



Assertiveness

Many people have great difficulty saying ‘no’ to others. Even people who are quite assertive in other situations may find themselves saying ‘yes’ to things that they really don’t want to do.

Saying ‘yes’ to something you don’t really want to do can be appropriate in some situations. For example in a work situation if your boss asks you to do something and you don’t really want to it wouldn’t be appropriate to practise your assertiveness skills and say ‘no’.

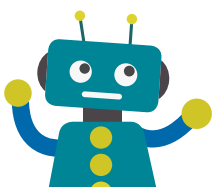
However, in other situations, for example, if a friend asks you to do something which is a real inconvenience for you and you say ‘yes’, or if you find yourself volunteering for all sorts of jobs to the point that you are over-loaded – then learning how to say ‘no’ becomes an important skill to learn.

The effects of being unable to say ‘no’

If you say ‘yes’ when you really mean ‘no’, resentment and anger can build up towards the person you have said ‘yes’ to, even though they have done nothing wrong. You can also become increasingly frustrated and disappointed with yourself. And if you are taking on more than you can cope with, you can become over-worked and highly stressed. In the long-term not being assertive in this way can decrease your self-esteem and lead to depression and anxiety.

At the other end of the spectrum some people are able to say ‘no’ but do so in an aggressive manner without consideration or respect for the other person. This may result in people disliking you or being angry and resentful.

Neither of these situations work well.





Unhelpful beliefs: Why is it hard to say 'no'

Anyone who has spent any time around a toddler knows that they have no trouble saying 'no!' However, as we grow older we learn from our environment and our experience that it is not always appropriate to say 'no'. We can end up with a number of unhelpful beliefs about saying 'no' that make it difficult for us to use this word. Some of these beliefs are listed below:

- Saying 'no' is rude and aggressive
- Saying 'no' is unkind, uncaring and selfish
- Saying 'no' will hurt and upset others and make them feel rejected
- If I say 'no' to somebody they won't like me anymore
- Others' needs are more important than mine
- I should always try and please others and be helpful
- Saying 'no' over little things is small minded and petty.

More helpful beliefs about saying 'no'

The unhelpful thoughts above are not facts. They are just thoughts or opinions that we have learned. Each of them can be replaced by a more helpful thought or opinion about saying 'no'. Some of these beliefs are listed below:

- Other people have the right to ask and I have the right to refuse
- When you say 'no' you are refusing a request, not rejecting a person
- When we say 'yes' to one thing we are actually saying 'no' to something else. We always have a choice and we are constantly making choices.

People who have difficulty saying 'no' usually overestimate the difficulty that the other person will have in accepting the refusal. We are not trusting that they can cope with hearing 'no'. By expressing our feelings openly and honestly, it actually liberates the other person to express their feelings. By saying 'no' to somebody it allows them to say 'no' to your requests while still being able to ask for further requests.

You may not immediately accept these new beliefs or thoughts. This is normal. You have probably been thinking the old thoughts for a long time, so it will take some time for these new beliefs to become as automatic as the old ones were. But in order for this to happen you need to practise. Start practising saying 'no' to others. Think about situations/circumstances in which this might be easiest to do so to begin with. Once you get the hang of it then move on to other situations that you might think are a bit trickier.

