



[COMMUNICATION]

5 simple ways to say no

How to stop being a people pleaser.
by Vanessa Geneva Ahern

YOUR co-worker asks you to cover for her when she leaves early ... again. Your neighbor begs you to cat-sit. Your friend wants you to donate to her latest favorite charity. And you? You either say yes when you really don't want to, or you make an excuse—and then you end up feeling like a doormat or a weasel.

Why is saying no so hard? Harriet B. Braiker, Ph.D., never thought it had to be. Braiker, a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles and the author of several best-selling books

on stress and well-being, died in January, shortly after the publication of her new book, *Who's Pulling Your Strings? How to Break the Cycle of Manipulation and Regain Control of Your Life*. *Health* had the chance to speak with her before her death.

The desire to please others at your own expense "has to do with a greatly inflated value of niceness, the idea that you have to be nice at all costs," Braiker said. "A pattern of compulsive people-pleasing sets you up to be easily manipulated."

Furthermore, it can backfire. "One

reason you say yes when you really want to say no is because you are afraid the other person will get mad," Braiker said. "In fact, you're the one who gets angry—at the other person for asking, and at yourself for saying yes."

Chances are you know that you can turn people down without upsetting them or coming off as cold-hearted and selfish. It's just that, when push comes to shove, you can't always think of the right words for "no." Here are five effective ways to say it. ►

1. The "no, but ..." response

USE THIS WHEN: You're willing to negotiate.

EXAMPLE: Your new assistant asks for a personal day during your busiest week.

YOU SAY: "No, but we may be able to work something out if you can come in for a few extra hours the week before."

WHY IT WORKS: "You're saying no to the initial request, but you're also showing that you are willing to change your mind if the other person can meet your requirements," says Stephen Schoonover, M.D., president of Schoonover Associates, a human resources and leadership-development consulting firm in Falmouth, Massachusetts.

2. The no sandwich

USE THIS WHEN: You'd like to help, but you can't.

EXAMPLE: You're dressing for a long-awaited romantic dinner with your spouse when your sister calls and says, "Our babysitter canceled at the last minute, and we have tickets to a concert. Would you mind watching your nephew tonight? He's been asking about you."

YOU SAY: "You know I love him, but I've already got plans. Why don't you try so-and-so? And tell Johnny that I'll make a special date with him next week."

WHY IT WORKS: You're placing the "no" between two positive responses. "The sandwich technique works well if you're worried about staying on good terms," Braiker said.

3. The "it's for your own good" no

USE THIS WHEN: Saying no will actually benefit the questioner.

EXAMPLE: A friend who is unemployed is desperately looking for a job and hears that the

company where you work is hiring. You really don't think he'd be the right person for the position, and he asks, "Would you mind putting in a good word for me?"

YOU SAY: "I'm not sure you'd find your niche there. You're great at coming up with creative ideas, but we need number crunchers."

WHY IT WORKS: Your friend needs honest feedback, Braiker said. "If he isn't a match for the company, then you're saving him from wasting their time."

4. The "butt out" no

USE THIS WHEN: Someone asks a nosy question.

EXAMPLE: A close co-worker is hoping for a raise. In the ladies' room she asks, "What are they paying you?"

YOU SAY: "I really hope you get the raise, because you deserve it. But I don't discuss my salary."

WHY IT WORKS: "It's often easier to say no if you first empathize. The other person is usually less likely to argue your answer," says Greg Markway, Ph.D., co-author of *Painfully Shy: How to Overcome Social Anxiety and Reclaim Your Life*.

5. The redirecting no

USE THIS WHEN: You need to address an underlying problem.

EXAMPLE: Your friend wants to get the kids together for a sleepover—at your house. Trouble is, she has yet to reciprocate.

YOU SAY: "Kate loves spending time with your daughter, but that night isn't good for us. Plus, I think the kids sometimes get bored at our place. Maybe we could have the sleepover at your house sometime."

WHY IT WORKS: "You're saying no," Markway says, "but you're also steering the conversation toward the real problem." ①