

An illustration of a woman with short hair and glasses, looking slightly to the right with a neutral expression. She is wearing a dark top. A large orange speech bubble is positioned above her head, containing the text 'never in a million years!'. To her right, another orange speech bubble contains the text 'Okay, just this once.' The background is a textured, light green color with some orange speckles.

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The best way to say no

It's not as tough as you think. Try these tricks. *By Shaun Chavis*

TODAY'S THURSDAY, and it's your neighbor's turn to collect the kids at school. But—for the third time this week—she's calling to ask you to pick up her slack. Boy, are you busy, too! Once again, though, the word “yes” escapes your lips. You really want to stand your ground >>

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with her, but it seems like you cave in all too often. Why is it always so hard for you to say that two-letter word?

For a variety of reasons, women tend to have trouble turning down requests to pitch in. “We’ve been raised to be nurturing and caring and to think that *no* is a negative word,” says social psychologist Susan Newman, PhD, author of *The Book of No: 250 Ways to Say It—and Mean It and Stop People Pleasing Forever*.

But saying what you mean can actually help you avoid awkward situations and future resentments. You *can* keep your calendar clear of activities you don’t have time for and make room for what really matters to you.

Believe it or not, it is possible to speak up for yourself in a graceful way. Here are a few common situations and tips on how you can give them a no ... politely.



The president of the PTA is pressuring you to chair a major fund-raiser. “There is no one I’d trust more with this kind of project,” she tells you. But you know that you already have way too much on your plate.

Don’t say: “I’m really busy right now. But if no one else is available, maybe I can squeeze it in.”

Do say: “I’d be happy to help in some smaller way. I can be on a committee, but not chair it.” Or, if you have zero time for this project, say, “I’m already working on another committee, but I’d love to write a check.”

Why this works: You’ve agreed to help without committing yourself to something you really don’t have time for. That’s a win-win.

Your 12-year-old promised to meet some friends at the mall without asking you first. “You’ve got to take me,” he insists. “I’ll look stupid if I’m not there after I already said I’d go!”

Don’t say: “Well, OK. I’ll do it this one time.”

Do say: “You need to ask me before you commit to anything. I can’t do this today, but I can take you on Wednesday.”

Why this works: The sooner your child learns to check with you before he makes demands on your schedule, the better. (That goes for your husband and other folks, too.) “You’re doing your child a favor when you say no, because you’re teaching him to respect other people’s time and that the world doesn’t revolve around him,” Newman says.

Your friend calls the day before she leaves on a two-week vacation. “I’m so sorry to ask you this at the last minute, but can you take care of my dog while I’m gone?”

Don’t say: “Well, if nobody else can do it ...”

Do say: “I’m not prepared to take care of your dog on such short notice.”

Why this works: You are being direct—and letting her know that the issue isn’t with her dog, but with her last-minute request. “This is someone who has no

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How *not* to say no

No means no. Anything else you say leaves room for someone to misinterpret, or to wheedle, whine, and wear down your defenses. Avoid these if you want to stand your ground:

Hesitation. If your immediate response is no, say so—right away. If you want time to think about it, end the conversation, but promise you'll follow up when you've made a decision.

Explanations. Excuses give the other person room to negotiate. They make you sound weak, too.

Apologies. Don't let 'em know you feel guilty ... ever.



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respect for your time," Newman says.

Giving a firm "no" this time around will probably discourage her from putting you on the spot again. And there's even a good chance that it might help her consider the benefits of planning ahead next time.

In this (or any) no-no situation, don't feel guilty or worry about backlash. "When you say no, people are not thinking that you're uncaring or selfish," Newman says. "The truth is, they're already thinking about finding someone else who can do what they need."

Your boss hands you a project that's due on Monday—right before you leave for a long-scheduled three-day weekend.

Don't say: "If it has to get done, let me see what I can do."

Do say: "I know this project is important, but I'm afraid I won't be able to do a good job on it over this particular weekend. Let's find another way to get it done."

Why this works: "Bosses are the one segment of the population you can't blatantly say no to," Newman says. "You need to negotiate."

Find out whether you can work on this assignment after you return. "Nine times out of ten, no project is such an emergency that you have to finish it so quickly," says Debra Mandel, PhD, author of *Your Boss Is Not Your Mother: Eight Steps to Eliminating Office Drama and Creating Positive Relationships at Work*. Promise to give the project your full attention when you get back to the office.

If the work does have to be done right away, however, ask if there is another colleague who can take on the assignment or if there's anything you can do to lighten your own workload in some other way, Newman suggests.

Be sure to explain your current tasks, and let your boss help you decide which ones can wait until the following week. Be direct, but diplomatic. And make it very clear that you *are* going on your trip. Although you want to be cordial, Mandel says, "it's up to you to set boundaries." 📌