

**"Let your heart guide you.
It whispers, so listen closely."**

—Molly Goode
(20th-century American writer)

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. (co

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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.

Too Much Distance: Learning to Say "Yes" in Relationships

Why is it important to say "yes"? It means connecting with others. It is a way of recognizing that we are all human and all need social contact. It is a healthy way of respecting your role as part of a larger community. It means becoming known to others.

SITUATIONS WHERE YOU CAN LEARN TO SAY "YES"

- ◆ Asking someone out for coffee.
- ◆ Telling your therapist how you *really* feel.
- ◆ Asking someone for a favor.
- ◆ Joining a club or organization.
- ◆ Calling a hotline.
- ◆ Being vulnerable about your "weak" feelings.
- ◆ Letting people get to know you.
- ◆ Soothing "young" parts of yourself.

★ Any others that you notice? Write them on the back of the page.

EXAMPLES: SAYING "YES" IN SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND PTSD

	<i>With Others</i>	<i>With Yourself</i>
Substance Abuse	"I am having a drug craving—please help talk me through it."	"I can give myself treats that are healthy rather than destructive."
	"Please come with me to an AA meeting."	"I will try speaking at an AA meeting."
PTSD	"I need your help—I am scared."	"I need to reach out to people when I'm upset."
	"I would like you to call and check in on me to see if I'm okay."	"I can start creating healthy friendships step by step."

HOW TO SAY "YES"

*** Try different ways:**

- *Share an activity:* "Would you like to go to a movie with me?"
- *Say how you feel:* "I feel so alone; it is hard for me to talk about this."
- *Focus on the other person:* "Tell me about your struggles with cocaine."
- *Watch how others do it:* Go to a gathering and listen to others relate.

*** Plan for rejection.** Everyone gets rejected at times. It is a normal part of life. Let go of that person and move on to someone else who might be available.

*** Practice in advance, if possible.** Therapy may be a safe place to rehearse.

(cont.)

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- * **Choose safe people.** Select people who are friendly and supportive.
- * **Know that it's normal to make mistakes along the way.** It will feel uncomfortable to reach out to others at first. Allow yourself room to grow—it will get easier over time.
- * **Set goals.** Keep yourself moving forward by making a clear plan, just as you would in other areas of your life. Decide to make one social call a week, or try one new meeting a week.
- * **Recognize that you may feel very "young."** Parts of you may feel vulnerable, like a child who is just learning how to relate to people. That is expected, as parts of you may not have had a chance to develop due to PTSD or substance abuse.
- * **Start small.** Start with a simple event (e.g., saying hello or smiling) rather than a huge one (e.g., asking someone out on a date).
- * **Notice what you have in common rather than how you are different.** Work hard to see your similarities with others; this can make it easier to connect.

ROLE PLAYS FOR SAYING "YES"

- ★ *Try rehearsing the following situations out loud.*

With Others

- You talk about your impulse to hurt yourself *before* doing it.
- You ask someone at work to go to lunch.
- You tell your therapist you missed her when she was away on vacation.
- You call your sponsor when you feel like drinking.
- You tell someone, "I love you."
- You tell someone how alone you feel.
- You admit a weakness to someone.
- You talk to your friend honestly about your anger at him.
- It is 4:00 A.M. and you are so depressed you can't sleep. Whom can you call?
- The weekend is coming and you have no plans with anyone. What can you do?

With Yourself

- You feel scared; how can you soothe yourself?
- You have worked hard; how can you give yourself a safe treat?
- Part of you ("the child within") feels hurt. How can you talk to that part?
- You are angry at yourself for failing a test. How can you forgive yourself?

Getting Out of Abusive Relationships

★ Are you in any relationship right now in which someone:

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Offers you substances or uses in your presence after you've asked the person not to? | Yes | No |
| 2. Repeatedly criticizes you, invalidates your feelings, or humiliates you? | Yes | No |
| 3. Manipulates you (e.g., threatens to harm your children)? | Yes | No |
| 4. Is physically hurting you or threatening to? | Yes | No |
| 5. Discourages you from getting help (e.g., medication, therapy, AA)? | Yes | No |
| 6. Lies to you repeatedly? | Yes | No |
| 7. Betrays your trust (e.g., tells your secrets to others)? | Yes | No |
| 8. Makes unreasonable requests (e.g., demands that you pay for everything)? | Yes | No |
| 9. Exploits you (e.g., sells pornographic pictures of you)? | Yes | No |
| 10. Ignores your physical needs (e.g., refuses safe sex)? | Yes | No |
| 11. Is controlling and overinvolved (e.g., tells you what to do)? | Yes | No |

If you said "Yes" to any of the questions above, read the rest of this handout. You deserve better than destructive people!

HOW TO DETACH FROM DAMAGING RELATIONSHIPS

If you have difficulty with boundaries, you may not notice dangerous cues in others. This makes sense if you lived in a past in which a veil of silence was imposed, you were not allowed to express your feelings, or you could not tell others about your trauma. You may need to make special efforts now to notice your reactions to people and to learn when to end relationships that are hurtful.

‡ **If someone doesn't "get it," give up for now.** In early recovery, don't waste your energy on changing other people; just focus on helping yourself. If someone doesn't understand you after you've tried to communicate directly, kindly, and repeatedly, find other people.

‡ **Even if you cannot leave a damaging relationship, you can still detach from it.** If it is someone you must see (such as a family member), protect yourself by not talking to that person about vulnerable topics, such as your trauma or your recovery.

‡ **If enough reasonable people tell you a relationship is bad, listen to them.** You may feel so confused or controlled that you have lost touch with your own needs. Listen to others.

(cont)

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‡ **It's better to be alone than in a destructive relationship.** It may be that for now, your only safe relationships are with treaters. That's okay.

‡ **Destructive relationships can be as addictive as drugs.** If you cannot stay away from someone you know is bad for you, you may be addicted to that person. Destructive relationships may feel familiar, and you may be drawn to them over and over if your main relationships in life were exploitative. The best strategy is the same as for all addictions: Actively force yourself to stay away, no matter how hard it feels to do so.

‡ **Remember that you are no longer a child, forced to endure bad relationships.** You have choices.

‡ **Recognize the critical urgency of detaching from bad relationships.** They impair your recovery from PTSD and substance abuse. They prevent you from taking care of yourself and others (e.g., children).

‡ **Once you make a decision to leave a damaging relationship, the "how" will present itself.** If you do not know how to leave, it usually means that you have not yet made the decision to leave.

‡ **If you feel guilty, remember that it is your life to live.** You can decide how to live it.

‡ **Expect fallout.** When you leave a bad relationship, others may become angry or dangerous. Find ways to protect yourself, including the support of people "on your side," your treatment team, and a shelter if necessary.

‡ **You do not have to explain yourself to the other person;** you can just leave.

‡ **Create an image to protect yourself.** For example, you are a knight in armor and you don't have to let the person in; you are a TV and you can change the channel.

‡ **Try Co-Dependents Anonymous.** This is a twelve-step group for people who become dependent on damaging relationships (☎ 602-277-7991).

‡ **You should never have to tolerate being physically hurt by anyone.** If you are in a situation of domestic violence, this is very serious and requires expert help. You can call:

☎ National Domestic Violence Hotline

800-799-7233

☎ National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

800-537-2238

‡ **If someone is physically hurting you, don't buy into "I'll be different next time."** If there is a pattern of abuse after you have given someone repeated chances to treat you decently, get out. Listen to the person's actions, not the words.

*** Take care of yourself! ***