

**“This book is a game-changer and a life saver!”**

—Edward Hallowell, MD, author of *Driven to Distraction*

*The Book of*

**NO**

UPDATED

*365 Ways to Say It and Mean It—  
and Stop People-Pleasing Forever*

**Susan Newman, PhD**  
with Cristina Schreil

“Overwhelmed? Overextended? Stressed? *The Book of No* is a must-read for the pushover tendency in all of us who agree to most things asked of us. Leading relationship psychologist Susan Newman explains why you say yes too often and how to say no graciously without feeling guilty or offending. Think of it as your life preserver and go-to guide for navigating relationships with your friends, family, spouse, boss, coworkers, parents, kids...even strangers. You'll want to say yes to *The Book of No* and keep it close by.”

—Michele Borba, EdD,  
educational psychologist and author of *UnSelfie: Why  
Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*

“Does it have to be a fact of life that, as parents, it's next to impossible to say no to our children? Susan Newman guides parents out of their giving-in habit with toddlers, teens, even adult children with smart advice in situations you will recognize and relate to. If you're a 'yes' parent, you need *The Book of No* to help you stand firm through your parenting journey. It's healthy for you and your kids!”

—Amy McCready,  
author of *The “Me, Me, Me” Epidemic: A Step-by-Step Guide  
to Raising Capable, Grateful Kids in an Over-Entitled World*

“In a world infected by instant gratification and murky boundaries, saying no—and sticking to it—is quickly becoming a lost art. The good news is that Susan Newman is here to help. Using detailed examples, humor, and actionable steps, Newman helps us explore our own obstacles to setting and maintaining healthy boundaries and empowers us to put an end to personal overload. In saying ‘yes’ to ‘no,’ we just might make a dent in putting an end to our current culture of busy.”

—Katie Hurley, LCSW,  
author of *No More Mean Girls* and *The Happy Kid Handbook*

“A wise and practical guide to living a life that fits your personal values, Susan Newman’s newest book is a treasure trove of realistic scenarios and thoughtful responses to help you let go of commitments that leave you feeling resentful and depleted. Whether it’s a whining child or a demanding acquaintance, a guilt-tripping relative or an unreasonable work colleague, *The Book of No* offers doable strategies for setting healthy boundaries so you can say ‘Yes!’ to the things that truly matter to you.”

—Eileen Kennedy-Moore, PhD,  
NJ psychologist, and coauthor of *Growing Friendships: A  
Kids’ Guide to Making and Keeping Friends*

“For many of us, it’s very difficult to say no. We’re asked to take on extra assignments at work and help colleagues and clients with projects that might be outside our official job description. We’re asked for favors by our friends, by our families, and sometimes even by our LinkedIn connections. And yes, it’s nice to help, but we can end up overburdened. In *The Book of No*, Susan Newman offers great strategies and tips for learning to say no. This book is going to be my new go-to volume for putting a bit more ‘no’ in my life—and in the life of my clients, colleagues, and friends.”

—Andy Molinsky, PhD, professor of Organizational Behavior and International Management, Brandeis University, and author of *Reach* and *Global Dexterity*

“All too often we find ourselves overworked and overstressed because we take on too much at work or at home. In short, we have trouble saying no! Dr. Susan Newman’s book is an essential guide for those of us who are too agreeable, nice, or helpful, and really don’t know how to set critical limits.”

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“Sometimes you have to say no so you have time to say yes to what really matters—the things that are important to you, preserve your health, and add to your happiness. That’s the powerful takeaway message from this realistic guide to kicking the ‘yes’ habit and embracing the power of no.”

—Ann Douglas,  
author of *Parenting Through the Storm*

“In this updated edition of *The Book of No*, social psychologist Susan Newman offers research and immensely practical tools to help us set boundaries and stop people-pleasing. The book is fun, easy to read, and provides scenarios like requests to look after a relative’s children, drive your teen to the mall, or give up your weekend plans to do last-minute work. Along with each scenario are specific dialogues that demonstrate exactly what to say. The ‘no’ responses are right on target—assertive and clear, yet respectful. So many of us struggle to skillfully set boundaries without hurting our relationships. This book is just what we need!”

—Melanie Greenberg, PhD,  
clinical psychologist and author of *The Stress-Proof Brain*

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# Introduction

**W**e live in a world that currently lauds the power of *yes*. It's a trend: numerous blogs, self-help books, and even plots of novels and movies suggest that saying yes unlocks more from life. This thinking instructs particularly timid people looking for adventure or change to say yes over playing it safe. In that way, *yes* is often a good thing. There's nothing wrong with a *yes* when it moves you closer to your goals: finally taking that boxing class you've always wanted to but were too wary to sign up for, keeping peace in the family, or strategically shoring up your position in the workplace. At work, saying yes purportedly sends the message that you are a team player, supporting your group and increasing your value to the company. A *yes* is perfectly fine if it moves you forward in some way or makes you feel good.

But here's the issue: "Yes." "Sure." "No problem." The words are out of your mouth before the reality or the enormity of the commitment registers. You realize too late that you don't want or don't have the time to do what you've taken on. You neither wish to babysit for a friend's or sibling's children, nor do you have time to walk a neighbor's pesky dog every time she asks. You wonder how you got roped into an extra office assignment or making arrangements for a coworker's farewell party. "How does this happen to me so often?" you ask. If you're not wondering, maybe you should.

*No*, the word you repeated without the slightest hesitation at age two, seems problematical, if not impossible, in many of your interactions today. Time to reorient yourself to

the word *no*. It has the power to bring equilibrium to your life and better manage your interactions. By keeping *no* at the front of your mind, you have both a plan and the ability to meet it. With *no*, *your* well-being becomes a priority.

### **Quiz: How Much of a People-Pleaser Are You?**

Often, people who regularly respond to requests with a *yes* rather than a *no* don't recognize their willingness or selflessness as a hindrance to their own progress and happiness. This quiz assists you in seeing your personal yes-no predicament more clearly. Note what you respond to with a *yes* or "Oh, that's me!"

1. Do you find you don't have enough time to exercise, relax, get enough sleep, or accomplish what you set out to do?
2. Are you often unable to express yourself or ask for what you want?
3. Do you say yes and then regret committing to what was asked of you?
4. Do you feel guilty when you turn someone down?
5. Do you resent the person who asked?
6. Do you have a need to be loved or liked?
7. Do you feel duped or manipulated once you've agreed to help out?
8. Do some of your relationships feel one-sided? Do you find yourself asking, "What does this person do for *me*, if anything?"
9. Do people see you as someone who is always available?
10. Does your fear of missing a fun event or fear of being left out influence how you respond to invitations or plans to get together?
11. Do you seem to be the person called on to make personal sacrifices whenever there is a problem?
12. Do you wish to be seen as the responsible, reliable person?

13. Do you sometimes think, “I am not having fun anymore”?
14. Do you sometimes feel that you do too much for others and not enough for yourself?
15. Do you allow the opinions of others to determine your self-worth?

If you had more yeses than nos, you probably say yes too often—you have the “disease” to please.

### **The Disease to Please: Why You Say Yes**

If you are someone who does things for others, leaving little to no time for yourself, and often feel at your wit’s end, put yourself in the “people-pleaser” category. It could be that you’ve been people-pleasing all your adult life, aiding others who thrive being on the receiving end. Being cared for is what the takers in your life have come to expect. That alone places you high on the people-pleasing scale.

Or you may be reluctant to state your needs, and by not stating your needs, you’re leaving the door open to saying yes. It could be you are a busy junkie: the more you can cram into a day, the happier you are, and the happier you are, the more likely you are to say yes. *Yes* is the default position for many overcommitted people. After all, busy people get things done, and the people in your life know it. Many busy people have a ton on their plates already and tend to rationalize, “What’s one more task?”

Or you may be someone who avoids confrontation or unpleasantness. For you, *yes* is the path of least resistance and the way to avoid damaging your relationship with the asker.

Incessant yeses often stem from the inability to think clearly about what is being asked. Many label the millisecond it takes to agree as a weak moment: “I was having a bad day”; “I was in a bad mood”; “I didn’t feel well; my guard wasn’t

up”; and a long list of other excuses. What keeps you from saying no is usually right below the surface of the question: an implied judgment, an unspoken, guilt-producing *should*, your own hesitation to offend or disappoint, or your fear of the asker’s power or perceived “hold” on you.

Then there’s the dangerous gray zone, filled with those things you have no strong feelings or opinion about. When in the gray zone, you’re wishy-washy and undecided. Requests out of the blue can leave you floundering in murky waters. Until you pause long enough to analyze a situation, you will continue to be a yes-person.

Or you may say yes because you like being needed and have gotten into the habit of being amenable. You enjoy the feelings of being liked or loved that emanate from cooperating. Similarly, you may crave the approval that validates you and gives your self-esteem a boost. You thrive on appreciation when people say, “Thank you.” In the extreme, saying yes becomes an addiction.

Perhaps you are driven to say yes too much because you fear you will miss something fun or important. Maybe you worry about being left out or abandoned. Your concern may be that people will judge you negatively if you refuse or don’t show up.

In moderation, being available is a good thing. Self-sacrificing, on the other hand, is not. Yes-people become weighed down, feel torn, trapped, or taken advantage of, and are often annoyed with themselves for being easy marks. The damage of saying yes indiscriminately affects you much more than your refusals affect the people you turn down.

Male or female, you may be a people-pleaser simply because, while growing up, you were taught to be nurturing and caring. Saying yes is how you have been functioning for what seems like forever. You can change that.

## ***No*: A Learned Skill**

Saying no may be completely uncharted territory—when you're a master of *yes*, you're a novice of *no*. For you, saying no means trying something entirely foreign. Think of the process as an adventure into the unknown, with delicious bounty at the end of the journey: a calmer, happier life, with you supervising it.

To master saying no, you may have to move out of your comfort zone. While saying no won't change your personality, it will help you assert yourself and put an end to that empty feeling in the pit of your stomach when you commit beyond your stamina or to the point of draining your emotional reserves. Over time and with practice, *no* will become your first option instead of a current, deeply ingrained propensity to say yes.

*No* is a word steeped in negativity, a perception ingrained from childhood. When you were a child, you had little difficulty shouting, "No!" but slowly the word *no* was drilled out of you. If you said no to sharing your toys as a toddler, you were sent to your room or a toy was taken away; as you got older and refused a parental rule or direction, you lost privileges. These early experiences translated into concrete fears about using the word *no*.

No doubt some of that apprehension carried over into your adult life. It takes time to start seeing the true power of *no*—to protect your time, balance your relationships, safeguard your health, and create *positive* change. Before you can fully embrace *no*, you have to understand why *no* is important.

You may be a person who has to be pushed and prodded, have your back against the wall, or be on serious overload before the thought of saying no enters your mind. Being on a yes-treadmill is an unhealthy place to be. A perpetual diet of yeses is depleting and not good for the mind or the body. Stress and frustration build; added stress can affect your sleep

and temperament and lead to depression. Feeling “under the gun” too often can also cause stomachaches or headaches and contribute to habits, such as overeating or smoking, that some use to cope with stress. In short, by saying no more often, you keep your stress level in check, avoiding possible health complications.

Transforming how you think about yourself and your life, even your dreams, will change how you respond to requests. Take some time to consider what you want and how all you do for others is probably holding you back or, at the least, slowing you down. With defined goals, you will be better able to avoid unwanted interruptions that interfere or put barricades in your path. You will be less likely to go with the will of others, to be generous and supportive every time you are called upon.

Think of *no* as your assistant, your cheerleader, the vehicle to become your best self. Saying no improves your state of mind and frees you to stay on course—your course—and feel more purposeful.

## **Changing Your Thinking**

Take a moment to consider the people in your life who rarely hesitate to say no when asked to do something. Note how they guard their time and have boundaries in place that they hardly ever alter. Make one of them your role model.

Saying yes doesn’t make you a better person, nor does saying no mean you are a less caring individual. You can still be kind and empathic without agreeing to all that is asked of you. Forget about the “shoulds” that nag at your conscience, sap your energy, and swallow significant chunks of your day.

It’s frustrating when you can’t get to what you want on a given day or accomplish goals you had percolating for months, possibly years. Hours and days vanish in a flash of

getting sidetracked. Understanding your own needs and moving them to the forefront stops you from agreeing to do things you find distressing or self-defeating.

You can't assert yourself or indicate your preferences until you know what they are. Figuring out these personal or work-related objectives is fundamental to reaching your goals. Maybe you want to learn or perfect your skills on a musical instrument or speaking a foreign language. Your aim may be as simple as getting more sleep or devoting less time to running errands for your mother-in-law, who might be perfectly capable of doing them herself. Maybe you enjoy gardening or sewing or want to join a book club or see more movies, but you never seem to get around to it.

Stop overcommitting. Give yourself permission to take time for yourself and eliminate the drudgery of having jam-packed days and nights. It's perfectly okay to say "me first." With changed thinking and goal-oriented direction, you'll be better able to stick to your agenda, and life will begin to feel more satisfying and rewarding. Spelling out what you hope to achieve automatically shores up boundaries and keeps your priorities straight.

## **Setting Boundaries**

To stop people from overstepping your boundaries, plan for what you want and reserve steadfast time slots—your child's naptime, for example, or an hour when you get home from work, or after dinner. When someone makes a request, you will know you don't want to give up the time you've saved. It doesn't mean that you won't ever give up reserved time.

Make lists (daily, weekly, monthly, or long term) and make it a practice to check them before you agree to anything. Post your list where you can see it as a reminder: tape it on your desk or put it in your wallet—somewhere it's readily

accessible to act as a sort of conscience. Better yet, memorize it so you will be more inclined to refuse requests that prevent you from removing items from the list.

Equally effective: think about the things you want to stop doing. Jot them down to remind yourself.

Need more reinforcement? Post a “NO” sign on your computer or desk, near the phone you use regularly, in your kitchen—wherever you are most often and are most apt to be asked to do something.

Consider that each request may obliterate plans you’ve made. Answering these questions before you respond will reinforce your new attitude and better mark your boundaries:

- Do I have the time?
- What do I have to give up to do this?
- Will I feel pressured to get it done?
- Will I be upset with myself after saying yes?
- Will I resent the person asking?
- Will I feel duped, had, or coerced?
- Why am I agreeing? What’s the gain?

## **Putting *No* to Work for You**

The more comfortable you become saying no, the more opportunities you create to achieve the less chaotic, more fulfilling life that always seems just out of reach.

At times, maximizing the power of *no* requires understanding when to say yes, when to stand firm, or when it is wise to negotiate. You will learn how to make the best of a *no* answer—that is, refuse a request yet create the least amount of pushback when you do. You will be able to say no and still remain in the good graces of friends, family, work colleagues, and bosses. You will also have skills and planned responses to deal with extraneous harassing or especially persistent people.

Even after you make a commitment to yourself, you may need stronger boundaries in some areas more than others. Perhaps you have no difficulty refusing your partner, but saying no to your children is a whole other story. Decide where your boundaries are strong and where they need work.

You might choose to build your no-power with friends, and after reading chapter 2, “With Friends,” you’ll be able to meet them head-on. If your family pulls you into all things unimaginable, you’ll want to focus on chapter 3, “All in the Family.” If encounters and conflicts with your children call for refusals, you’ll discover ways to navigate *no* as a parent in chapter 4, “With Children—Park Your Guilt.” If your hesitancy to say no is most prevalent on the job, then survey chapter 5, “At Work,” to learn scripts to use with your boss, coworkers, or clients. Delve into chapter 6, “Really Difficult People,” to master *no* with an array of busybodies, salespeople, and scammers who hope that you will say yes or get sucked into their swindle.

Each chapter is filled with situations, questions, and demands that snag people every day. While a request may not be one precisely asked of you, you will recognize the predicament and start to think ahead to similar situations in which you might be caught off guard.

Scenarios include questions, requests, and demands. Each scenario is dissected into three parts: “What’s Going on Here,” “Response,” and “Alert.”

- **What’s Going on Here:** This section warns of the possible motives behind the “ask,” offering details of the circumstances that could influence how you respond. “What’s Going on Here” analyzes what’s asked and why you may have a hard time saying no. This knowledge builds resistance and helps assemble a strong base from which to begin your turnaround.

- **Response:** Responses help extricate you and, in most instances, suggest language to disengage you from the commitment without your seeming uninterested or impolite. When you aren't confident that you can find the words on your own, the scripts give you the words to say no. This also helps you assess the situation and answer less impulsively.
- **Alert:** The "Alert" provides rationale and words of caution so the next time you're in a similar bind you'll hesitate before locking yourself in. The "Alert" also reveals what people who ask favors think, why they behave the way they do to get you to do something for them, and in certain cases why you react as you do. This knowledge gives you the courage to say no without obsessing over the decision.

Some approaches to *no* may seem hard-edged, but they are realities of life. They are truths about others and ourselves that we don't want to accept and facts about human nature that are sometimes difficult to acknowledge. An important lesson to learn from the start is: *People don't think about you as much as you worry about what they think. As soon as you say no, they move on to find someone to do what they are asking.*

By saying no, you state your opinion, stand up for yourself, and become sole proprietor of your life. Begin by using a few refusals here and there as a testing ground. The first *no* to a person makes subsequent refusals easier. A short statement to express your denial is sufficient. Lengthy explanations leave wiggle room for debate or misinterpretation or can tacitly grant permission to ask again.

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