



# Learning to Say “NO”: Tips for Work-Life Balance

by Gail M. Carroll

*Half the troubles of this life can be traced to saying yes too quickly and not saying no soon enough.*

~ Josh Billings, American Humorist 1818-1885

The most difficult word for most of us to say is “no”. Amazing that when we are two years old the word “no” comes so easily for just about everything as we test our boundaries! What happens to us as we grow and develop? We seem to lose that sense of clarity around our boundaries as the whirl of studies and work life sweep us up like the speed of light. For a variety of reasons we feel compelled to say yes to everything, making it tricky to maintain a healthy work-life balance. For educators, this balance can be even trickier. Why? In the early days of your teaching career there may be a sense of fear around saying no to work things because you are not yet tenured, so you often take it all on. When teachers reach tenure though they sometimes forget that they can say no. Whether you are a tenured or untenured teacher, there are little ways you can present to others that you are trying to achieve balance. It is not going to happen overnight, so you have to start small and grow from there. It is crucial to set good boundaries and to take care of yourself as these qualities will make you a better teacher and enhance the quality of your overall life. It is so easy, and many times also tempting, to just say yes. Learning how to say no is a critical part of learning how to manage your time effectively. Here are some things to think about to help get you started on practicing your “no”:

- Try to thoughtfully craft your choice of words, i.e., when someone asks you to do something that has not been part of your schedule and you are feeling that your schedule is already close to or at a breaking point, try phrasing such as, “I’d really love to do this, but my schedule is very full (or overfull) at this time. Is it possible for us to postpone another deadline so that I could give this the full attention it needs?”
- Think in terms of priorities. When someone asks you to do something, what is the priority? If the

response is urgent, then see the response above. If the request is not urgent then an appropriate response might be, “I’d love to do this for you right now. How urgent is this?” or “Perhaps we can negotiate a time that could work for both of us.” Or you could recommend a colleague (or other avenue) who might be able to assist with the request. If you’re unable to help, recommending a way for them to achieve their goal can also be very satisfactory. So even though you are saying no, you are still helping in some small way.

- We often feel under pressure from colleagues, family and friends to respond immediately to their requests. Some people may be offended or take it personally when we say no. Remember, the only person you have control over is you! To take the heat out of immediate responses and avoid automatically saying yes only to later try getting out of the request, you could respond by saying, “I’d really like to help. Let me check my schedule first and I will get back to you.” A statement like this puts you in the driver’s seat. Again, don’t feel bad if you really cannot accommodate the request or don’t feel up to it. If appropriate, you can always make another recommendation.
- Sometimes you just have to put you first. Some weeks are overfull with work, family and/or personal commitments. Saying “no” is often critical to your overall health, especially your mental health.
- It is important to find your own inner balance to help achieve your optimal health and happiness. Be kind to yourself, be your own best friend and remember to cut yourself some slack. You will not wake up tomorrow and say “Hurray for me! I now have boundaries!” Start with a few small things and build from there.

## Strategies for Saying No

When saying “no” feels impossible, here are a few starters:

- Start by saying no to little things as a practice. You don’t want to be disrespectful or get into great trouble or be labelled a trouble maker. So choose

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little things to begin with that will allow you the practice and even lighten your schedule just a little. Being overscheduled in your work life will mean an overscheduling in your personal life and an imbalance all around.

- When saying no, keep your explanations brief and simple. No need for long detail.
- Always work from a list. It will help you to prioritize and you will be less likely to forget important details and deadlines.
- Always use “I” statements and remember to present assertively and not defensively. When we respond with statements such as, “I already have all of this to do and now you are asking me to do more?!” we may appear to be too defensive. Instead, try something like, “I think that sounds like a great idea. Just let me check my schedule and I’ll get back to you.”
- Sometimes a little tweak in your schedule can make all the difference. Getting up a little earlier can help ease the pressure. Even an extra half hour can make a big difference!
- When “no” doesn’t work, then little “yeses” with small achievable goals can also be helpful, i.e., you may not be able to accommodate all of it, but you may be able to do a small part and make recommendations.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Sometimes it is impossible to achieve everything by yourself. Even young kids at home can pitch in and help. You just have to cut yourself and everyone else some slack and accept that helping doesn’t mean having to do it to your standards, i.e., kids can help fold laundry, but it won’t look like the folding you do. As long as it gets done, that should be the main focus. It also helps build relationships, confidence and self-esteem for all.
- Keep your communication open, clear and assertive. (Use those “I” statements!)
- Last, but not least, reward yourself for saying no when you need to and helping to keep your work-life balance in check. It might be something as simple as buying a longed for novel, a piece of jewelry or some other tangible little treat.

Remember how important you are and how important your overall health is to your balance and happiness. Starting small and always having a plan will help you achieve an excellent status of self-care and work-life balance over time. Take good care of yourself and you will be the best “YOU” you can be!

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