



# JUST SAY NO!

Learning to say no could change your life.

Don't believe us? Give it a try...

Work is a nightmare, the house is a tip, you promised you'd help out with your son's French homework, you're on a girls' night on Thursday, it's still only the middle of the week and you're knackered. And the weekend isn't looking any better – you've promised the kids a sleepover as a thank you to another mum who picked them up when you had to work late. And you've agreed to dog-sit for your parents while they swan off on holiday. Welcome to the women's world of yes – a frantic place where millions of us are afflicted by the crippling inability to say no. What is it with women? We're clearly not born this

way – you just have to look at any toddler, male or female, to see they don't struggle with an assertive use of the word no.

## Yes women

So, do we become yes people over time because we think we have to keep other people happy? Advanced behaviour coach and psychologist Dr Michael Mantell thinks that saying yes goes back to the way we were brought up. He believes that girls are encouraged to be more concerned for the feelings of others, and that can lead to submissiveness.

'The brain tends to react more favourably and more positively to yes stimuli and more painfully to no stimuli,' he explains. 'But women who habitually say yes can often feel besieged, burdened and unacknowledged.' Is that ringing any bells with you?

It is for *Essentials* reader Jane Longhorn, 37, who finds herself going for coffee with a woman at work she can't stand. She knows she should say no, but now she's made it a regular occurrence, it's difficult to get out of. 'Like a lot of women, I find it impossible to say no, and on the very rare occasions when I do, I fumble around offering apologies and excuses. I hate myself for it!'

Jane is not alone. Just ask

yourself how many times you've found yourself agreeing to do something or to be somewhere for fear of upsetting the other person if you say no? Then ask yourself how you feel when that day eventually comes round? How much are you wishing that you'd simply had the guts to say no in the first place?

Experts agree that our ability to say no with confidence is one of the most important things we can do to bring back some control into our lives. It doesn't mean being closed or unwilling, instead, it's much more about establishing healthy clear

boundaries.

Dr Mantell agrees that once we learn how to reintroduce that tiny potent word back into our vocabulary, things will change for the better. 'You'll start to feel like your own person, who calls the shots in your own life. You'll develop self-respect, self-confidence and become a victor, not a victim.'

## The power of no

Annie Raymond, 44, also found herself a victim of the yes word last year. 'I'm a nurse in a really busy hospital and one of my colleagues was always asking me to take on her duties. She'd say she felt ill or that her back hurt, and it used to make me feel bad saying no to her. It was



my own fault, I know, but the reality was I ended up doing her job as well as my own.' In the end, Annie became so exhausted that she dreaded going in to work.

'My older sister recommended a book called *The Power of No* by self-help writer James Altucher and his wife Claudia. As soon as I started to read it, I could see how much I had let myself be taken advantage of. It wasn't easy and it was a slow process, but I went into work with a new attitude. I tried to say no where before I had always said yes, and the problem was eventually solved. It was a life-changing experience because it taught me I had the right to say no, and that doing so was an act of strength, not weakness.'

So how on earth do we break the deep-seated habit of saying yes? Clinical psychologist Dr Linda Tillman suggests making it a project to say no to something every day. Make sure your voice is firm and be direct as you say it, looking the other person in the eye. When you say that all-important word, notice that you have, and give yourself credit for saying it.

## VALUE YOURSELF

According to consultant clinical psychologist Sally Austen, not being able to say no can be an indication of lack of self-worth. 'People who find it hard to say no are likely to get overtired and put their needs last. Learning to say no will increase the time you have to commit to your own needs.'

Annie Raymond's experience is proof of how successful that can be. 'Since I sorted things out

at work,' she says, 'I've learnt to say no in other areas of my life, too. It's as if I have started using a long-neglected muscle which has become stronger and stronger.' Annie has found she's created more time for herself by saying no more often, so there have been practical benefits. 'But the biggest reward is in terms of my self-esteem,' she adds. 'I think people saw me as a bit of a doormat before. My saying no has made them look at me with different eyes.'

## 5 EASY WAYS TO SAY NO

### 1 IN OTHER WORDS...

*Instead of saying no, try 'That doesn't' or 'won't work for me'. It's less direct, but equally clear.*

### 2 I CAN DO

*Say what you are happy to do: if a friend asks you to look after her kids all afternoon, offer her a slot between 4 and 5. If that's no good, say, 'Sorry I can't help out this time'. It sets clear boundaries.*

### 3 POSTPONE

*To get out of a regular arrangement, get in first by saying, 'I can't do next week' and gradually make it less frequent to break the expectation.*

### 4 REDIRECT

*If someone is dumping on you, make it harder for them. Try saying, 'Sorry you're unwell, you should speak to (line manager) and ask them what's best.' It puts the responsibility back on them.*

### 5 BUY TIME

*Give yourself some thinking time by saying, 'I'll get back to you on that'. It will also get across that you have other priorities, too.*

**\* Psychotherapist, Karen Meager, is co-author of *Real Leaders for the Real World***