



# Sometimes the Answer is *No*

by MARIE WALL

**F**or such a small word *no* can be very powerful and one that causes difficulty for many people. Being able to say *no* to others and to oneself is a necessity. And learning to accept a negative response from others is also a challenge. This article will explore the dynamics of saying *no*, how to use it effectively and how to cope when others say *no* to you.

If you are a person who always wants to please others or feel guilty for inconveniencing others, you may have a problem saying *no*. If you have a hard time standing up for yourself or agree to do things you don't want to do you may struggle with setting personal boundaries. If you are unable to make desired changes in your own life such as health or financial changes you may be unable to say *no* to yourself. And if you take things personally and feel hurt if others say *no* to you, you may be struggling with accepting other people's limits. Whether it is your ability to set boundaries or respect the boundaries of others, developing these skills can make your relationships and your life more fulfilling because the choices you make will be more honest and the commitment more solid.

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It was not always difficult to say *no*. As children we learned the word and used it regularly. Think about a two-year-old who says it forcefully and often. So what changes? As a child grows, adults often teach the child that it is not always nice to say *no*. And there are times when children are told to do things which they find uncomfortable, to hug or kiss Auntie 'good-bye' for example. These actions seem innocent enough, but in reality they are setting the seeds of

poor boundaries from a very early age. Consider your childhood for a moment. How permissible was it for you to say *no* in your family?

Learning how to say *no* and set boundaries is difficult, but this behavior can help you be healthier, less stressed and more committed when you say *yes*. When you begin to change this behavior it may feel awkward and uncomfortable, but in time it becomes easier and more comfortable, for you and others.

Others will also be happier when you learn to set boundaries. When a person is a 'people pleaser' those around them are often uncertain where they stand on an issue or project. This is because there is often a sense of doom or heaviness about them, since there may be resentment, reluctance or non-commitment. When you learn to say *no* your *yes* becomes stronger. You will learn to deal with the initial discomfort and learn to appreciate the clarity.

## Saying *No* to Others

There are three stages in learning to say *no* to others: awareness, practice and validation. The awareness that pleasing others can take a personal toll is the first step. Being overextended, feeling resentful or regretful and wanting to avoid others are indicators that your stress level is on bust. Thoughts like "I should never have agreed to this" are indicators that the negative experience of not setting boundaries is outweighing the benefits of pleasing others.

Often the first step to change is renegeing on a commitment you have agreed to. You get into a project and realize you just can't fulfill the demands. When you let others know, it feels extremely uncomfortable because you feel you have let them down. On the other hand, there is such relief and self-confidence that it enhances your sense of pride. It is this positive feeling that re-enforces the new behavior. It is the sense of personal power that encourages you to try it again. Also, the realization that others can and will do what they can, shows you that things will get done.

With this reinforcement you will be able to begin

to assess what you can commit to and what you are unable to put your full energy behind. At this stage others are more able to relax with you and accept your decisions. It is important to be patient with others when you make these changes. They have experienced you in a particular way for a long period of time. These changes do affect them and the changes are being imposed. Stay the course. They will catch up.

If you are worried that learning to set your limits by saying *no* means you will never be involved again, don't worry. When you learn to care for yourself in this way you will agree to the commitments to which you can say *yes* and enjoy doing them with a heart and a half.

### Internal Boundaries

Listening to oneself is a key to setting boundaries. We need to pay attention to the aspects of internal boundaries; the ability to limit ourselves, to say *no* to oneself and to accept someone else's *no* without taking it personally. Developing these behaviors and responding comfortably is empowering.

We are so used to saying *yes* that we often overextend ourselves without considering the consequences. If offered food we may feel obliged to eat it, even if we are full. The thought is, "if it is available, have it". We do this financially as well. If we want it, we just get it. There is no sense that it is okay to delay getting what we want. This is an 'I deserve it' attitude, even if the long-term pain is harmful. Assessing *need* versus *want* will help to set internal limits. We need to make the decision that when it is a need, have it or get it; when it is a want, decide if and when you will get it.

Learning to say *no* to oneself can be uncomfortable. Initially it can be just as uncomfortable as beginning to say it to others. An example is when deciding to change spending habits with the goal to becoming more financially sound. Learning and putting into practice *need* versus *want* is a process of setting limits. It is internal because no one is imposing this on you; it is a commitment you make to yourself. Feeling empowered and proud of making such decisions is the positive experience that will encourage you to continue this way.

Internal boundaries also include the ability to accept other people's limits and their response to you. Feeling rejected when you are given a negative response or hesitating to ask for other's assistance because they may say *no* are indicators that you have poor internal boundaries. It is necessary to separate yourself from the response given. We have to accept that sometimes the answer is *no* and would be *no* no matter who was making the request. There are circumstances that you may not be aware of and this may influence the

response. One example is if your administrator turns down a request for professional development. It would be understandable to feel disappointed but it is important not to take it personally. The administrator may have to consider the bigger picture, and while you may want and/or need professional development, there may be legitimate reasons for the refusal. If you do get a *no* from someone, consider whether there is anything further in your control. If there is, do something about it; if there is not, let it go and move on.

Sometimes the answer is *no*, whether it is saying *no* to someone else, to yourself or accepting it from another person. It is important to learn to deal with a negative response, whether it be from you or someone else. Being able to set limits is empowering and clearly informs others of your position. Being able to say *no* to yourself enables you to achieve desired goals. Finally, learning to accept *no* from others, without taking it personally, opens up honest communication with co-workers, family and friends.

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