HOW YOU CAN LEARN TO SAY "NO"

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One Step Outside

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Have you noticed that there's a big trend towards saying YES? Yes to opportunities, yes to adventure, yes, yes, yes…!

In Danny Wallace's bestseller *Yes Man*, he commits to saying yes "to every favour, request, suggestion and invitation". We want to live the fullest lives we can and we have FOMO (fear of missing out) when people are having fun without us. Carpe diem! Life is short! No regrets!

It's not just in our personal lives but in the office as well. Work is competitive so we take on more and more projects to prove that we deserve to be there and to make sure we're demonstrating our value. Those of us who are freelancers or consultants will often take on projects we don't really want to do with clients we know we don't want to work with.

Now I'm all about saying "yes". I said "yes" to a sabbatical travelling alone across South America in 2013; I said "yes" to starting up my own business; and I've been saying "yes" to all sorts of professional opportunities and fun adventures since then.

But the problem is that I don't just say yes to the good stuff.

When I get an email from a friend asking me to help with something, I'll not only do it, I'll do so before I've done my own work. When strangers contact me and ask me for free advice, I'm always eager to help in whatever way I can, even though I'd usually charge for my services. When I'm asked to interview for an interesting new position even though I don't want a full-time job, I'm always tempted to say "yes" (it's such a good opportunity, after all…).

Sorry Mr Yes Man but, if anything, I need to be No Girl!

Why is it important to say "No"?

In a world in which there are so many people, projects, and messages vying for our attention, we have to learn to set boundaries simply for our own sanity! But there are plenty more reasons why saying "Yes" when you really want to be saying "No" is a bad idea:

- Saying "yes" to other people's priorities at the expense of your own means that you are **putting others ahead of yourself** (remember what they say on the plane: put your own oxygen mask on before you help other people)
- You might not be able to deliver in the end and you might end up having to say no when it's too late to find another solution – so all you're doing is **making the situation worse** for the other person
- Saying "yes" to these new things will mean that other priorities will suffer, which in turn will mean that you'll be **letting other people down** – so you're only really shifting the problem to a different area of your life

- If you say "Yes" when you mean "No" then you're likely to **end up feeling resentful** towards the person who has "put you in this situation"
- If you keep on the way you're going, if you keep taking on more than you can handle, **you're eventually going to burn out**, and then you're going to be forced to say "No"!

Now this doesn't mean that you have to go to the other extreme and say "No" to everything that comes along (although that could be an interesting exercise!). The whole point of saying "No" to the unimportant stuff is to allow you to say "Yes" to the stuff that *is* important.

Ultimately, saying "no" creates the space to say "yes".

Why do we find it so difficult to say "no"?

Before we get into how you can learn to say "no", it's important to explore why you find it so difficult.

Saying "yes" when you mean "no" is a very British kind of behaviour, a sense of decorum and politeness that comes with keeping up appearances.

Good girls – and boys, of course, but the behaviour does tend to be particularly common in girls – are especially likely to say "yes" to everything. We want to oblige the other person, we want be liked, we want the "good girl" stamp from our teachers and our parents, the gold star on our homework.

Saying "no" on the other hand can feel aggressive, we feel like we're letting people down, we feel selfish and guilty, and we worry: "What will they think of me?"

These are behaviours that are taught and reinforced throughout our childhood and schooling, along with plenty of 'shoulds' and pressure from both external and internal expectations. For many of us, these messages resonate with a subconscious feeling that we're not good enough and that we need to constantly prove ourselves.

And so we say "yes". To that party we'd really rather skip, to lending money to the person who never pays us back, to taking on a project at work that really isn't in our remit but, of course, we don't want to let anyone down… And as a result, our diaries are full of plans we want to get out of, our to-do lists full of tasks for other people.

This behaviour doesn't serve you well in a world where risk taking, entrepreneurship, and creativity can take you much further than keeping your head down and working through an endless to-do list…

So what are the reasons why *you* say "yes" when you'd really rather be saying "no"?

➢ **Exercise 1: Why are you saying yes?**

Think back to a specific situation when you said "yes" but you really wanted to say "no". What made you say yes?

In the coming days and weeks as well, observe yourself and make a note of whenever you say "yes" to something and the reasons *why* you're saying yes.

No need to change your behaviour at this stage, simply notice what's going on. Even just acknowledging the reasons why you're saying "yes" may be enough to make you aware of the situation and to start you on the path towards saying "no".

You can use the sheet at the end of this ebook to note your answers or just write them down on a blank piece of paper.

Knowing what you're saying "Yes" to

Now you're going to need some criteria for when "no" is the correct response; and to get clear on those, you'll need to know what you're going to say "yes" to!

If you don't know what's important to you, if you don't have a clear vision or specific goals in mind, then it's incredibly easy for other people to push you off your path (especially since you're not really on a path to begin with!). There are only so many hours in the day and adding something onto your plate will inevitably mean that something else falls off.

Even if you do have the time, by the way, you don't have to fill every single blank space in your diary! You need breathing space, time to relax, time to do nothing.

So the first thing you need to do is decide on what's important to you.

➢ **Exercise 2: What are you saying "yes" to?**

Write down all the things you want to say "yes" to.

Now you can do this in terms of the roles you play (or want to play) in your life e.g. mother, husband, manager, colleague, friend; you can identify areas of your life that are important to you e.g. family, career, fitness, and so on; or you can choose to represent your personal values e.g. freedom, creativity, personal development.

Try to go beyond the obvious: so if 'money' seems to be an important area for you, ask yourself what this gives you. Is it financial security to look after your family that you're after? Freedom to live your life without worrying about paying the bills? Or maybe living a life of luxury and indulgence?

If you're looking at 'career', is it about progressing to a senior position in a large company, feeling intellectually fulfilled, or perhaps doing what you love?

Take a look at my other ebook, *Using the Wheel of Life to Get Unstuck* (available [on my website store](#)) for more detailed guidance on this.

Then, once you're clear on your priorities, you'll be in a position where you know what's at stake, and you can start saying "no" to commitments that don't fit with those priorities.

➢ Exercise 3: What do you want to say "No" to?

Now that you know what you want to be saying "yes" to, let's take a look at the implications. Are there particular areas where you definitely want to start saying "no"?

Imagine if nobody would get hurt, nobody would be mad at you, and there would be no negative consequences at all; what would you say no to?

For example, is there a particular type of request at work, or a particular colleague, that regularly demands your attention even though it's not a priority for you and your team? Is there a particular acquaintance that always asks for help but never returns the favour? Is there a family member who makes completely unreasonable claims on your time?

Make a list of **five things** you'd like to be able to say "No" to.

Alternatives to "Yes" and "No"

Now that you've identified those situations where you no longer want to say "yes", what are you going to do about it?

We often have a tendency towards very black-and-white thinking – in this case, we think we can only say "yes" or we have to say "no". However, there is a middle ground where you might be able to find some kind of compromise.

Here are some alternatives that lie at different points on the scale between the extremes of "yes" and "no":

(1) "No, but…"

First, tell them you can't do it but give them an alternative: refer them to someone else who might be able do it, send them a link to a blog post you've written, give them a couple of quick pointers to get them started… This will ensure that you don't take on something that you don't want to do, while still helping them and therefore also feeling better about it yourself.

Another way of doing this is to suggest a different format or forum. For example, if they are asking to meet face-to-face on the other side of town, can you suggest a call instead? If they're asking for a call and you really don't think it's going to be worth your time, can you suggest that they jot down their thoughts in an email

first? Or can you organise a group call or training session where you can gather together all the people who've been asking the same things and therefore make better use of your time?

(2) "Not now"

"Not now" means "no" to the immediate request but if the deadline is flexible or the same request comes up another time you might be able to say "yes". Always remember that the fact that something is urgent for someone else doesn't mean it's urgent for you. If it's something you are genuinely interested in doing then say so: "I can't do that right now but please keep me in mind for future opportunities."

Be wary of this tactic, though, if you really don't want to do it at all, as there are some very persistent people out there and in that case it's better just to say "no" right away!

(3) "Maybe"

Buy yourself some time with this one! Tell them you need to check your calendar, or you're waiting to hear back on another project, and you can't give an answer right now. This will give you time to think about it and make a measured decision as to whether it's a "yes" or a "no" without the pressure of being put on the spot.

This can even be a strategy for every request that you get: implement a *pause* period, never saying "yes" or "no" on the spot and always giving yourself at least 24 hours to think about it. Do you want to do it? Does it fit with your priorities? What will you get out of it? What else is on your plate? Is there an alternative?

(4) "Can you tell me more?"

Often we won't get a lot of information about a particular request and simply asking for more details will both buy you time and clarify if it's really something you want to be doing. Make sure you really listen to the answer, so that you're able to judge the importance of the request both for them and for you.

A prime example here is work meetings. Before you agree to yet another new meeting, be sure to clarify if you really need to be there: What is the agenda? Are you the right person to attend? Does it have to happen now?

(5) "Yes, but…"

This is a "yes" on your own terms, a compromise of sorts. You are saying yes but you are asking for an extension of the deadline, or stipulating what you're going to need in order to deliver, or making some kind of 'demand' that will ensure that you can deliver what they are asking without jeopardising your own priorities.

Choosing one of these alternatives (or another that you come up with yourself) can offer you a way out that's easier than having to just say "No".

➢ Exercise 4: What might be the alternatives?

Looking back at Exercise 3 and your list of things you want to say "no" to, is there an alternative? Are you interested in principle but just not right now? Can you direct the person making the request towards another resource?

Write down whether the answer really needs to be "no" in each case and, where relevant, make a list of alternative answers you can give so that you have one ready when needed.

How to just say "No"

Sometimes, and in some situations, you do need to give a straightforward "No". Not a "Maybe", not a "Yes but", not a "Not now", but plain and simple: NO.

That being said, there's no need to be rude! There are still ways of rejecting that request while still showing respect for the person making it.

For example:

"Thank you for thinking of me, but…"
 "Unfortunately it's not possible for me…."

It can be helpful to *validate* the request, and show them that you care:

"I wish I could, but…"
"I understand how important this is for you, but…"

Another tip is to set clear boundaries.

For example, specify the work hours during which you can be contacted; say how you prefer to be contacted (email, chat, phone…); set up principles for running meetings; and so on. Having rules like these helps both you and the person you're dealing with be clear on what's possible within an established framework.

People do generally respect a polite but assertive "no", much more than a shaky commitment or a begrudging "yes" that you then can't deliver on.

But whatever you do, don't try to justify your answer with a long list of excuses; and don't lie. Be firm and direct, confident in the knowledge that you are making the right call.

And, if you're stuck, you can always try that line from Phoebe in Friends, when she responds to the question if she wants to help Ross unpack his furniture:

"I wish I could - but I don't want to." ☺

➢ Exercise 5: What's your one thing?

To finish with, I'm always a fan of identifying one step, one area to focus on at the beginning in order to get the momentum going.

So I'd suggest that you start now by identifying *one thing* that you're going to say "no" to, ideally the one that you think will make the biggest difference - and come on over and share it in **our Facebook group** for some added accountability.
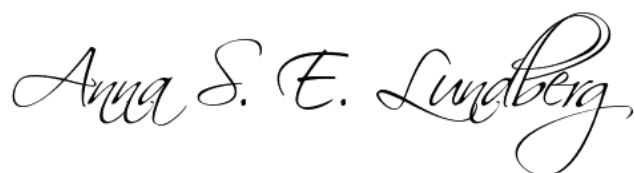
Final thoughts and additional resources

Now you know what you're saying "yes" to; you know what you're saying "no" to; and you know *how* to say "no"… all that remains is to practise!

Next time you're in one of those situations where you really don't want to say "yes", try saying "no" - or else one of those other alternatives. Practise whenever you can! Don't be hard on yourself if it feels uncomfortable in the beginning, it'll get easier the more you do it.

I'd love to hear about the insights you've gained from working through these exercises and how your practising is going. Join us over in **our private Facebook Group** to share your progress and get support and encouragement along the way.

Good luck!

Anna S. E. Lundberg

Worksheet

Exercise 1: Why are you saying "yes" when you want to say "no"?

Exercise 2: What are you saying "yes" to?

Exercise 3: What do you want to say "no" to?

Exercise 4: What might be the alternatives?

Exercise 5: What's your one thing?