

**Q & A with Dr. Susan Newman, Author of: *The Book of NO: 365 Ways to Say It and Mean It—and Stop People-Pleasing Forever***

**Young children have no trouble saying “no.” But the older we get, the harder it seems to be. Why do adults have such a problem saying “no”?**

“No,” the word you repeated without the slightest hesitation at age two, seems problematical, if not impossible. Many of us were conditioned as children to be helpful, giving people, and that means saying “Yes.” It could be that you’ve been people-pleasing all your adult life, and you don’t want to disappoint those who rely on you.

You may be reluctant to state your needs. By not stating what you want, you leave the door open for people to ask for favors. It could be you are a busy junkie: the more you can cram into a day, the more likely you are to say yes. For some, being agreeable and available is a habit, an automatic response; for others, saying “yes,” agreeing to do whatever is asked, is an addiction.

Others worry that a “No” will have negative backlash—that the asker will be offended, will judge and label them as uncaring or selfish. You may be someone who craves the approval that comes from being a “nice” person because it validates you and gives your self-esteem a boost.

**What are some indications that you’re a “yes-person”?**

There are several quizzes in the book that help pinpoint if people-pleasing is a problem for you, and to what degree and with whom: harder to say “no” to friends? Your parent? Your children? A contractor, for example? Some signs:

1. You find you don’t have enough time to exercise, relax, get enough sleep, or accomplish what you set out to do.
2. You sometimes feel that you do too much for others and not enough for yourself.
3. You are often unable to express yourself or ask for what you want.
4. You say yes and then regret committing to what was asked of you.
5. You feel guilty when you turn someone down.
6. You resent the person who asked.
7. You feel duped or manipulated once you’ve agreed to help out.
8. Some of your relationships feel one-sided. You find yourself asking, “What does this person do for me, if anything?”
9. People see you as someone who is always available-- the person called on to make personal sacrifices whenever something needs to be done.
10. You have a need to be loved or liked.
11. Your fear of missing a fun event or fear of being left out influences how you respond to invitations or plans to get together.
12. You want to be seen as the responsible, reliable person.
13. You sometimes think, “I am not having fun anymore.”

### **What's so terrible about being a people-pleaser/having a yes-habit?**

People-pleasers become weighed down, pulled in different directions, feel trapped, or taken advantage of, and are often annoyed with themselves for being easy marks. Inveterate yes-people often feel exhausted, stressed or anxious, or have trouble sleeping...any one of which can affect your health. It's important to understand that the **damage of saying yes indiscriminately affects you much more than your refusals affect the people you turn down.**

People who regularly respond with a yes don't recognize their willingness or selflessness as a hindrance to their own progress and happiness—they continue to people-please and self-sacrifice until they realize their own goals haven't been met—their boundaries breached if they had any—because they devote so much time to the wants, whims and needs of others.

### **What are some initial pointers/basic steps to take for getting into the *No* mindset?**

As soon as you begin to apply these six basic steps, you will begin to feel justified saying no.

- Accept that saying "No" doesn't mean you are aggressive, obnoxious, selfish, or controlling. It means you know how to protect yourself.
- Get your priorities straight. Decide who has first crack at you. Your spouse? Your friends? Your boss? Your children?
- Pay attention to how you parcel out your time.
- Stop trying to do it all; accept your physical and emotional limits.
- Give control to others to minimize your responsibility.

### **You have five sections in your book: *With Friends, All in the Family, With Children-Park Your Guilt, At Work, and Really Difficult People.* Do you need different approaches with different people?**

Some people have no problem refusing friends, but are pushovers with their children. Others can't say no to their office colleagues, but agree to everything their partners or parents ask. By dividing the book in this way, people can find situations and solutions for the people who get them to "yes" with annoying regularity.

Each of the 365 scenarios is divided into **What's Going on Here** that warns of the possible motive behind the "ask," a **Response** that helps you say no graciously without damaging your relationship or being rude, and an **Alert** with information and tips to protect you from saying yes in the future.

In the *With Friends* section, for instance, readers learn to ask themselves if is this a friend with whom you have an equitable give-and-take, or someone who takes advantage of your good nature or availability? Reevaluating your friendships doesn't mean you have to cut the cord. It can be a matter of figuring out on what levels you should interact.

In general, know that people have surprisingly short memories. Most of the time, the asker, whoever it is, moves on to the next person once you say "no."

### **You speak about how every family has a "Yes person." What does that mean?**

This refers to the person who regularly gives in to requests and handles most problems—especially around the holidays or family celebrations. If you're the go-to person whom relatives turn to for anything from small complaints to financial help, it may feel as if you're stuck in a pattern. Because of your family history, close ties, and traditions, breaking the cycle and saying no can be hard, but not impossible.

The scenarios in all the sections identify patterns and help you see that you are not responsible for someone else's happiness or comfort. One person can't do or be everything for everyone in the family. That alone should reduce your stress and guilt level when you find yourself in situations that call for a "no."

### **What makes a person a Yes-Parent? Why is *No* valuable for parents and children?**

The parent quiz helps readers determine how much of a yes-parent they are. For example: Does saying no to your kids, be they toddlers or young adults, feel wrong? Does your child have every toy or gadget that his best friend has? Do you spend Saturday evenings driving your teen and their friends from place to place? Are their smartphone charges through the roof?

Most parents want to see their children happy all the time. The inability to refuse a child causes parents to feel exhausted, stressed, and walked over, with their own needs pushed to the back burner.

Many parental nos are actually learning opportunities for children. Strategic nos reduce the chance that a child of any age will feel entitled and believe that everything is coming her way. Among other positives, refusals help children learn to cope with disappointment, become resilient, and sharpen their decision-making ability.

### **Who says No at work?! How can someone say “no” to their boss and not get fired?**

Unlike interacting with friends or family, sometimes you have little or no choice to refuse in the workplace. But, there’s a difference between saying yes when you have to and being the person who always assumes the extra load. Being a workaholic is chic; agreeing to demands and requests, no matter how absurd, is something that most people believe keeps bosses and clients happy. Such thinking is antiquated and can reap disastrous results—including added stress and poor job performance.

Setting limits may be in order to get you out from under the yeses that bury you at—and in—work. Saying “no” is generally a time-management issue; pay attention to what you have to do before accepting. When you have the time and too soften the your “no,” offer minimal assistance—to confer, advise, be a sounding board, or pitch in—to a project you are turning down. If you take on too much, you risk not doing your best work.

Often bosses and colleagues in higher positions know when they are requesting something beyond the normal range of what is expected. Listen for apology in their voice or tone, a slight reluctance to ask, a telltale wavering.

### **Why are strangers or salespeople sometimes harder to refuse than close friends or family?**

Many yes-leaning people become magnets for hustlers, service people hoping you’ll bend to their agenda, or even scammers. In many situations you can be more successful saying no to your boss or a meddlesome parent than to a stranger—the person you met recently in the park or the one hired to build a deck or color your hair. You can be persuaded simply because you believe they are the experts, they know more than you do about what they say, propose or sell.

### **For those who struggle with saying “no,” what are some tips to keep them on track?**

Tips for ending indiscriminate people-pleasing:

- Keep your antenna up and running, on the alert for people who attempt to cross the boundaries you put in place and keep you from reaching your goals.
- If no runs through your mind upon hearing a request, if instinctively that’s how you want to respond, find the moxie to go with the feeling.
- Not everyone asking something of you expects you to say yes.
- Remember, people are not thinking about you as much as you worry about what they think.
- Feeling guilty for refusing is a wasted emotion; it eats up time and is almost never worth the drain on your psyche.
- Agreeing doesn’t make you a nicer person.

By saying no, you set your boundaries and become sole proprietor of your life. 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 the life you want that always seems just out of reach will be attainable.

#####