

# The Art of Saying No

## Setting Healthy Boundaries

Why the smallest word in the English language might be the most powerful

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ People & Relationships

<b>Level</b>	B1 (Intermediate)
<b>Skill</b>	Reading
<b>Topic</b>	People & Relationships
<b>Duration</b>	30 minutes
<b>Age Group</b>	Teens & Adults

### Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the importance of setting boundaries
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to communication and personal development
- ◆ Identify the causes and consequences of people-pleasing behaviour
- ◆ Discuss cultural differences in saying no
- ◆ Write about a personal experience with boundaries

## 1 Before You Read — How Good Are You at Saying No?

Think about your own behaviour and discuss:

1. Do you find it easy or difficult to say no to people? Why?
2. Have you ever agreed to something you really did not want to do? What happened?
3. Do you think saying no is rude, or is it a sign of self-respect?

## 2 Reading: The Power of No

### The Power of No

"Could you stay late at work tonight?" Yes. "Can you help me move house this weekend?" Of course. "Would you mind lending me some money?" Sure, no problem. If these responses sound familiar, you are not alone. Millions of people around the world struggle to say one simple word: *no*. We say yes when we are exhausted, yes when we are busy, and yes when every part of us wants to say no — because we are afraid of disappointing people, being seen as selfish, or **damaging** a relationship.

But here is the truth that psychologists want everyone to understand: saying no is not selfish. It is one of the most important skills you can develop for your mental health, your relationships, and your overall **well-being**. Learning to set healthy **boundaries** — clear limits on what you will and will not accept — is essential for living a balanced, fulfilling life.

### Why We Struggle to Say No

The inability to say no is often rooted in childhood. Many of us were taught that being "good" meant being **agreeable** — always helpful, always accommodating, never causing conflict. This creates a pattern called **people-pleasing**: prioritising other people's needs above your own, even at the cost of your own health and happiness. People-pleasers often believe that their value depends on how useful they are to others, and that saying no will make people stop liking them.

**Cultural** factors also play a role. In many societies, saying no directly is considered impolite, and people use indirect strategies to avoid giving a clear refusal. In some Asian cultures, for example, saying "that might be difficult" actually means "no," but the indirect phrasing softens the message. In Western cultures, directness is more valued, but even there, many people feel intense **guilt** after declining a request.

## The Cost of Always Saying Yes

Saying yes to everything has serious consequences. The most obvious is **overwhelm** — taking on too many tasks, commitments, and responsibilities until you are physically and mentally exhausted. People who cannot say no often experience chronic stress, burnout, and **resentment** — a growing anger towards the people they are constantly helping, even though those people never actually forced them to say yes.

There is also a deeper cost: when you always say yes to others, you are implicitly saying no to yourself. Every hour spent on someone else's **priority** is an hour not spent on your own goals, your own health, or your own relationships. Over time, this leads to a loss of identity — you become so focused on meeting other people's needs that you forget what *you* actually want and need.

## How to Say No — Kindly but Firmly

The good news is that saying no is a skill that can be learned and practised. Experts recommend several **strategies**. First, remember that "no" is a complete sentence. You do not need to give a long explanation or a detailed excuse. A simple "Thank you for thinking of me, but I cannot do that right now" is perfectly sufficient.

Second, use the "pause technique." When someone asks you for something, do not answer immediately. Say: "Let me think about it and get back to you." This gives you time to check your schedule, assess your energy levels, and make a **deliberate** decision rather than an automatic yes. Third, practise saying no in low-risk situations first — declining a sales offer, saying no to a second helping of food, or turning down a social invitation you do not want to attend. Each small "no" builds your confidence for the bigger ones.

## Boundaries Make Relationships Stronger

Many people avoid setting boundaries because they fear it will **damage** their relationships. In reality, the opposite is true. Healthy boundaries actually make relationships stronger because they are built on honesty rather than **resentment**. When you say yes and mean it, your yes has real value. When you help someone because you genuinely want to — not because you feel obligated — the help you give is more generous, more enthusiastic, and more appreciated.

People who respect your boundaries are the people worth keeping in your life. And people who become angry when you say no are often the very people who benefit most from your inability to refuse. Recognising this difference is one of the most **empowering** realisations you can have.

Saying no is not about being unkind. It is about being honest — with others and with yourself. It is about recognising that your time, your energy, and your needs matter just as much as anyone else's. And it is about understanding that the most generous thing you can do for the people you love is to take care of yourself first.

### 3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>damaging</b>	causing harm or negative effects to something	Many people fear that saying no will be damaging to their friendships.
<b>well-being</b>	the state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy	Setting boundaries is essential for your mental well-being.
<b>boundaries</b>	clear limits that define what you will and will not accept	Healthy boundaries protect your time, energy, and mental health.
<b>agreeable</b>	willing to agree; pleasant and easy to get along with	We are taught that being good means being agreeable at all times.
<b>people-pleasing</b>	always trying to make others happy, even at your own expense	People-pleasing often leads to exhaustion and resentment.
<b>cultural</b>	relating to the customs and beliefs of a society	Cultural norms influence how directly people say no.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>guilt</b>	a feeling of having done something wrong	Many people feel intense guilt after declining a request.
<b>overwhelm</b>	a feeling of being unable to cope with too much	Saying yes to everything leads to stress and overwhelm.
<b>resentment</b>	bitter anger towards someone you feel has treated you unfairly	Always saying yes can create resentment towards others.
<b>priority</b>	something that is more important than other things	Every yes to others is a no to your own priorities.
<b>strategies</b>	planned methods for achieving a particular goal	Experts recommend several strategies for learning to say no.
<b>deliberate</b>	done on purpose; carefully thought out	Take time to make a deliberate decision rather than an automatic yes.
<b>damage</b>	to cause harm or make something worse	Boundaries do not damage relationships — they strengthen them.
<b>resentment</b>	growing anger from feeling used or taken advantage of	Honest boundaries prevent the build-up of resentment.
<b>empowering</b>	making someone feel stronger, more confident, and in control	Learning to say no is one of the most empowering skills you can develop.

## 4 Useful Collocations

set boundaries · say no · feel guilty · people-pleaser · mental health · self-care · personal space · comfort zone · self-respect · take on too much · burn out · stand up for yourself · let someone down · put yourself first · emotional energy · healthy relationship

## 5 Reading Comprehension

**1. Why do many people struggle to say no?**

a) Because the word 'no' is difficult to pronounce  
**b) Because they fear disappointing others or being seen as selfish ✓**  
 c) Because saying no is illegal in some countries  
 d) Because they do not understand the question

**2. What is 'people-pleasing'?**

- a) A career in customer service
- b) Always prioritising others' needs above your own ✓**
- c) A personality type that enjoys parties
- d) A negotiation technique used in business

**3. What happens when you always say yes to others?**

- a) You become the most popular person
- b) You earn more money
- c) You may experience burnout, stress, and resentment ✓**
- d) Nothing negative happens

**4. What is the 'pause technique'?**

- a) Taking a break during a conversation
- b) Saying 'let me think about it' before answering ✓**
- c) Pausing for 10 seconds before speaking
- d) Counting to ten when you feel angry

**5. How do boundaries affect relationships?**

- a) They always damage relationships
- b) They make relationships weaker and more distant
- c) They make relationships stronger because they are based on honesty ✓**
- d) They have no effect on relationships

**6. What does the text say about people who get angry when you say no?**

- a) They are your best friends
- b) They are often the ones who benefit most from your inability to refuse ✓**
- c) They are always right to be upset
- d) They should be avoided completely

**6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

**boundaries · guilt · overwhelm · resentment · people-pleasing · deliberate · empowering · strategies**

1. Setting healthy \_\_\_\_\_ means knowing what you will and will not accept.

2. Many people feel intense \_\_\_\_\_ after saying no, even when it was the right decision.
3. Taking on too many tasks leads to \_\_\_\_\_ and mental exhaustion.
4. Always saying yes can create \_\_\_\_\_ — a quiet anger towards the people you help.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ is a pattern of always putting other people's needs before your own.
6. Use the pause technique to make a \_\_\_\_\_ decision instead of an automatic yes.
7. Learning to say no is one of the most \_\_\_\_\_ things you can do for yourself.
8. Experts recommend several \_\_\_\_\_ for practising the art of saying no.

## 7 Answer Key

### ■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. boundaries
2. guilt
3. overwhelm
4. resentment
5. People-pleasing
6. deliberate
7. empowering
8. strategies

## 8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

### ■ ■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- In your culture, is it easy or difficult to say no directly? How do people usually refuse?
- Think of a time you said yes but wished you had said no. What would you do differently now?
- Do you agree that 'no is a complete sentence'? Or should you always give a reason?
- How can parents teach children to set healthy boundaries while still being kind?

### ■ Useful Phrases for Saying No Politely

- **Thank you for asking, but** I am not able to help with that right now.
- **I appreciate the offer, however** I need to focus on my own priorities this week.
- **I would love to help, but unfortunately** I already have other commitments.
- **Let me think about it** and I will get back to you tomorrow.
- **I am going to have to say no this time,** but I hope you understand.

### ■ Writing Task: A Time I Should Have Said No

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

**"Describe a situation where you said yes but should have said no. What happened? How did it make you feel? What would you do differently now?"**

Use vocabulary from this lesson. Reflect on what you learned from the experience and how it changed your approach to setting boundaries.