

18

Chapter

Liberate Yourself: Say “No”

Do you find it difficult to say “no”?

Do you feel guilty when you put yourself first?

Do you rarely, if ever, ask others for help or support?

Do you do a lot of things in life because you feel like you “should” but you don’t really want to do it?

If you answered “yes” to some of these questions, learning to say “no” may help your depression and anxiety. A significant contributor to many individuals’ depression and anxiety is a habit of consistently putting others (e.g., family, work, and friends) ahead of themselves. Some people have this habit in all areas of their lives, even with strangers, while others may only have difficulty saying “no” in one area of their lives. When you put others’ needs ahead of your own time after time, you may feel good about yourself for being so helpful. You may like that you consider yourself to be a good person because you put others ahead of yourself. You might be *motivated* by guilt and fear, but you rarely if ever *feel* guilty or fearful, because you keep on giving.

Despite feeling good about yourself in some ways, it is also very likely that you will feel devalued and unsupported. Because your needs aren’t being met, you’re left feeling depressed. Rushing to meet the demands of others while attempting to meet your own needs can leave you feeling stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted, or all three. If you feel well balanced in what you give and get from work, friends, and family, then you may skip this chapter. If you believe you give more than you get in return or that your habit of taking care of others is responsible for some of your own problems, continue.

If you have difficulty saying “no,” practice with your therapist or supportive friend or relative. Consider reading *The Assertive Option* (Jakubowski & Lange, 1978), *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* (Smith, 1985), or another book your therapist recommends. However, you can begin to practice saying “no” in the mirror right away. Below are some sample phrases of what you can say:

1. I’m sorry, I’m not going to be able to help you out this time.
2. I’m sorry, I have a policy to not lend money to anyone.
3. I have other plans. (Your plans may be a commitment to clean your house, to stay home and read, to go the gym, or to spend time with your family. This is truthful. You do not need to have a specific commitment in order to say “no.”)
4. I’m not sure whether I’m going to be able to help you. Let me check my schedule and get back to you.
5. I’d like to be able to help you move for a couple hours in the afternoon. (When requested all day.) I’ll text you before 1 o’clock to see where you are.
6. I won’t be able to keep Kyle and Kaycee all weekend, but I’d be happy to watch them on Sunday.
7. From now on I’m only going to be able to come over and help you once a week.

Give and Take

Make a list below of people to whom you give more than you receive. The thing you give can be anything from listening to friends' problems to running errands to spending time with a sick or elderly person. Include in the list things that you have volunteered to do that are not 100% necessary or that you feel are necessary only because you made a commitment and you honor them. This list may include doing things at work that are outside your job, being on boards, taking care of neighbors, volunteer work, or helping at your kids' schools. Next to each item on the list, write what you do for the person or organization that isn't truly your responsibility, regardless of the degree to which you want to do the thing or feel obliged to do it.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List people who do more for you than you do for them.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List the people who are fairly equal. That is, your relationship is a give and take.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What did you learn by making these three lists?

On the one hand, the world is a better place because people help each other and because we have volunteers and good samaritans. On the other hand, some people lead unhappy and stressful lives from repeatedly giving time after time, especially when they get little support from others. Keeping this in mind, circle the things that you are clear you enjoy doing and that you want to continue to do. Continue doing these things with joy!

Now draw a line through the things that you do out of guilt or fear. What will be the advantages of saying "no" to these things? List the advantages below:

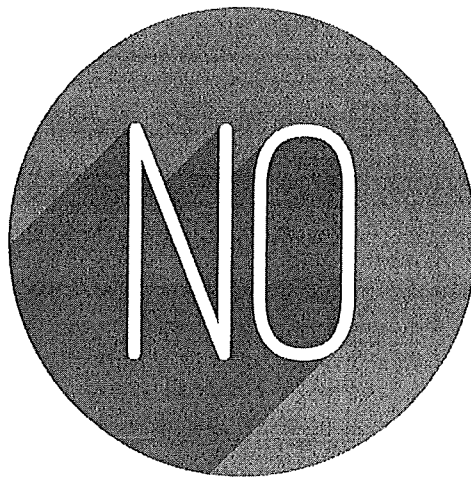
Do an experiment. Stop doing the items you crossed off. Or at least try not doing them for one week and see how it feels. If you aren't willing to do a week, think about how long you would be willing to run this experiment. Use acceptance strategies (see Chapter 3) to deal with the uncomfortable feelings and use B³s (see Chapter 8) to remind yourself that it's not your responsibility. Enjoy the advantages of not doing these things.

Some things we do partly because we want to and partly out of duty. For those items, take a moment to think about how you could change the situation so that the thing is something you do more because you want to. In the list on page 89, items 5, 6, and 7 are examples of these assertive compromises. Keep practicing saying these things until they become more comfortable, or at least much less uncomfortable. Remember too that your needs matter and it's important for your mental health to put yourself first much of the time.

An example that many baby boomers are facing is helping elderly parents; many millennials help their grandparents. Let's say you visit them three to four times a week for many hours. You are certain that you want to spend time with them and help them, but it's taking a toll on your social life and your own home, maybe even your work. Perhaps you want to make them the priority once or twice a week and make your life the priority on all other days. Only go over more than that if you really want to and you have extra time, or if there is an urgent situation. Perhaps you can make more of an effort to spend shorter periods of quality time together rather than just logging large numbers of hours?

People may catch you off guard, leading you to say "yes." Before you know it, you've made a commitment to something you don't want to do. It isn't good to say "yes" and then change your mind to "no" unless something unexpected comes up. It's much better to say "no" or "probably not" and then reconsider. Item 4 on page 89 is an example of not committing. It's a good exercise to get into the habit of saying you're not sure unless you are absolutely certain you want to. In fact, it's a good idea to practice saying "no" initially. You can always change your mind after saying "no."

This next form aims to help you to be more aware of what you give that you want to give and what you give out of guilt and fear. It is also a reminder of your choices. Use this monitoring form on a daily basis until you feel you are saying "yes" only when you want to say "yes" and making compromises that you want to do. Hopefully, you will enjoy doing the things that you want to do for people even more, and most importantly, feel less depressed and less overwhelmed as you start to reclaim your time to take care of yourself and to do the things that are most important in your life.



Giving, Receiving, & Saying "No"

This form can help to motivate you to keep track of your self-sacrificing and assertive behaviors. Write numbers in the spaces below unless a column is not applicable, in which case put "n/a."

Date	Hours spent doing things for others	Hours I wanted to do things for others	Number of times I let others help me	Number of times I asked for help	Number of things I agreed to do that I don't want to do or am not sure I want to do	Number of times I said "no" or "probably not" to requests	Number of times I offered to do less than was asked	Number of times I said I'd think about it instead of "yes"