

Say No So You Can Say Yes

BY LEO BABAUTA

When I suggest that people simplify their day by saying No to thing, I often hear people say, “But I’d rather say yes!”

Of course — saying Yes sounds so much more positive! I’ll say Yes to yoga, and wonderful projects, and gardening!

But where does the room for these beautiful new things come from? We have to admit to ourselves that there’s a limit to how much we can do in a day, and that our days are already full. We have limits.

So we have to say No first. We have to clear up some space by saying No to things we’d like to do, but that are taking up space in our lives — space that could be used by something we really really want to do.

Say No to all those things we said Yes to over time, that have accumulated and piled up like driftwood.

Saying Yes is Easy

That’s the problem — we say Yes to something because it doesn’t sound like much. Sure, I can have coffee with you! But that coffee also involves getting there and going back, and it involves a few more emails to coordinate day and time, and of course there might be a proposal during coffee that leads to more coffees and maybe even a project (especially if we say Yes to the proposal during coffee). And so on.

Saying Yes is easy, because current self thinks that future self can handle it, no problem. But then future self becomes current self, and suddenly has to pay up for all the obligations placed upon him by all the optimistic past selves. We have a huge debt of obligation to all the people we’ve said Yes to in the past, one at a time, but now they’re all calling and asking us to fulfill those obligations.

Saying Yes is great, except when you never say No, and then everything is piled up.

Saying Yes is Not Really Saying Yes

Saying Yes to everything means you really have time for nothing. You can't possibly say Yes to everything, because where will you fit it all? Want to go to every meeting, every event, every coffee? Want to do every project that comes along? Your days will be crazy, and you'll have no rest, and what's more, you'll likely not meet all your obligations.

Saying Yes to everything means you're not really saying Yes — it means you're not setting priorities. You're not making a serious commitment. You're not being conscious about your life.

Instead, I propose we adopt Derek Sivers' idea: don't say yes anymore. Either say Hell Yeah, or No. Say Yes to less, and simplify your life.

When to Finally Say Yes

Of course, I'm a big fan of saying Yes to the things you really love (or Hell Yes!). That's the whole point of the Say No habit.

So start by saying No to the obligations you've built up but don't really want to do. Make a list of all your commitments (really do it, it only takes 5 minutes) and mark the 4-5 that are most important. Say No to the rest — actually call or email people and let them know you can't do it.

Create room in your life. Some breathing space. Some time for what's most important — your important work, the things that you love, the people you love.

Then start saying Hell Yes to those things. Then it's like magic.

21 Ways to “Give Good No”

Saying “no” can be really hard. But **Christine Carter** has a three-step plan to get there.

BY [CHRISTINE CARTER](#) | NOVEMBER 13, 2014

We are coming to that time of the year that is both blessed and cursed with zillions of invitations. Here are some that are in my email right now: Can you meet me for coffee to help me with my book proposal?

Will you bring a snack to the 8th grade party on December 19th? Are you coming to our housewarming party? Can you help with my son's college applications? Do you want to take the kids to see "The Nutcracker" this year?

As much as I'd like to do all of these things, I can't. When I take on everything that comes my way, I find that I start staying up late in order to get everything done. And then, tired, I start pressing snooze instead of meditating in the morning. Before I know it, I'm too tired to exercise, too, something that is essential for my wellbeing.

It's a slippery slope that starts with me taking care of other people's needs at the expense of my own, and ends with me being too tired (and sometimes sick) to take care of anybody's needs, my own included (much less do anything fun, like go to a party). Perhaps this is obvious, but just to spell it out: When we get sick and tired, we have a hard time feeling happy, and a hard time fulfilling our potential, both at home and at work.

But saying "no" can be really hard—I hate making people feel bad for even asking. It takes practice to say no in a way that doesn't offend people, much less to say it in a way that makes folks feel happy they asked. Giving no that good takes practice. Here is my three-step plan.

Step One: Prepare yourself to say "No."

It is much easier to say no to an invitation when we have a concrete reason for doing so—a way to justify our refusal beyond the vague notion that we should avoid the commitment in question.

This means that we need to create the reason for saying no *before* we need it—we need a decision making structure, or "rules" to guide us so that we don't have to agonize over every invitation.

For example, one rule I have for myself is that I don't go out more than two nights in a given week, because I know that when I do this, I get cranky, tired, and run down. So if someone asks me about a third evening one week, I have the structure I need to tell them I'm not

available (but thank you for asking!). Similarly, I only meet people during the workday for lunch or coffee two times per week, I only do two speaking engagements a month, and I only do one phone interview a day.

In addition to making rules for myself, I block out time on my calendar for things like writing (in the morning, when I'm most productive), hiking (in the afternoon, when I need a break), and for tackling administrative tasks (on Fridays, when I'm most inclined to want to just tick stuff off my list). This means that a lot of time on my calendar is blocked out, which can be really annoying to people who are trying to make an appointment with me. At the same time, however, blocking time out for the things I need to do to feel calm makes it totally clear to me when I'm just not available. This makes it much easier to give good no.

Finally, if I'm *available* to do something, I don't say yes before asking myself a very important question: Do I *want* to do this thing, or is it that I feel I "*should*"? Will saying "yes" bring me joy or meaning? Or will I feel dread or regret when this particular event or task rolls around? I've learned to notice when I'm glad I said "yes"; it has helped me realize how much happiness I get from helping other people. (I always try to help my friends' children with their college applications, for example. So fun.)

One of the joys of middle age is that I now feel confident that if I do only the things that I really feel compelled to do (rather than the things I used to do because I thought I "should" do), I end up contributing more. If I find myself considering an invitation because I'm worried about what other people think of me, or because I think it will "look good on my resume," I just say no.

Step Two: Say no.

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I've found it incredibly helpful to have go-to ways to just say no. I mostly use Renee's "I'm already booked" strategy (see below),

because that is most often the reason I can't do something. Here are some other tactics—21, count 'em!—that work for me:

- 1. Vague but effective:** “Thank you for asking, but that isn't going to work out for me.”
 - 2. It's not personal:** “Thank you for asking, but I'm not doing any interviews while I'm writing my book.”
 - 3. Ask me later:** “I want to do that, but I'm not available until April. Will you ask me again then?”
 - 4. Let me hook you up:** “I can't do it, but I'll bet Shelly can. I'll ask her for you.”
 - 5. Keep trying:** “None of those dates work for me, but I would love to see you. Send me some more dates.”
 - 6. Try me last minute:** “I can't put anything else on my calendar this month, but I'd love to do that with you sometime. Will you call me right before you go again?”
 - 7. Gratitude:** “Thank you so much for your enthusiasm and support! I'm sorry I'm not able to help you at this time.”
 - 8. Give Dad a chance:** “You know, I feel like moms are always getting to do the holiday parties at school. Let's ask Dad if he wants to help this year.”
 - 9. 5-minute favor:** “I can't speak at your event, but I will help you promote it on my blog.”
- I also asked my friends Renee Trudeau and Katrina Alcorn—two people who've honed their ability to say no well—for their favorite go-to ways to say no. Here are Renee's favorite ways:
- 10. Just No:** “Thanks, I'll have to pass on that.” (Say it, then shut up.)
 - 11. Gracious:** “I really appreciate you asking me, but my time is already committed.”
 - 12. I'm Sorry:** “I wish I could, but it's just not going to work right now.”
 - 13. It's Someone Else's Decision:** “I promised my coach (therapist, husband, etc.) I wouldn't take on any more projects right now. I'm working on creating more balance in my life.”
 - 14. My Family is the Reason:** “Thanks so much for the invite, that's the day of my son's soccer game, and I never miss those.”

15. I Know Someone Else: “I just don’t have time right now. Let me recommend someone who may be able to help you.”

16. I’m Already Booked: “I appreciate you thinking of me, but I’m afraid I’m already booked that day.”

17. Setting Boundaries: “Let me tell you what I can do…” Then limit the commitment to what will be comfortable for you.

18. Not No, But Not Yes: “Let me think about it, and I’ll get back to you.”

(Renee’s list is from her book *The Mother’s Guide to Self-Renewal*.)

And here are the additional ways that Katrina most often says no:

19. Say nothing: “Not all requests require an answer. It feels rude to ignore a request, but sometimes it’s the best way for everyone to save face.”

20. Let it all hang out: “Recently my daughter got injured in gym class. It was a week of visits to the ER, the concussion clinic, specialists, etc. I decided to just tell people what was going on, which sort of shut down the requests for a bit.”

21. I’m “maxed out”: “We need a ‘safety word’ for saying no—an easy way to tell people that we can’t/won’t do the thing they are requesting, but that it’s not personal. One convenient thing about authoring a book called *Maxed Out* is that now I can say ‘I’m maxed out’ and people who are familiar with the book know I’m asking them to respect that I’m taking care of myself, and that I also respect their need to take care of themselves.”

Step 3: Don’t look back.

Plenty of research suggests that when we make a decision in a way that allows us to change our minds later, we tend to be a lot less happy with the decisions that we make. So once we decline an invitation, we need to make an effort to focus on the good that will come from saying no, not the regret or guilt we feel about turning down an offer. Perhaps we will be better rested because we didn’t go to a party, or we’ll feel less resentful because we let someone else help out. Maybe saying no to one thing frees up time for another (more joyful) activity. Whatever the case may be, focus on the positive outcome of your effort to give good no.

Because that is what all this saying no is really about: Allowing ourselves to really enjoy what we are doing in the moment, whatever that might be.

What is your favorite way to say no?