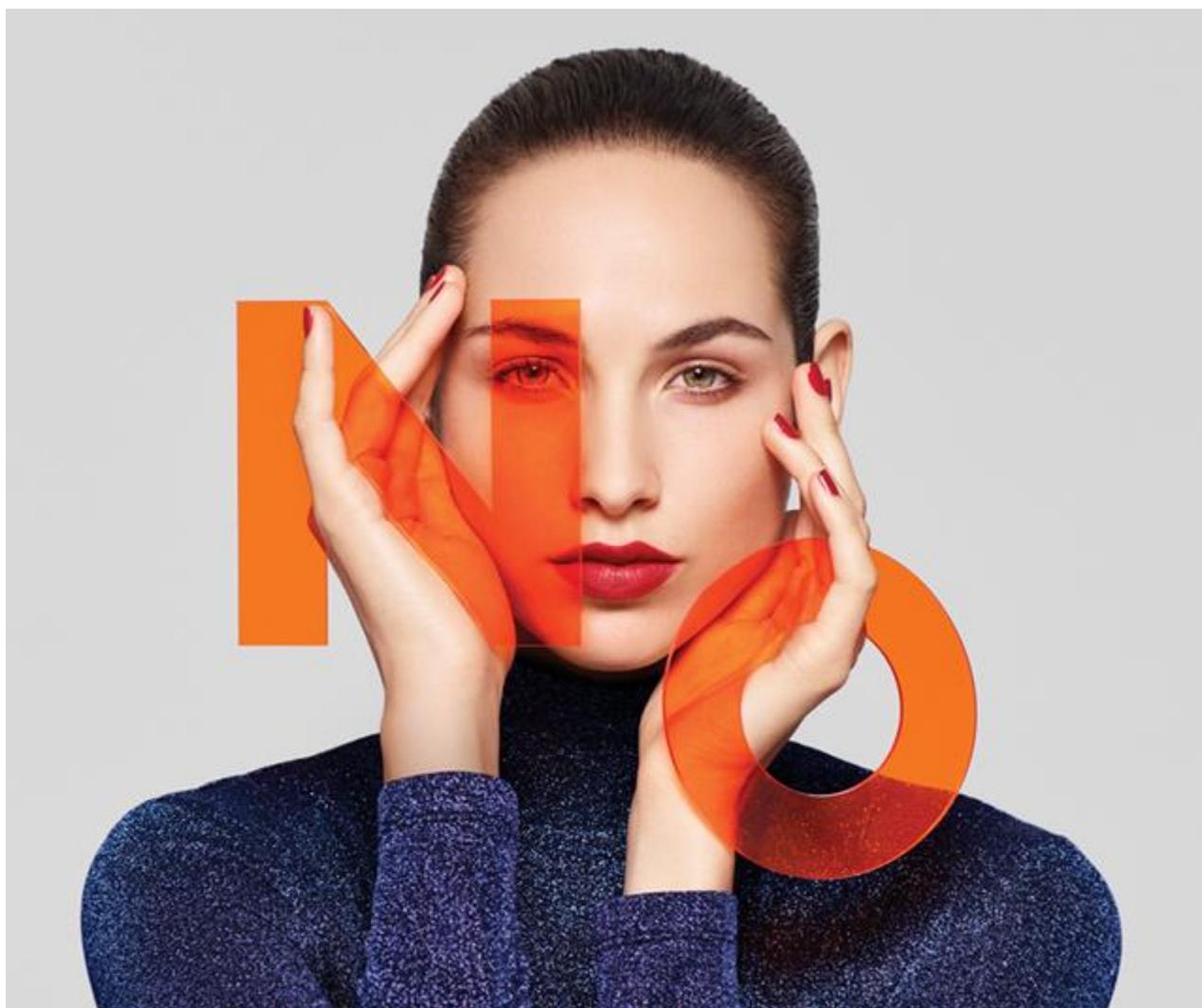# The Hardest Word

The ability to say no is crucial for mental health and self-confidence. Yet, loath to disappoint others, many go to extreme lengths to avoid uttering this slim but salient word. Here's how to do it.

By Carlin Flora, published on September 5, 2017 - last reviewed on September 13, 2017

"I can't say no," says Madhavi Dandu, a professor and clinician at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine. "I've always been that way. Most of the time I've framed it as: There are a lot of things I want to do. But now that I have two

school-age children, everything I do takes away from something else, or makes it impossible to do any one thing really well."

In addition to teaching, seeing patients, and sitting on faculty committees, Dandu fields queries from trainees seeking guidance. All get a yes. "I received that support," she says, "so I have to be there for the students."

At her children's school, she sits on the PTA board, a race and equity curriculum committee, and the district's advisory council, and she put together a Science Day for students featuring 30 interactive stations. "The school asked if I could do a two-day event next year," she says. Guess who said "Sure."

Dandu has high expectations for herself and doesn't like disappointing people. If something is challenging, she just figures she needs to step up. "I say yes more than I want to because it's hard to figure out what matters most," she says. Though she's benefited from the projects she's taken on and the relationships she's forged, the toll is mounting. "The checklist in my brain is always expanding. It's mentally exhausting."

For such a tiny word, no looms large in our consciousness. We don't like saying it, and we don't like hearing it. But it is the sharpest weapon we have in the clash between our desire to connect with and please others and our need to assert and defend our individuality and autonomy. How we wield no—if we do at all—has great consequences for our mental health and our ability to thrive.

Why We Don't Say It

We come up with plenty of reasons not to say no. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. We don't like confrontation or conflict. Or we've been raised to be polite and helpful.

The word is so fraught, says linguist Nick Enfield of the University of Sydney, that we've developed a litany of ways to communicate it without actually having to say it. "A recurrent way to say no is to not say it at all, but to produce signals that suggest a no is on the way, such as an audible breath and an interjection like 'well,' or 'um,' " he says. "A second-long delay by itself is often enough for others to know that a no is coming." An observant requester might take in these cues and jump in, in a prosocial way, to let the imminent rejecter off the hook: "…or maybe you're too busy?"

In unhealthy relationships, though, people might willfully ignore the signs that you want to say no, says Enfield, the author of *How We Talk*. "And people vary in terms of how well they are tuned in to our cues. If one person isn't playing the game, or is playing to a different tempo or tune, then it's not going to work that well. You might have to be more direct."

Saying Yes to Belonging

For our ancestors, going along with the group was a matter of survival, says Julie Coultas, of the University of Sussex, who studies conformity. "If you move to a strange place where you don't know what to eat or how to behave, you look around at what other people are doing. Behaviorally, you're going to say yes and copy them."
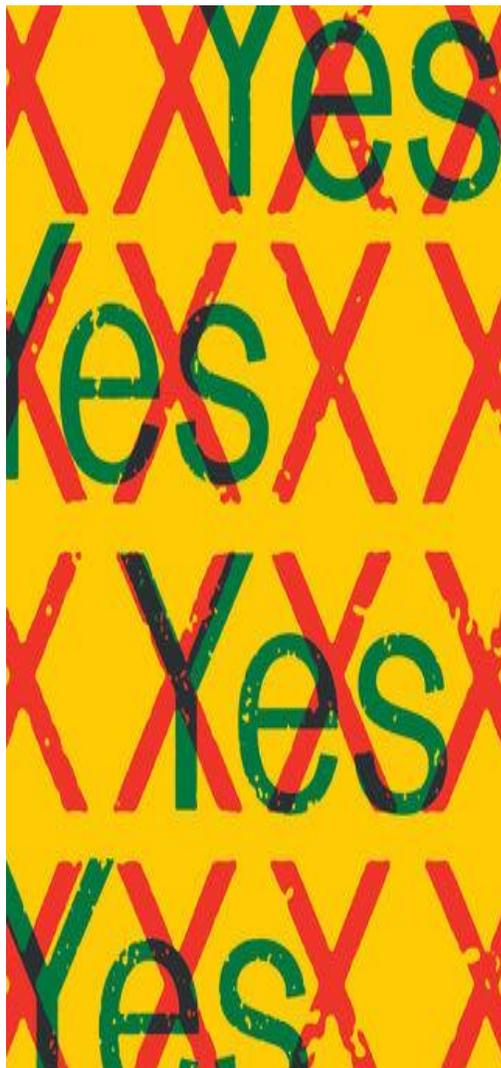
Even today, Coultas has shown, small interventions are all it takes to nudge people to conform. Yet most people—75 percent, according to one study she conducted—remain convinced that they are not influenced by other people. The reality is that this group is probably the easiest to persuade. "People who admit that they are influenced by others are more self-reflective," Coultas says. "They say, 'I'd like to think I'm not, but I think I am.' These people, I suspect, are more able to say no. Conformity is often unconscious. To say no effectively, you have to be conscious of the decision you've made."

The need to belong is universal, but clearly some value it more than others. Psychologist Mark Leary, of Duke University, and colleagues came up with a need-to-belong scale that measures the lengths to which a person will go to be included. He suspects that **"people who are higher in the need to belong may have greater problems saying no because of concerns about rejection." They might also have a strong fear of negative evaluations, so they worry that saying no will cause others to judge them unfavorably.** "People are concerned about the disappointment, frustration, or inconvenience that their refusal might cause. So **people who are more empathic might have more trouble saying no because they can put themselves in the requester's shoes and recognize the negative effects of their refusal on the requester."**

Saying no tends to be more of a struggle for women than for men, research has consistently shown. A 2014 dissertation by Katharine O'Brien, then at the Baylor School of Medicine, involved three separate studies on gender differences in the ability to decline requests at work. She found that women had more difficulty saying no, and that

personality factors such as agreeableness and conscientiousness could not account for the gender difference.

Women's wariness of no has some justification, according to O'Brien. Women who said yes tended to be more valued in the workplace, while those who turned down requests received worse performance reviews and fewer recommendations for promotions. They were also less well liked. Other research has shown that when **women act assertively in pursuit of their interests, which could include saying no, they're punished by both men and women for violating gender stereotypes.**

Age factors into our ability to say no without regrets as well, with conformity peaking in adolescence and then waning in later adulthood. "By the time you've lived a while and have a less vulnerable position in whatever group you're in, you probably do say no more effectively," Coultas says.

Saying It With Confidence

We resist saying no because we dread letting people down, but is that concern legitimate? "Many of us exaggerate how badly counterparts will react when we refuse their requests or proposals," says Daniel Ames, a professor of management at Columbia University. **"Many help-seekers think a no is pretty likely, so they may not be shocked to get that answer."**

Ames's research has found that many people who were viewed as appropriately assertive by counterparts in negotiation situations mistakenly believed they were seen as being over-assertive. In a review of the literature on the subject, Ames finds that low assertiveness can lead to worse outcomes, even diminished health.

If we underestimate how often people expect us to say yes, and also overestimate how offended they'll be if we say no, it follows that those who have come to understand this equation will not only say no more effectively, but might also be more effective at getting others to say yes.

Vanessa Patrick, a professor of marketing at the University of Houston, offers a reliable refusal strategy. "We came up with a linguistic cue that reframes situations. **If you say, I don't eat chocolate cake, it signals that this is your policy and that it stems from your identity. It is empowering. But if you say, I can't eat chocolate cake, you're implying that you're not in control and that external factors drive you. You're also begging the question, Why not? If you say, I don't, you don't get pushback.**

"It boils down to setting a personal policy, implementing it, and communicating it to others," Patrick says. "Think deeply about the things that matter to you, then give voice

and action to your values." If someone asks you for money, your rejection will be less damaging if it's not personal: "I don't lend money to anyone, as a rule."

"Choosing what to do and when to pass on a request comes from having a clear sense of your larger priorities and near-term task [goals](#)," Ames says. "If you don't have clarity on what matters to you, and what you need to do to make progress on that, then it's easier for someone else to claim some of your time on a task you'd rather not do."

Focusing on goals sets you up with a good story when you need to say no: "I can't house-sit while you're away because I'm committed to making progress on a project at work, and I need to be in my office to do that."

"We know that people's reactions often depend on 'account-giving,' " Ames says. "In other words, the stories we tell, and the justifications we give, matter. An explanation can make the person who doesn't want to do something feel more comfortable saying no, and it can ease the rejection for the request-maker."

Be wary, though, of turning someone down with an explanation that invites them to come up with creative solutions for you to fulfill their request. "If you say to an acquaintance, 'I can't house-sit while you're away because I'm allergic to your cat,' they could come back with, 'Well, I can just let my cat stay with another friend,' " Ames says.

A common approach of a requester is to impose a deadline on you to decide whether to do them a favor. Don't let yourself be pressured. "Just because someone needs something from you doesn't mean they also get to dictate the conditions and timing for your deciding whether to help," Ames says.

A more humane way to turn down a request is to point out the impact a yes could have on others. Presenting yourself as negotiating on behalf of others instead of

yourself can lead to better results, as it stresses how much you value relationships: "If I do X for you, I can't do Y for someone else."

Because it's stressful to spit out a quick no, or it goes against our instincts to accommodate, psychologist and author Guy Winch says that **too many of us say "maybe" to requests when we have no intention of ever complying.** "If you're leaning toward no, go with no," he says. "Otherwise, you're getting the other person's hopes up, and the situation could get sticky."

The more important a person is to you, of course, the harder it will be to say no to them. Yet some loved ones are simply pushy, Winch says. "People feel bad because they think they're saying no too much, but really your friend is asking too much."

Consider a friend who replies to your declining a night out by saying, "Well, I know you're not that busy because I saw on [Facebook](#) that you just got together with so-and-so."

"You have to tell them that you don't feel right accounting for and justifying your time and your life," Winch says. **"That's where you throw up a boundary, because they're overstepping. You know when a boundary is being pushed because you can feel it in your stomach.** You just have to tell them it makes you uncomfortable."

Denial at the Office

"Some people think that the boss just wants you to do what she says. That's not correct," says marketing and strategy consultant Dorie Clark. "If we're talking about knowledge workers, it would be foolish of that boss not to take into account your perspective. It is important to have a dialogue. If you think your boss is asking for something that's impossible or misguided, it is your duty to tell her that, nicely."

Managing your workload without appearing unambitious is a tricky feat. Saying yes to every opportunity and potential contact is practically a [religion](#) for contemporary go-getters. Clark doesn't disagree with this mind-set—when you're just starting out: "You never know where a connection will lead you, and you need to be expanding the raw numbers of your network," she says. The problem is that, as you progress in your career, the invitations and requests only increase. "If you continue to say yes to everything, you won't get any meaningful work done."

We don't like to alienate others, but if we cede to their wishes, we might grow to resent them. "The default in business culture is let's have lunch or let's have coffee," Clark says. "That can quickly become onerous. Instead, invite someone to an event

you're already going to or organize a dinner where you can spend time with 10 people instead of just one."

Or simply defer: "I'm in this incredibly busy patch right now, but can you come back to me in two months?"
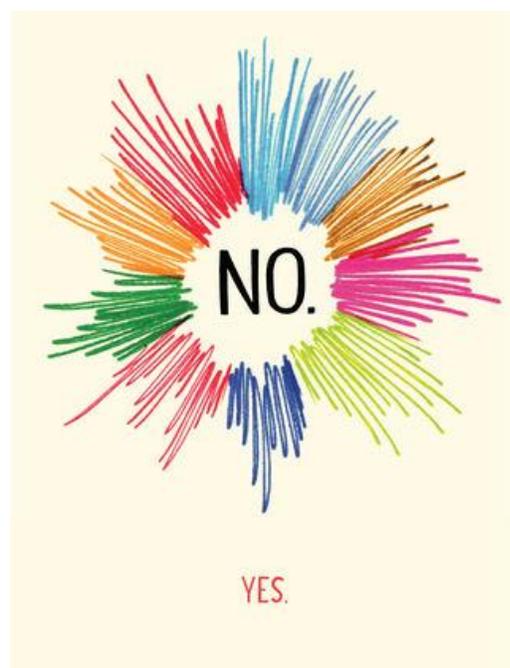
"That's a good litmus test," Clark says, "because most people are not organized or persistent enough to do it. The people who are less committed will drop off, and you won't have to deal with the request, and those who do get back to you are the people you'll probably want to connect with anyway."

Deception Online

As challenging as it is to vocalize the word no, you would imagine it would be easier to type it. But the research into our behavior in the online realm suggests that's not the case. And that's a problem because social-media platforms are rife with manipulators seeking to take advantage of us. Our reflexive response to innocent-seeming prompts—clicking on links, accepting friend requests, and filling out surveys—can all make us vulnerable to identity theft and other scams.

"Social media is designed to push us to say yes and to accept," says Arun Vishwanath, a professor of communication at the University at Buffalo who specializes in cybersecurity. Even the recent viral Facebook meme "List 10 concerts you've attended and one lie" could broadcast your preferences to advertisers and make it easier for hackers to guess your password, since "What was your first concert?" is a common online security question.

In one study, Vishwanath found that students who used Facebook most, and had the most social-media friends, were more likely to fall for a phishing scam that led them to give away personal information. He created fake profiles to determine which elements led people to accept strangers as friends and found that faux profiles with more friends—even if those were also fake—conveyed more legitimacy to surfers.

Scammers rely on the classic persuasion technique of getting "a foot in the door": They get you to say yes to a small commitment, which makes you more likely to say yes to the bigger request they're really angling toward. Once you accept a faux friend request

online, a perpetrator has his foot in your virtual door, making it much more likely that you'll respond to a private message or even share personal information. "People report higher trust on social media exchanges," Vishwanath says. "No one questions the legitimacy of these profiles. They might think, 'I'm not sure I know him,' but they never think, 'He might not exist.'" Once such an avatar has friended you, your friends are also at risk, because, Vishwanath says, "Being friends with you legitimizes him. The weakest link in a network is the person with the most friends. They are the ones who are targeted, because they say yes."

For those of us who think only other people are credulous enough to give money to a "Nigerian prince," Vishwanath's work is humbling. In a recent test at a major corporation, he sent 600 people a link to a Google doc from a stranger; an [attachment](); or a link that asked the recipient to enter his or her Facebook login and password. "These were account managers responsible for millions of dollars," he says. Half had actually received cybersecurity training three weeks prior. Still, 55 percent clicked on the link, 38 percent opened the attachment, and nearly 50 percent filled out the form. Receiving the training had a negligible effect.

One factor that increases our tendency to say yes is the device we're using. "We are four or five times more likely to accept a fake friend request if we're on a smartphone," Vishwanath says. "The device itself is restricted in terms of what you can see and do, and you tend to be multitasking while you're on it. Also, we habitually check and respond to whatever pops up on our phones. It's an interplay between design and [cognition]()."

The Right To Refuse

When you drop the hedging and the excuses and simply say no more often, you're embracing your true personality rather than an agreeable persona, says Lauren Zander, a life coach and the author of *Maybe It's You*. Otherwise, "In the name of keeping up appearances and making others happy, lying becomes a [philosophy]() and even gets credentialed as being nice." When you get more comfortable saying no, she says, "You like yourself better, you're more present to yourself, you actually believe in yourself, and you have way more management over your inner dialogue."

Once you start saying no, you might have to update your sense of what it means to fulfill your life's various roles, Clark says. Can you be a good community member without going to every city council meeting? Can you be a good parent without attending every school event? The answer is usually yes.

Dandu's long roster of commitments has given her a sense of purpose, but with the opportunity costs mounting in her mind, she's come to realize that if she says no, someone else will rise to the occasion. "I'm learning to say, 'Ask me next year.' "

Carlin Flora, a science writer and former PT *features editor, is the author of* Friendfluence: The Surprising Ways Friends Make Us Who We Are.

The Road To Refusal

Saying no should be a moment of empowerment, when you take responsibility for yourself and resist the pressure, or the urge, to satisfy someone else instead. Still, if it's not part of your linguistic repertoire, it can be hard to get the word out. Here's how to start:

Practice. When you know you need to turn down a boss, a parent, or a neighbor who hasn't heard no from you before, rehearse your response in advance. The more you hear it in your head, the easier it will be to say it out loud.

Stay calm. You may be churning inside over letting someone down, but keeping a calm demeanor, without revealing [anger] or doubt, will make the experience easier for you and keep your stance firm.

Think of others. If someone's request would infringe on your commitments to your children, partner, or co-workers, think of them as you form your reply. Knowing you're standing up for them should help you stand up for yourself.

Soften the blow. Most people have a keen sense of when they're being turned down, even if your words remain mild and diplomatic: "I'm not comfortable with that" or "That's probably not going to work for me" get the job done as well as "No!"

The High Cost of Saying No for a Living

Most of us struggle to say no to minor requests from friends and family, but some people are paid to turn people down, all day long, and it's no easier for them. Dan Evans was an admissions officer for 14 years, most recently at the University of Pennsylvania, where admit rates are famously low. "We would get calls from [parents], or from students who had been turned down," he says. "When I opened their file to speak

to them, I would hope to see poor grades. But usually they had all the credentials, and we just couldn't take everyone. Those calls were tough."

Hollywood casting director Maribeth Fox normally delivers her rejections to agents, not to the actors themselves. Still, actors often suspect they're heading for a no while they're in the room with her, especially if she sees them for only a few minutes. "They'll say, 'Do you want me to try something else?' It's difficult to sense their disappointment."

Once, Fox says, toward the end of working for a TV show that demanded a large cast, "My neck was hurting and I just didn't feel well. I realized it was because the actors were constantly apologizing to me, in fear of doing the wrong thing and getting rejected, and I was exhausted from having to say, in a high-energy way, 'Oh no, that's fine! You're OK!' to restore their confidence."

Mary Guy, of the University of Colorado, Denver, is an expert on emotional labor, an often-overlooked element of work that can make or break a job. "There's an emotive cost for most employees when they have to say no," she says.

"It means either having to wear a mask and pretend not to care or to feel the other person's disappointment and then recover from that to see the next client." Guy's research has shown that such "surface acting" leads to burnout. "The authentic expression of emotion relates positively to job satisfaction. It's having to wear the mask that is most draining."

David Wagner, a professor of management at the University of Oregon, found that workers who put on a fake smile during the day were more likely to suffer insomnia, feel anxious, depressed, or emotionally exhausted in the evening, and to have more family conflict.

"The degree to which someone is self-aware and can articulate how they're feeling determines how effectively they can manage emotional labor," Guy says. "Managers who really understand the emotive toll on workers set up ways for them to decompress."

When she's ready to deliver bad news to an agent, Fox writes out a script and practices it. "Sometimes an actor has been auditioning for a month, and to finally say no is really hard. It's art, it's a subjective opinion. But unlike, 'I don't like this song,' or, 'I don't like this painting,' actors essentially hear, 'I don't like you.' "

For workers like Evans or Fox, opportunities to say yes are precious. "We appreciate joy and happiness more when we understand the contrast," Guy says.

"I work with the director Ed Burns," Fox says, "and he will occasionally give actors the job in the room right after they audition. To watch the look on an actor's face when they realize that they nailed it is something I really treasure."