

Too Much Closeness: Learning to Say “No” in Relationships

Why is it important to say “no”? It means setting a limit to protect yourself in relationships. For example, “If you show up with coke, I’m leaving,” or “Unless you stop yelling at me, I’m walking out.” Saying “no” is an important skill for setting boundaries. At a deeper level, setting boundaries is a way of conveying that both people in a relationship deserve care and attention. It is a healthy way of respecting your separate identity.

SITUATIONS WHERE YOU CAN LEARN TO SAY “NO”

- ◆ Refusing drugs and alcohol.
 - ◆ Pressure to say more than you want to.
 - ◆ Going along with things that you do not want to do.
 - ◆ When you’re taking care of everyone but *you*.
 - ◆ When you do all the giving in a relationship.
 - ◆ When you make promises to yourself that you do not keep.
 - ◆ When you’re doing things that take your focus away from recovery.
- ★ *Any others that you notice? Write them on the back of the page.*

EXAMPLES: SAYING “NO” IN SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND PTSD

	<i>With Others</i>	<i>With Yourself</i>
Substance Abuse	“No thanks; I don’t want any now.”	“Self-respect means no substances today.”
	“Drinking is not allowed on my diet.”	“If anybody offers me drugs at the party, I need to leave.”
PTSD	“I need you to stop talking to me like that.”	“Working as a prostitute is making my PTSD worse; I need to stop.”
	“Please don’t call me again.”	“Seeing war movies is triggering my PTSD; I need to stop.”

HOW TO SAY “NO”

※ **Try different ways to set a boundary:**

- *Polite refusal:* “No thanks, I’d rather not.”
- *Insistence:* “No, I really mean it, and I’d like to drop the subject.”
- *Partial honesty:* “I cannot drink because I have to drive.”
- *Full honesty:* “I cannot drink because I’m an alcoholic.”
- *Stating consequences:* “If you keep bringing drugs home, I will have to move out.”

※ **Remember that it is a sign of respect to say “no.”** Protecting yourself is part of developing self-respect. Rather than driving people away, it helps them value you more. You can be vulnerable without being exploited. You can enjoy relationships without fearing them. In healthy relationships, saying “no” appropriately promotes closeness.

(cont.)

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* **How much or how little you say is up to you.** However, if you can comfortably provide an explanation, this can make it easier on the other person.

* **You will find the words if you are motivated to say “no.”** Once you commit to protecting your needs, the *how* will present itself.

* **Take care of yourself; let others take care of themselves.** You can only live your life, not theirs.

* **If you are afraid of hurting the other person,** remember that it may take repeated work, both with the other person and within yourself. Over time, you will realize that healthy people can tolerate hearing what you think and feel.

* **You can set a boundary before, during, or after an interaction with someone.** Try discussing a difficult topic beforehand (e.g., discuss safe sex before a sexual encounter), during an interaction (e.g., try saying “no” to alcohol when it is offered), or afterward (e.g., go back and tell someone you did not like being talked to abusively).

* **Be careful about how much you reveal.** PTSD and substance abuse are sensitive topics, and discrimination against these disorders is very real and harmful. You can never take back a statement once it has been said. You do not need to be open with people you do not know well, people in work settings, or people who are abusive to you.

* **Be extremely careful if there is a possibility of physical harm.** Seek professional guidance.

ROLE PLAYS FOR SAYING “NO”

★ *Try rehearsing the following situations out loud. What could you say?*

With Others

- You are at a holiday party and your boss says, “Let’s celebrate! Have a drink!”
- Your partner says you should “just get over your trauma already.”
- A friend tells you not to take psychiatric medications because “that’s substance abuse too.”
- Your sister wants to know all about your trauma, but you don’t feel ready to tell her.
- Your partner keeps drinking around you, saying “You need to learn to deal with it.”
- Your date says, “Let’s go to my place,” and you don’t want to.
- Your boss gives you more and more work, and it’s too much.
- You suspect that your uncle is abusing your daughter.

With Yourself

- You want to have “just one drink.”
- You keep taking care of others but not yourself.
- You promised to stop bingeing on food but keep doing it.
- You are working too many hours, with no time left for recovery activities.