Boundaries and the Art of the Polite Decline

Boundary-setting for resilience and healthier relationships

Have you ever felt like someone’s taken advantage of you? Felt obligated to take on more than you should, especially during busy times like holidays or near deadlines? Said “yes” to something you don’t have time (or don’t want) to do, then blown your lid when things got too stressful?

If you answered yes to any of these, it might be time to reexamine your boundaries. Boundaries can help us better manage how, when, where, (and on whom and what) we spend our time and energy. Rather than being restrictive, the right boundaries can be expansive, helping us to derive much more meaning, productivity, and fulfillment from those things and people we do spend time on. But, for many of us, the notion of politely declining is an unsettling one.

Boundaries

Boundaries are limits we set for ourselves to facilitate reasonable, safe, and healthy ways of interacting with others.

Although setting proper boundaries can feel stressful at first, over time and with practice, it can boost our resilience and promote well-being. It’s not wrong to want to do things for others; but when we want to please too much, and at our own expense, good intentions can leave us feeling resentful and exhausted.

Decide what you need. Imagine a compass that can point to either Yes or No. If you agree to a request, and your needle points to Yes, how does that make you feel? Anxious? If your needle points to No, how then? At ease? Take a moment to reflect before answering.
Set your calendar. When filling out your calendar, map out time for personal things like chores, leisure activities, and dinners with family. Having plans can make it easier to say no without guilt when conflicting requests come in.

Don’t be Afraid to Say “No”. Saying no is commonly and incorrectly associated with being selfish or callous. A “yes” will bring a smile from the person doing the asking, and a “no” will probably have the opposite effect. So, we might find ourselves saying yes when we shouldn’t just to make someone else happy or to avoid conflict in the moment.

Discomfort passes, but resentment can last forever. When someone asks you for something you can’t or don’t want to do, take a deep breath and remember that the discomfort of a no will pass in a moment. But, the resentment of saying yes can affect your health and well-being long into the future.

Use your inner yes/no compass. Before responding to a request, imagine a compass in your head that can point to either Yes or No. If you agree to this request, and your needle points to Yes, how does it make you feel? Anxious? If your needle points to No, how then? At ease? Take a moment to breathe mindfully, pause, and reflect before answering.

Be aware of harshness bias. According to psychologists, we believe people judge us more negatively than they do in reality. This applies to boundaries too. People tend to respect us more rather than less when we set healthy limits.

Rehearse your no mantra. Research shows that if we consciously prepare ourselves to give a specific answer to new requests, we’re more likely to honor and maintain healthy boundaries. Try practicing a polite no phrase in your head and out loud so that it’s ready when you need it. Something like: “I wish I could help with that, but I can’t in good conscience take on any more tasks this week.”

Like many healthy habits, setting boundaries takes effort at first but should get easier with practice. Invest time to build your boundary skills now and you might be surprised at how much time and effort you will gain in return.