

Why Is It So Hard to Say No?

Introduction

Have you ever agreed to something you didn't really want to do, only to spend the next few days wishing you hadn't?

Perhaps your manager asked you to take on another project, even though you're already overwhelmed. Maybe a friend asked to meet when you desperately needed some time to yourself. Or perhaps you've found yourself saying yes simply because saying no felt too uncomfortable.

If this sounds familiar, you're certainly not alone.

Many people tell me, *"I just can't say no."* They often describe feeling exhausted, overwhelmed or stretched too thin, yet still find themselves agreeing to things they don't have the time or energy for.

It's Rarely About the Word "No"

Most people assume they struggle because they need to become more assertive. In my experience, it usually runs much deeper than that. When we begin exploring why saying no feels so difficult, clients often describe thoughts such as:

"If I say no, someone else might get the opportunity."

"My boss asked me... I can't let them down."

"If I don't do it, it won't be done properly."

"I'm already exhausted, but I know I have to do it."

These aren't simply problems with saying no. They're often rooted in the belief that your needs should come after everyone else's.

What's Really Behind Saying No?

For many people, saying no feels risky. Not because someone has told them they can't, but because they fear what might happen afterwards.

They worry about disappointing people.

They fear criticism.

They don't want to appear selfish.

Sometimes they have spent years trying to keep everyone happy, believing that's what makes them a good employee, friend, partner or parent. Over time, saying yes becomes automatic. Not because it's what they truly want, but because it feels safer.

Where Do These Beliefs Come From?

There isn't one answer.

Sometimes people describe growing up in families where they felt pressure to succeed in every area of life. Others remember being compared with brothers or sisters or feeling that mistakes weren't easily accepted. Some learnt that being helpful earned praise, while expressing their own needs brought criticism or disappointment.

None of these experiences automatically lead to difficulty setting boundaries, but they can quietly shape the beliefs we carry into adulthood.

Boundaries Aren't About Being Unkind

One of the biggest misconceptions I hear is that setting boundaries is selfish.

It isn't.

Boundaries simply help us recognise that our own needs matter too. Imagine a friend asks if everyone can gather at your house for the weekend. You're already feeling emotionally drained, but you don't want to disappoint anyone, so you say yes. You spend the entire week worrying about it. You cook all the food. You clean the house. You organise everything yourself. By the time everyone arrives, you're mentally and physically exhausted and instead of enjoying the evening, you're wondering whether people are judging you.

Could there have been another way?

Perhaps everyone could have brought a dish to share. Maybe a friend would have happily helped set everything up if you'd asked.

Boundaries don't always mean saying no.

Sometimes they mean allowing yourself to ask for help.

One of the Most Rewarding Changes I See in Therapy

One of the things I love watching happen in therapy is the moment someone realises they actually *can* say no. Not because they've become harder or less caring. Because they've begun to believe something new.

That they matter.

That they can say no and still be kind.

That they can disappoint someone occasionally and still be respected. Many people are surprised to discover that, more often than not, the consequences they feared never actually happen.

It's Often Connected to Other Struggles

If you've read some of my previous articles, you may notice a familiar theme. Finding it difficult to say no rarely exists on its own. It often sits alongside feeling *not good enough*, worrying about what other people think, struggling to accept compliments or apologising far more than is necessary.

Although these experiences can look very different on the surface, they often grow from similar beliefs about our worth and our place in relationships. Rather than treating each problem separately, therapy can help us understand the deeper patterns connecting them.

Final Thoughts

Learning to say no isn't about becoming selfish. It's about recognising that your needs are just as important as everyone else's. Boundaries don't push people away. Healthy boundaries help us build healthier relationships—with others and with ourselves. Sometimes one simple word can feel incredibly difficult to say. But over time, many people discover that saying **no** doesn't mean they're a bad person.

It simply means they're beginning to believe they matter too.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** Over the years, one of the things I've noticed as a therapist is that people often come to therapy believing they simply need to get better at saying no. As we begin exploring their experiences together, we often discover that saying no isn't really the problem.

Underneath it may be a fear of disappointing people, being criticised, missing out on opportunities or believing that other people's needs matter more than their own.

One of the most rewarding moments in therapy is seeing someone realise they can say no and still feel like a kind, caring and worthwhile person. They don't become selfish. They simply begin to recognise that their needs matter too.

Perhaps the goal isn't simply learning to say **no**.

Perhaps it's learning to believe that your needs matter just as much as everyone else's.

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