

Achieving Balance by Saying No

Cheryl Stephens, Communications Coach

Can't Say "No"? Try writing some rules.

Until you can say "no" with comfort and grace, your life is not your own and you have no hope of achieving a balance between your work and social obligations and your personal needs. But while learning to say "no" is necessary, it is also difficult.

If "No" seems blunt, try saying, "I won't" or "Sorry, I can't". This is less confrontational and identifies an action you won't do rather than rejecting the person by saying "NO!" to their request.

Making "No" Easier to Say:

Show a generous spirit.

Be helpful and say "yes" whenever it doesn't cause you stress or inconvenience. If you are considerate of others when you do have the time, energy or money, they will be understanding and even protective of you when you must say no.

Keep it simple.

You are not obliged to give an explanation or to fake an excuse. Unless it is business, it is nobody's concern but your own.

Buy yourself some time.

Take time to consider whether to reject a request or to devise a diplomatic reply. Instead of saying "no" immediately, offer to consider the request.

Practice prevention.

Keep your schedule and your obligations to yourself, so you will not be asked for help when others think you are "available".

Draw black slashes across whole days on your calendar – for people who like to read over your shoulder or across your desk.

The excuse "I have other plans" can refer to down-time, your meditation, or a bubble bath. Nobody but you need know to whom you have committed your time.

Don't ever lie, but prepare face-saving excuses for use when necessary.

Setting Policy and Rules

It can be easier to decline a request if you can refer to your “personal policy” not to fulfill such requests. Make a list of the commitments you have made in the past year that turned out to be time-consuming, frustrating, boring, or overwhelming. Is there a common thread that can provide the basis for a policy decision?

Here are a few excuses based on policy:

“I am sorry but I have had to establish a policy of declining invitations
to speak at more than one event each quarter
to join any more committees
to make evening commitments – due to my family obligations
to be out of the office in the mornings – that is when I see clients
to take on any more volunteer work before year’s end”

After you get the hang of setting personal policies, you can write your rules. You don’t need too many—just a couple that allow you to keep some time clear in your schedule so you can control your life. Here is a batch – nobody can get away with all of these at once!

Rule 1. I don’t do mornings.

Rule 2. I don’t do volunteer committee meetings.

Rule 3. I don’t “do lunch”.

Rule 4. I don’t go out in the evening.

Rule 5. I don’t babysit.

More About Saying No

Try these tactics. If you still find you aren’t saying no as often as you’d like, it might be time to do a little more studying. Here are some books that can help.

How to Say No Without Feeling Guilty

By Patti Breitman and Connie Hatche

Don’t Hurry, Be Happy

By Ernie Zelinski

Cheryl Stephens is the author of Plain Language Legal Writing, and is a leader in the field of plain language communication, providing training and workshops to clients all over North America.