

## **A Self-Advocate's Reflections on "How to Say No": Some Practical Ideas and Strategies**

This toolkit is designed to provide autistic persons guidance on how to say 'no' or communicate protest. All people have the right to say 'no'. We first focus on the why it may be important to say 'no', as well as offering strategies and accessible language.

Life presents us all with scenarios in which we have choices to make. We have the choice of consenting (or not) to activities involving our bodies, emotions, time and energy. Giving consent means we agree to the activities.

Let's now explore the concept of 'informed consent'. In a medical setting, informed consent is given when we have all the relevant information about a medication or procedure (we know the risks, the benefits, what is expected from us and what the likely outcomes will be) and we voluntarily agree.

When others request our time, energy, emotional engagement or physical actions we have the same right to make informed choices. Saying 'no' to others can often feel uncomfortable or be difficult. Throughout this toolkit we aim to provide some clarity, practical strategies and meaningful reflections on the importance of 'no'

## Why is it important to say 'no'?

Saying 'no' can be a powerful statement. Saying 'no' can prevent current or future discomfort, and in some instances be a lifesaving word. There are many ways to say 'no' which will be covered later in this toolkit. Other reasons to say 'no' may be:

- To create space for yourself in your daily schedule
- To engage in activities that align with your goals
- To avoid burnout or exhaustion
- To be clear about boundaries
- To deny consent
- To create physical and emotional boundaries



### Why saying no can be difficult

There are many reasons why we may feel uncomfortable saying 'no'. You may identify with some of these perspectives. Let's look at a few reasons why saying 'no' may be uncomfortable.

'No' is viewed as being negative.

Growing up we are expected to say 'yes' to adults.

We don't want to be seen as difficult.

We don't want to disappoint people.

We don't feel like 'no' is an option.

We are worried we may not be able to complete the task effectively.

We haven't considered our own preferences and boundaries.

We want to be accepted and valued in our social groups.

### **What happens when we say 'no'?**

There are many possible outcomes that could occur in a situation where you aren't sure if you want to say 'yes' to what has been requested or suggested. You may...

1. Say 'yes' and feel badly about doing something you don't want to do.
2. Say 'no' and feel badly for making someone else uncomfortable.
3. Say 'no' and feel good about your decision.

### **What if I say 'no' when people are used to me saying 'yes'?**

If people expect you will say 'yes' for whatever reason (maybe you have always said 'yes' in the past, or you often say 'yes'), they may react strangely or negatively if they are expecting a 'yes'.

But that is their own discomfort to deal with. It is not your responsibility to make things better/easier for them. They will move on, and you can feel confident in making a healthy choice that you honors yourself.

Things to consider...

Why is a given request being asked of you by someone else? Perhaps...

- Because you are seen to have a strength in that area.
  - Because you appear to be a 'yes'-person.
  - Because no one else wants to do it.
  - Because no one else has the skills to do the task or meet the request.
- 
- **Can you think of other reasons why others may be seeking a 'yes' from you?**
  - **Will saying yes delay or prevent progress on more important tasks?**
  - **Will I enjoy this activity?**
  - **Do I have time for this activity?**

## Be honest

The common statement we hear about the word is “no means no”. While it can be incredibly difficult to say the word “No” it is important to be direct. That way, when the answer is “No”, it cannot be confused for ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’.

Let’s use a traffic light representation of choice and negotiation:

|          |                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> |    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Yes</b></li><li>• Happy with the request and feel comfortable and confident</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>B</b> |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>I am Unsure</b></li><li>• Need to consider if something you want to do</li><li>• Consider the energy needed to make a healthy choice about the request</li><li>• May require negotiations or clarification around expectations/time frames</li></ul> |
| <b>C</b> |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>No</b></li><li>• To the entirety of the request</li><li>• Not comfortable with any aspects</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                 |

## **Sometimes there are complex requests and resulting feelings.**

For instance, some parts of a particular request may be a green, some may be a red, and others may need some negotiation. Think about these types of more complex requests in your life.

- **How did you respond?**
- **How else could you have responded?**
- **Would it be helpful to have an opportunity to have more time to think through these requests before making a decision on how to respond?**

### **Let's look at a real life example**

*Kevin's story: Professional*

*Kevin works at a large tech company with many departments. He has been working in his position as a developer for 6 years and enjoys his job, however, Kevin is often tired; sometimes he has a hard time focusing and isn't spending much time outside of work doing the things he enjoys. Kevin was asked by his supervisor to take a new staff member "under his wing". Not having a clear idea of what that meant, Kevin started training and supporting the new staff member and then found his own work tasks weren't getting done on time.*

How could Kevin respond in a way that best works for him?

One option would be for Kevin to explain to his supervisor the impact of his work responsibilities and their impact on him, and request that he do task X,Y and Z by the end of the week (that is, in a time that is reasonable for him). Perhaps he could say, "I can do Task X, no problem. Task Y may require a bit more time than you are allocating for it. How would you like me to proceed with that? As for Task Z, I don't feel I have the skill level to do that in the time frame. I am not comfortable with that task. Could we find another way to get that task done?"

## **Why do we say 'yes' when we really mean 'no'?**

There are likely many reasons, but here are a few ideas:

- To be a part of the group.
- To comply and do what we are told.
- To be part of the community or team.
- To avoid having people mad or upset with us.
- To avoid worry or concern about what others might think.
- To avoid letting people down.

How may you feel if you tend to say 'yes' to other people even when that is not what you want or need?

We know it can impact physical and mental health. It could appear as:

- Headaches
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Inability to relax
- Lack of motivation
- Ongoing fatigue
- Emotional instability
- Broken personal relationships
- \*Anger. Anger is an important emotion to keep in check. If you are overwhelmed, it can be much easier to get angry or have triggers that wouldn't normally upset you.

## **Saying 'no' without saying 'no'.**

In a situation where you feel you have to answer on the spot, there are ways you can avoid saying 'yes' without saying 'no' and potentially coming off as curt or rude. Some examples of how to say 'no' include:

- 'Not right now'
- 'I'd like to think about it'
- 'I'm not able to at the moment'

You can also ask for clarification around the request and what it might involve from you. This would have been helpful in Kevin's situation.

In such work situations, an employer or supervisor may talk with you about your work tasks, or offer support on some tasks to help you manage your workload.

### *Loretta's story: Personal*

*Loretta is a kind person who likes to spend time with her friends after work and on weekends. She has a group of friends that get together regularly for game night. Each person takes turns bringing snacks but lately Loretta has been the only person making sure there are always snacks.*

*After a few weeks, Loretta realizes that she is the only person contributing snacks on game night and she is not sure how to address this. She reasons that she doesn't want to "nag" and wants to keep game nights fun. But Loretta also doesn't have much extra money left over after she pays her bills and buys groceries. This means that she is having to buy cheaper and less healthy food for herself in order to afford the snacks for the games night.*

*Loretta worries about speaking up about the situation in case she causes a conflict and is no longer part of the group.*

Loretta could frame her request something like this...

"I really want to contribute to game night, however I feel I shouldn't be the only contributor. Could we all commit to contributing in \$5 each to provide food on a given

game night? Or maybe we could each donate \$5 before each game night then take turns with who will pick up the food?

### *Daryl's story: Physical*

*Daryl is a young person who has a tendency to say 'yes' to physical experiences such as shaking hands, hugs and intimacy with other people. They aren't sure why they say 'yes' to physical discomfort in some situations. Daryl has a good relationship with their partner, but sometimes they don't communicate their needs and dislikes. This often leaves Daryl feeling unhappy with these experiences and they worry that saying 'no' could cause a fight or end the relationship.*

People have a right to say 'no'. If they chose to be intimate with their partner or partners as requested to Daryl could say 'yes'. Daryl may also choose to incorporate regular breaks to reset. Another option is selecting other physical actions like linking arms or pinky fingers instead of holding hands or hugging. Perhaps if they chose to, Daryl could work their way up to a hug for a while before wanting to feel further connected. What is important here is that Daryl has the right to say 'yes' or 'no', and the terms of what that means.

### **Softening the 'No'**

Using other words to 'soften the no' in response to a request could show that you are being calm and clear. For example, using 'thank you' within the response can communicate your appreciation for being asked. Below are some phrases you could try:

"No, thank you"

"Thank you for thinking of me, but I need to say 'no' because I need to look after my {energy, mental health, myself, my wellbeing}."

"Thank you for asking, but I can't do that today"

"I like the idea, but I don't have the energy for it at the moment".

## **How to say 'no' if you have already said 'yes'?**

Sometimes after some time or reflection, we realize we have agreed to a task or action that we are not comfortable with, or we don't have time or energy to complete. It can feel awkward or unkind to take back our agreement, however, it is important to take care of ourselves first. We don't want to disappoint others but sometimes this is unavoidable. Below is an example of how you could word the conversation:

"Hey, I know I agreed to do this; however, I realize now that I am not comfortable with it for X,Y,Z reasons. I understand this may be disappointing, but I need to look after myself at this time."

## **Adding the Physical 'No'**

Physical gestures are ways of showing 'no' with your body that can help communicate or emphasize your verbal 'no'.



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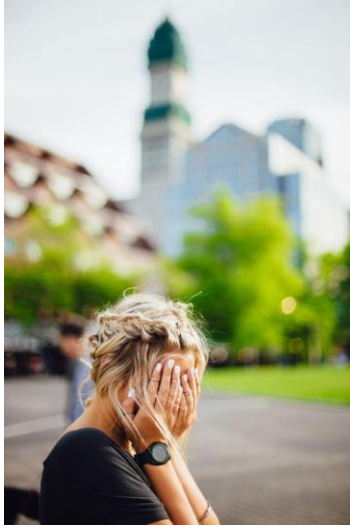


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- Head shake
- Hand(s) up in a stop signal
- Arms crossed

### **Some Reflective Questions:**

As you've reflected on this information about saying 'yes' or 'no'...

- **What are some challenges you identified for yourself?**

- **How important is these for you?**
- **How might you respond authentically, in your own words, the next time you're asked to do something you don't want to do?**
- **What are ways to take care of your well-being in your daily life?**
- **How could you engage with others more often in ways that work well for you?**
  - In school or employment situations?
  - In personal relationships?
- **Can you think of at two things you could say to avoid saying 'yes' when you truly want to say 'no'?**
- **What would be some benefits of being honest with how you feel and what you want?**

[Resources!!!]

{[BC Government Plain Language guide](#)}

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