

# ASSERT YOURSELF!



## Module Six

# How to Say “No” Assertively

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## Saying “No”

Many people have great difficulty saying “No” to others. Even people who are quite assertive in other situations may find themselves saying “Yes” to things that they really don’t want to do. Now saying “Yes” to something you don’t really want to do can be appropriate in some situations. For example in a work situation if your boss asks you to do something and you don’t really want to it wouldn’t be appropriate to practise your assertiveness skills and say “No”. You may get the sack. What we are talking about here is if you find yourself saying “Yes” in other situations. For example, if a friend asks you to do something which is a real inconvenience for you and you say “Yes”, or if you find yourself volunteering for all sorts of jobs to the point that you are over-loaded.

## The effects of not being able to say “No”.

If you say “Yes” when you really mean “No”, resentment and anger can build up towards the person you have said “Yes” to, even though they have done nothing wrong. You can also become increasingly frustrated and disappointed with yourself. And if you are taking on more than you can cope with, you can become over-worked and highly stressed. In the long term not being assertive in this way can decrease your self esteem and lead to depression and anxiety.

At the other end of the spectrum some people are able to say “No” but do so in an aggressive manner without consideration or respect for the other person. This may result in people disliking you or being angry and resentful.

Neither of these situations is good assertive communication.

## Unhelpful beliefs: Why is it hard to say “No”

As we saw in Module 1 we are all born assertive. Anyone who has spent any time around a toddler knows that they have no trouble saying “No!” However as we grow older we learn from our environment and our experience that it is not always appropriate to say “no”. We can end up with a number of unhelpful beliefs about saying “no” that make it difficult for us to use this word. Some of these beliefs are listed below. See if any apply to you:

### Unhelpful Beliefs about Saying “No”

- Saying “no” is rude and aggressive.
- Saying “no” is unkind, uncaring and selfish.
- Saying “no” will hurt and upset others and make them feel rejected.
- If I say “no” to somebody they won’t like me anymore.
- Other’s needs are more important than mine.
- I should always try and please others and be helpful.
- Saying “no” over little things is small minded and petty.

See if you can think of any others:

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### Changing your Thinking: More Helpful Beliefs about Saying “No”.

The unhelpful thoughts above are not facts. They are just thoughts or opinions that we have learned. Each of them can be replaced by a more helpful thought or opinion about saying “no”. Below we have listed some of these:

- Other people have the right to ask and I have the right to refuse.
- When you say “no” you are refusing a request, not rejecting a person.
- When we say “yes” to one thing we are actually saying “no” to something else. We always have a choice and we are constantly making choices.
- People who have difficulty saying no usually overestimate the difficulty that the other person will have in accepting the refusal. We are not trusting that they can cope with hearing “no”. By expressing our feelings openly and honestly, it actually liberates the other person to express their feelings. By saying “no” to somebody it allows them to say “no” to your requests while still being able to ask for further requests.

See if you can think of any others, try and come up with alternatives for your own unhelpful beliefs about saying “no”.

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Remember that sometimes to come up with a new thought you will need to do a Thought Diary or a Behavioural Experiment. These techniques that you learned in Module 3 can be applied to your beliefs about saying “no” as they can to any unassertive belief. You may not immediately believe these new beliefs or thoughts. This is normal. You have been thinking the old thoughts probably for a long time so it will take some time for these new thoughts to become as automatic as the old ones were. Keep practising and you will get there.

## Changing your behaviour: How to Say “no”.

So you have now worked through some of your unhelpful thoughts about saying “no” but you may still not be really sure how to go about it. There are some basic principles you can apply when you want to say “no”. These are:

1. Be straightforward and honest but not rude so that you can make the point effectively.
2. As a rule keep it brief.
3. Tell the person if you are finding it difficult
4. Be polite – say something like “thank you for asking...”
5. Speak slowly with warmth otherwise “no” may sound abrupt.
6. Don’t apologise and give elaborate reasons for saying “no”. It is your right to say no if you don’t want to do things.
7. Remember that it is better in the long run to be truthful than breed resentment and bitterness within yourself.
8. When saying “no” take responsibility for it. Don’t blame or make excuses. Change “I

can't" to "I don't want to".

## Ways of saying "No"

There are also a number of ways you can say "no". Some of these are more appropriate in particular situations. Trevor Powell describes 6 ways of saying "No". These are described below:

1. The Direct 'no'. When someone asks you to do something you don't want to do, just say 'no'. The aim is to say no without apologising. The other person has the problem but you do not have to allow him or her to pass it on to you. This technique can be quite forceful and can be effective with salespeople.
2. The reflecting 'no'. This technique involves acknowledging the content and feeling of the request, then adding your assertive refusal at the end. For example "I know you want to talk to me about organizing the annual department review, but I can't do lunch today". Or "I know you're looking forward to a walk this afternoon but I can't come".
3. The reasoned "no". In this technique you give a very brief and genuine reason for why you are saying "No". For example "I can't have lunch with you because I have a report that needs to be finished by tomorrow".
4. The raincheck "no". This is not a definite "no". It is a way of saying "no" to the request at the present moment but leaves room for saying "Yes" in the future. Only use it if you genuinely want to meet the request. For example "I can't have lunch with you today, but I could make it sometime next week".
5. The enquiring "no". As with the raincheck "no" this is not a definite "no". It is a way of opening up the request to see if there is another way it could be met. For example "Is there any other time you'd like to go?"
6. The broken record "no". This can be used in a wide range of situations. You just repeat the simple statement of refusal over and over again. No explanation, just repeat it. It is particularly good for persistent requests. For example:

Dave: No, I can't have lunch with you.

Kate: Oh, please, it won't take long.

Dave: No, I can't have lunch with you.

Kate: Oh, go on, I'll pay.

Dave: No, I can't have lunch with you.

## Module summary

- Saying “no” can be difficult for a lot of people.
- As toddlers we don’t have any trouble saying “no” but as we learn from our environment and our experience we can start to have trouble with it.
- Saying “yes” when we really mean “no” can lead to stress, resentment and anger.
- If we have trouble saying “no” it is often because we hold a number of unhelpful beliefs about saying “no”. These can be changed by realising that they are just opinions and not facts. You can also use a Thought Diary or behavioural experiments (see Module 3) to change our unhelpful beliefs.
- There are some guidelines to saying “no”. These include keeping it brief, being clear, and being honest.
- There are some different ways to say “no”. These include the direct no, the enquiring no, the raincheck no, the reasoned no, and the broken record no.

Coming  
up:

The next module talks about  
how to deal with criticism  
assertively.

## ABOUT THIS MODULE

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We would also like to thank Paula Nathan for her contribution to these modules

### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

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Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24, 461-470.

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### “ASSERT YOURSELF”

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