pretty powerful!



FOMO

Everywhere you look, someone is generating a message of urgency. From advertisers promising exclusive offers that will never come again (until next week) and friends showcasing their vacation pictures on Facebook, FOMO is all around us. We see new examples of what we’re missing every day. FOMO, or “fear of missing out,” is the anxiety we experience when we feel that there is a more exciting prospect happening elsewhere—and we’re not there. It prompts a strong desire to stay connected with that individual or situation. It gives us anxiety by undermining confidence in our decisions. The decisions might be as small as where to go for lunch, or as big as what career you’re pursuing. FOMO feeds the hypothetical, anxiety-provoking questions of “if only” and “what if?”

Think about how many times you've created your own FOMO anxiety. Every year on Fat Tuesday, my mom made pancakes. We called it "Pancake Tuesday" in our family. She made these delicious, thin crepe-like pancakes and we sprinkled sugar and lemon juice on them. We rolled them up and ate them like they were going out of style. Even after I moved out, I often came back for Pancake Tuesday. I created the sense of urgency myself. If I didn't get the pancakes, my chance would be gone for another year. In reality, I could easily make those same pancakes for myself any night of the year. The same goes for turkey on Thanksgiving and candy on Christmas. You can eat those things any time of the year, if you want. If you can't get it, you can certainly make it.

Recognize that advertisers are creating a sense of urgency to get you to buy, buy, buy today instead of next week. The urgency to buy is a fabricated emergency. This week's sale is almost certainly not your last chance at savings. I get daily emails from a company that I expressed interest in a few months ago. Many of the subject lines are: "You're about to miss this," or "Ending tonight!" I'll get the same emails tomorrow or the day after. They're creating urgency where it isn't needed. At all.

A friend of mine recently went to Paris and London with her husband for their 25th anniversary. The pictures she posted on Facebook were gorgeous. The view of the Eiffel Tower out their hotel window, their tour of the house where Downton Abbey was filmed and their tickets to "Hamilton" at a beautiful theater in London were just a few of the highlights. I was so jealous when I saw it. The FOMO reeled me in hook, line and sinker. I love this friend, and she deserved this anniversary trip. They've had some ups and downs in their family over the years; she and her husband deserved a trip of a lifetime. I tried to keep that in mind as I pined over her vacation experience.



Remember, when it comes to social media, people show their best faces. We post about the positive aspects of our lives—vacations, accomplishments, kids doing cute things, photos in which we look particularly hot. No one posts about cleaning the litter box or picking up tampons on sale. Everyone does these things just as often as you—it’s just that those moments aren’t on display. Don’t fall prey to FOMO because you’re worried that someone else is having a great time without you. Odds are, you have some great moments in your life too.

Boundaries and Needs

Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them and how they will respond when someone passes those limits. In short, we draw invisible lines around us that mark our personal space—whether physically, emotionally or mentally—and we use those lines to identify where we start and someone else ends. We use phrases like “drawing a line in the sand” and “personal space” when talking about boundaries.

What happens when you’re talking to someone and they get a little too close to your face or body when they talk? You sense your personal boundaries being crossed! It’s an uncomfortable feeling of being closed in with someone. Remember the episode of *Seinfeld* with the “close talker?” Elaine was dating a guy named Aaron who was very sweet, but had no sense of personal space or boundaries. He liked to talk to people up close—about six inches from their face. The episode was hilarious because it looked ridiculous. Kramer fell over in Jerry’s kitchen because he was so taken aback by the close talker (no surprise there). If you watch the episode now, it’s still ludicrously funny, but you can easily see that the move looks intimidating. Aaron deliberately forces himself into the space of others.

We allow people to creep into our personal space all the time. We say “yes” to events that we don’t want to attend. We let family members come over to our house unannounced. We tell our bosses we can take on a project when we’re already in over our heads. And sometimes *we’re* the ones doing the creeping. We wrap our entire existence around our children and become helicopter parents. We text people at all hours of the night or early morning. We assume that our coworkers will still be connected to work projects while on a personal vacation. Somewhere along the way, our boundaries have loosened up and become blurry.

When boundaries are loose, we easily take on the emotions and needs of others. There is little sense of a separate self and it’s difficult to identify our own emotions and needs. We feel smothered and become hypersensitive to others’ comments and criticisms.

For some people, too much closeness is anxiety-provoking. Intimacy may be frightening due to fears of being suffocated and loss of independence. Some may also avoid connection with themselves due to a harsh inner critic (Remember the Gremlin from Book Two!). Feelings of emptiness and depression may be present, along with difficulty giving and receiving care and concern.

Ultimately, rigid boundaries can lead to chronic feelings of loneliness. It can be a double-edged sword—craving connection while fearing closeness. Rigid boundaries protect us from vulnerability, where hurt, loss and rejection can occur and be especially painful.



Here are some signs that your boundaries need adjusting:

- Feeling unable to say no
- Feeling responsible for others' emotions
- Being concerned about what others think to the point of discounting your own thoughts, opinions and intuition
- Being so drained by someone that you neglect your own needs (including food, rest, etc.)
- People-pleasing
- Avoiding intimate relationships
- Inability to make decisions
- Believing your happiness depends on others
- Taking care of others' needs, but not your own
- Believing that others' opinions are more important than your own
- Difficulty asking for what you want or need
- Going along with others vs. what you want
- Taking on moods or emotions of others around you
- Being overly sensitive to criticism

Hey, I resemble that remark! Cough...cough...I mean, do any of these sound familiar to you? When your boundaries are loose, you feel responsible for everything and everyone—powerless, imposed upon and resentful. I'm certainly not perfect when it comes to holding boundaries. I have a hard time telling people "no" in certain situations. I'm good at turning down events. I'm also good at staying in my own lane when it comes to getting involved in other peoples' lives. However, I do have a touch of perfectionism and people pleasing. I can sometimes let people manipulate me with emotion. I'm much better at setting boundaries than I used to be. It's taken me a long time to get there.

Whether you have loose or rigid boundaries, it's OK. Try not to judge where you are right now. Rather, approach it with curiosity and openness. Read through the following suggestions and find one thing you can start with today. Give it a try to see how you feel. Remember, it may be uncomfortable at first as you are learning a new skill. Stick with it. You deserve to be treated as valuable, which is what healthy boundaries communicate. **You may need to remind yourself that this is a form of loving self-care and you're doing the best you can.** You don't need to feel guilty for what you need.

Know yourself. This means knowing your innermost thoughts, beliefs, feelings, choices, and experiences. It also means knowing and connecting with your needs, feelings and physical sensations. Without knowing your true self, you can't really know your limits and needs—your boundaries. This will also help you clearly define your needs when boundaries are crossed.

In her psychcentral.com blog, *Keeping Good Boundaries and Getting Your Needs Met*, therapist Rachel Eddins suggests the most useful tips I've seen for working on boundaries:

- **Be flexible.** Having healthy boundaries doesn't mean rigidly saying no to everything. Nor does it mean cocooning yourself from others. We are constantly growing, learning and evolving as human beings.
- **Stay out of judgment.** Practice healthy compassion for others without the need to "fix" them.
- **Let go of judgment about yourself.** Start practicing compassion and acceptance. When you can accept yourself for who you are, there's no need to hide your true self. A more positive inner world can help you feel safe with vulnerability. Connect with the voice of someone loving and nurturing and imagine what he or she would say to you in this moment instead.
- **Accept the truth in what others say and leave the rest.** Feel what you feel and don't take responsibility for or take on the emotions of others. Give back their feelings, thoughts and expectations.
- **Practice openness.** Be willing to listen to others about how your behavior impacts them.
- **Watch out for black and white thinking.** There's a lot more gray area than you think. Do you have difficulty saying no? Try "Let me think about it and get back to you." Do you have to do x, y, or z or else? Try to find the middle ground.
- **Pay attention to activities and people who drain you and those who energize you.** Protect yourself by saying no to those who drain you or finding ways to reduce them through delegating, setting limits, or lowering perfectionistic standards. Add more energizing activities to your day instead.
- **Pause.** When you feel the urge to (insert compulsion here), stop and check in with yourself. What are you feeling? Can you allow that feeling to be present without acting on it for the moment? What do you need? Dig deep and see what comes up for you. Take five or 10 deep breaths if need be, focusing on exhaling completely.

What is hardest for me as a recovering people pleaser is not feeling guilty. I can now do the hard part of saying "no" to someone, but then I ruminate about it the rest of the day. "Did I do enough?" "What do they think of me?" Eddins' suggestions are very helpful when it comes to being true to yourself.

HOW TO USE OXYGEN MASK ON PLANE



Taking Care of You First

Think of the times you've flown on a commercial airplane and about the safety instructions at the beginning of each flight. You've probably heard it so many times that you don't even pay attention anymore. A flight attendant says:

"In the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will drop from the overhead panels. To start the flow of oxygen, pull the mask toward you. Place the mask over your nose and mouth and slip the elastic band over your head. Tighten by pulling the straps and breathing normally. Do not worry if the bag does not inflate; oxygen will be flowing through the mask.

Parents traveling with younger children should first secure their own mask, and then their child's mask. You may remove the mask when indicated by a uniformed crew member."

You are instructed to put your own mask on first before attempting to help anyone else. At high altitudes, there is little oxygen in the air and the human brain can't survive for long without supplemental oxygen. In the time it takes to help someone else struggle with their mask, you could both black out and die. However, if you put on your own mask immediately, you'll have the oxygen you need to survive and think clearly, so you can help others. The analogy here is a simple one: If you don't take care of yourself first, you're of no use to anyone else. The same holds true about practicing self-care. Whether it's mental health, physical well-being or emotional value, you must take care of yourself first. A car without gas goes nowhere, right?

If you're giving 100% of yourself to your children, spouse or job, what's left for you?

You're Gonna Get Push Back

Know this. It's as sure as the sky is blue. When you choose to reclaim your power and set boundaries with people, they're not going to like it. Be prepared for tantrums. Be ready for manipulation. Be aware of emotions. You'll hear phrases like these:

“You’re being selfish.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“Nobody has ever talked to me like that.”

“Why would you do this to me?”

Think about it. When you’ve allowed people to encroach in your space—whether physically, mentally or emotionally—they’re going to take your boundary setting as rejection and selfishness. People without boundaries don’t typically understand how boundaries are supposed to work. They don’t see a problem with getting enmeshed with you.

I worked for a small non-profit for about a year. The office staff was only 10 people and they were all women. There were positives and negatives about that. Women tend to bond and nurture each other when we’re all together. We all ate lunch together every day and we knew just about everything about each other. We cheered each other on. We championed each other. We also talked about each other. It’s a pretty common practice in offices, but it was non-stop at this office. And only one staff member had true boundaries—she was a therapist. The unfortunate thing was, the two women who headed up the organization were so enmeshed that they had no boundaries with each other. They fostered that mindset with the rest of us too. I wasn’t confident enough to keep boundaries in place with my boss. When I tried to set boundaries with her, she got mad and thought I was being insubordinate. It was a very trying year.

The good news is, there are people who actually appreciate boundary setting. They genuinely have no idea that they are encroaching on your space. They have no idea that their behavior was inappropriate. It’s what they learned in another environment—maybe in their home or work setting—and they think it’s normal. Self-aware, open people might say very different things when you set boundaries with them:

“Thank you for telling me that.”

“I had no idea that I came across that way.”

“I appreciate you sharing your frustration with me.”

No and Let Go

You have responsibility for yourself and your actions, but you are not responsible for how others react. That’s called unhealthy responsibility and it enters the equation when you believe that you are responsible for controlling others people’s reactions when you say “no.” You aren’t. It doesn’t make sense. If you keep believing that it’s your responsibility, you cave to that reaction and you may as well have not set the boundary at all. So, what exactly is your responsibility?

According to Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist Danielle Grossman, it all boils down to being kind, being consistent, and letting it go. In her Psychcentral blog post, *Saying No Kindly and Then Letting Go*, she outlines eight responsibilities or jobs you have when saying “no.”



1. **It is your job to decide when to say “no.”**
2. **It is your job to say “no” when it reflects careful consideration of your own needs and the needs of others.** For example, you may not want to go to the big charity function this year with your sister. You don’t really want to go, and your kids don’t want to go either because it’s the night of their big school play. Could you say, “This year I’ll say no, and then perhaps next year I’ll say yes?”
3. **It is your job to say no in a direct but kind manner.** “I deeply appreciate you thinking of us, but we are not going to make it this year.”
4. **It is your job to listen to your sister plead her case and to carefully consider her preferences.** She may say, “This year is important to me because my favorite band is playing at the event.” If this is new information, you may reconsider your decision in light of these facts. If it is not new information, or if you still want to say “no,” then it is your job to say “I understand your preference, but we are not coming this year.”
5. **It is your job to listen to your sister’s reaction and interpretation of this “no.”** “I guess you don’t want to hang around with your little sister anymore,” she might say. It is your job to then clarify your own feelings: “I do love and care about you, but I also am not coming to the charity event this year.”
6. **It is your job, in the case of telling your child “no”, to help him or her to learn strategies to manage their reactions to getting “no” for an answer.**
7. **It is your job to get the support that you need to take care of yourself emotionally and physically, and protect your children, if and when there is danger from a person reacting badly to a “no.”**
8. **At that point in time, it is time to let go.** Telling your sister “no” might be hard and she may be angry and hurt. She may choose to never invite you to an event again. She may decide to drink herself into an alcohol stupor. She may decide to tell your other siblings how awful you are. But none of this is your responsibility. The way she interprets your “no,” and the choices she makes following your “no,” are not your responsibility. Instead, it is your job to let go of that responsibility.



Get Comfy with No

There are times when we feel like we just can't say "no." Invitations from friends to fantastic parties. Requests from your boss. Pleas from your sister to help at the charity auction again this year.

Keep in mind that any time you say "I can't do it," you're reinforcing loss of control and empowerment. You *can* do it; you just need a game plan. How can you prepare to say "no?" Outline your plan and keep these things in mind:

Realize the reason behind the request

People ask us to participate in something because they know we have the smarts and ability to help. Respect that consideration when saying "no." Thank them for considering you or making the request.

Turning down the "what" not the "who"

You're declining an invitation/request, not rejecting someone personally. Let your sister know that you admire her passion for charity and fundraising. You'd like to make a donation to the event or contribute in another way, but you won't be able to attend.

Stay the course

So, your sister is really pushy. She needs to fill one last spot on the social committee. She wants *you* because she likes spending time with you. Even if she won't give up, don't give in. Be resolute. You can be pushy too. Stay on message.

Get ahead of the ask

Sometimes it's easier to turn down a request before it happens. At this year's charity auction, you tell your sister, "Listen, next year I won't be able to help at this event. I have XY and Z going on and my time will be really limited." I realize that it's not always that easy—especially when it's your boss doing the asking. When the VP gets excited about that incredible opportunity to submit an RFP that will land your team trophies, talk to your boss about what your priorities should be.

You'll be ready for your workload and you can always refer back to your conversation with your boss.

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse!

Practice saying “no” to people when you’re at home by yourself. Go through the scenario in your mind and plan your script. You can get experience and confidence by saying “no” to the window salesman who knocks on your door. Or “no thanks” to the perfume sales guy at the kiosk in the mall. The more you practice, the easier it gets.

Say “no” to say “yes”

When FOMO rears its ugly head, remember that you’re turning down an opportunity because you’re saying “yes” to something else at that time. When your sister posts the fun pictures of the charity event on her Facebook page, it’s o.k. to feel like you missed out on something, but remember that you chose one opportunity over another.

Be confident in your decision

Courage, my friend! It takes some bravery to know that you’re turning down an opportunity because it’s the best decision for you. What if people talk about you behind your back? Hey might be jealous because they don’t have the courage to set boundaries. Summon that bravery to stay confident in your decision.



Minimalist Derek Sivers has a simple rule for determining whether or not to accept an opportunity. In his blog post (and future book) “*HELL YEAH!*” or “no,” he says, “If you’re not saying “HELL YEAH!” about something, say “no.” When deciding whether to do something, if you feel anything less than “Wow! That would be amazing! Absolutely! Hell yeah!” — then say “no.” When you say no to most things, you leave room in your life to really throw yourself completely into that rare thing that makes you say “HELL YEAH!””



Declutter Mentally and Physically

I have a good friend who is a professional organizer and coach. She once said the most profound thing to me and it has stayed with me since. “Physical clutter is a manifestation of mental clutter.” Wow, what a revelation! And it’s true. The more we take on, the more our brains are cluttered. Cleaning the physical clutter around us is our way of containing the mental clutter as well.

According to minimalist Mike Burns, clutter is the stuff that interferes with the life we want to live. It slows us down from doing the things we value most. It’s that unnecessary stuff that we entertain, but doesn’t help us get where we want to go. And it needs to be removed.

It's a hard, but necessary task. When you analyze who you are, what you want in your life, and what you want to achieve, it's easier to clear out the clutter. Again, it's saying “no” to some things so that we can say “yes” to others.

So, where to go from here? Start by asking yourself these questions:

- *How frequently do you say “yes” to requests that you really don’t want to do?*
- *How does it make you feel when you tell someone “no?”*
- *In what ways can you take control of your choices?*
- *What would you cut from your weekly schedule if you could?*
- *What does “no” mean to you?*
- *What’s the cost of saying “yes” to everything? (Physical, mental, and emotional)*
- *How can you say “no?” How will it make you feel to say “yes” to your needs?*
- *What small steps can you take to foster success?*

You'll get the clarity you need to determine what is most important to you and what doesn't serve you well anymore.

I want to hear from you! How have you reclaimed your power? Send me a note at angela@resetyourhappy.com.

Saying "No" Quotes

The art of leadership is saying no, not saying yes. It is very easy to say yes.

--Tony Blair

In order for us to practice self-control, we must have a goal. We must have something we are saying "yes" to, which necessarily comes with things that we must say "no" to. We use self-control to maneuver ourselves toward this "yes." This goal must be entirely our own. The minute another person is choosing and managing our goals for us, we have left self-control behind.

--Danny Silk, *Keep Your Love On: Connection Communication and Boundaries*

One friend told me her one big takeaway from three years and \$11,000 of therapy was 'learn to say no.' And when you do, don't complain and don't explain. Every excuse you make is like an invitation to ask you again in a different way.

--Kelly Corrigan, *Tell Me More: Stories about the 12 Hardest Things I'm Learning to Say*

I can't spend time with people I don't enjoy. I can't do it anymore as theater. I make choices, and that's a beautiful thing about growing up, learning to say no, in a nice way, just say no. I have this friend...we just went different ways in life. Once he came to me and said, "Francis, you don't like me anymore." and I said "No, it's not that I don't like you, we've chosen different styles of life. I still have beautiful souvenirs of all the things we did together and how close we were, but the truth is it's not that you bore me, but I don't enjoy talking to you anymore and I don't want to fight with you but there's nothing in common between your life and mine nowadays". I would have never said that but he asked me. So what could I say? I said the truth. Growing up has a bit to do with that, to be able to tell the truth, to show who you are, even if it hurts.

--Francis Mallmann – Famed Argentine Chef

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