

Why Is It So Hard to Say No?

2/25/2020

[Last week](#), we talked about disappointing people every day. We hope you used the Practice Disappointing Someone Reflection Pages to start thinking about who to disappoint, when and how to drop that ball, who will pick up the slack if needed and start processing how it feels to disappoint others on purpose. Hopefully you were able to spread the “disappointment” around and you were amazing at *not* making things happen. But it’s possible that “disappointing” others was a challenge. So, this week, we’re delving deeper into the art of saying “no” to help you do the things that really matter to you.



“Just Say No.” Remember that anti-drug campaign from the 80’s and 90’s? Politics aside, those 3 little words seemed like they’d be so easy to say but they didn’t really make a difference for real people in real-life situations in the real world, in part because those words didn’t tell people *how* to “just say no.” Telling someone to do something really hard without giving them the knowledge or tools or support they need to do it is likely doomed to failure. SO, we don’t want the idea of “disappointing someone every day” to be another memorable but unhelpful slogan. Something that sounds good on paper but is just way too hard to do in real life.

Why is it so hard to say no? Understanding *why* it’s tough to say no may actually help you feel a little more comfortable saying no. At a basic level, “no” is a powerful word involved in our earliest learning experiences. “No” can derail our brain’s functioning, triggering the release of stress-related chemicals in our brains, activating our fight-flight-or-freeze response, bringing

about emotional distress and interrupting our thinking, decision making and communication. At the same time, we are aware of social norms, we care what others think about us and we can experience intense emotions and perceived pressure when we are put on the spot*. So, if someone asks a favor, we may become overwhelmed, feeling awkward, guilty, embarrassed, anxious, etc. When that happens, it may be easier to say “yes” even when we want to say “no.”

Now, let’s get back to you. If you are hard-wired and socially-wired to experience all kinds of distress around the word “no,” it kind of makes sense that it isn’t easy to “just say no.” It isn’t just you. It isn’t a mom thing or a woman thing. It’s just a human thing. There’s something fantastic in all of this: if this is how pretty much *everyone* is wired, then *you* aren’t weird or bad or even unique for struggling with saying “no.”

Don’t get me wrong- you may have your very own reasons for struggling with saying “no” that *are* about being a mom or a woman or something else. But, if everyone has a hard time saying “no,” maybe you don’t need to feel bad about it or avoid it. Maybe you could be okay-ish with saying “no” to some things and leave the turmoil for times you actually *do* have reasons to feel bad for saying “no.” Think about it this way. Everyone sneezes, right? Sneezing clears irritants out of your nose. You could feel mortified about sneezing whenever it happens. Or, just save that distress for something truly cringe-worthy, like when you sneeze right in someone’s face.

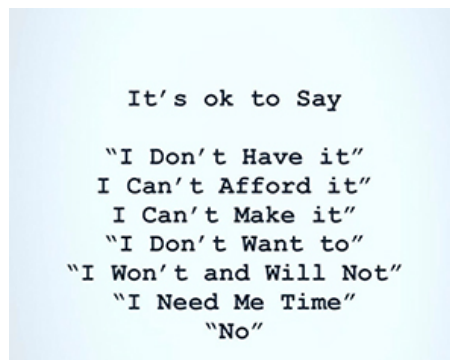
Let’s turn to the support you need to say “no” in order to pursue your priorities. Clearly, we have your back when it comes to encouraging you to “disappoint people on purpose.” If you haven’t already done so, think about who in your daily life will support your prioritization efforts- a spouse, friend, sibling, cousin, co-worker, parent, aunt, etc. Who is there to listen when you’re having a hard time? Who sees how tired or stressed you are? Who has enough distance (physically, emotionally, etc.) to see the big picture? Who is also trying to conquer their overcommitment to being everything to everyone?

In addition to having the general support of people who want you to take things off of your plate, it’s ideal to have the support of the person/people who really matter to you *and* who will

be directly impacted by your commitment to prioritizing. It's not that you need permission to do something good for you. But it can certainly be easier to commit to that good-for-you thing when you know that the person who will be affected is on board.

Let's say you will be disappointing your kids 2 days this week by not picking them up extra early after school. Your husband will instead pick them up from their after-care program, which will allow you to finish your work at work then go to the gym. Your kids will likely ask you to change your mind, question your decision and/or pull a guilt trip like only they can. When that happens and you feel the pressure to cave, it would be great if your husband could point out that it's important for you to do things that matter to you too. Talking with him beforehand to make sure you're on the same page will help him back you up on your "no."

This week, while you work on prioritizing, identify your disappointment cheerleaders and enlist their support. If you're asked to add things to your plate, see if you can notice how that request makes you feel (i.e., does it create distress, does it throw you off track, does it make you feel pressured, etc.). If you can recognize the urge to just say "yes," you can remind yourself that we all struggle with the discomfort of "no." And, if you need a little inspiration, remember the following (courtesy of DL Hughley via Twitter):



It's ok to Say
"I Don't Have it"
I Can't Afford it"
I Can't Make it"
"I Don't Want to"
"I Won't and Will Not"
"I Need Me Time"
"No"

* If you're interested in recent work on the fascinating (and historically controversial) topic of "compliance," you can listen to this episode of NPR's Hidden Brain, which features Vanessa Bohns, a Cornell University social psychologist who studies the topic: <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/20/807758704/the-influence-you-have-why-were-blind-to-our-power-over-others>