



MAKE 'EM STICK



Knowing your boundaries is important, but being ready to enforce them, to let people know they're hitting one (or are about to), is even more important. Unless you enforce your no-zones—early and often—they're like the tree falling in the forest with no one there. It makes no noise. It has no impact. Most of all, it doesn't protect you or the people you care about from over-commitment, exhaustion, confused priorities, frustration, or any of the zillion consequences of saying yes when you really mean no.

So right now, sit up, throw your shoulders back, take a deep breath, and promise yourself, “When I feel someone getting close to a no-zone, I will speak up, say no, and make it stick.”

Zero-in here on the idea of *getting close*. It means not waiting until a boundary is crossed to let someone know they're smack in the middle of a non-negotiable for you. And the faster you point out that no-zone, the easier it is: by the time a boundary's been crashed a few times, the crasher expects to be able to treat you that way. Saying no at that point is harder than it would have been if you just said it the first time they crossed the line. Care enough about your relationship with them to do this, even when it's tough!

Making no stick...

Regardless of whether you're being asked for something you can't deliver without hurting yourself or people you care about, or whether someone's expecting you to compromise about something that matters to you, SPEAK UP. No more suffering in silence or waiting until you're crazed or the situation has gotten out of control.

Okay, beautiful someone, breathe. We'll start slowly with a few tried-and-true basics:

1. Be clear

When you say no, be crystal clear:

- “I’m not comfortable with that.”
- “No thanks.”
- “I won’t be there.”
- “That’s just not my thing.”
- “That’s not what we discussed yesterday.”
- “I would appreciate it if you didn’t do that.”



...etc. in a respectful but clear voice that says you mean it. Lather, rinse, and repeat as needed.

2. Use the “naked no”

Compare what I call a “naked no,” a no without an explanation (a simple “I’m not available” or “I can’t make it” for example) with the TMI version of the same statement: “I won’t be able to go because I have a fitting for the dress I’m wearing to my brother’s wedding.”

In the first case, no means no. Not much to talk about because the naked no doesn’t leave the door open for discussion or give someone information that can be used to take down your boundary.

In the TMI version, you’ve practically invited the person to say, “The fitting’s on Thursday? That’s three days away! You have plenty of time to move the appointment and help me instead!” or “Those appointments are easy to change. All you have to do is call them. They’re very flexible!” or “A fitting? That’s why you can’t make it? Seriously?”

So you can say...

TMI: “I’m not sure, but I think I have a hair appointment that I made like two months ago.”

OR

Naked: “I can’t be there” or “Sorry, I have an appointment then.”

TMI: “Any other day, I would. I just can’t today because I need to leave a little bit early to pick up my son at 4.”

OR

Naked: “I’m not able to help with that.”

TMI: “I don’t really like that kind of event. I went to one once and didn’t have a great time. So I’d just rather not, unless this is somehow different from that other time which, as I said, wasn’t great.”

OR

Naked: “I’d rather not, thanks.”

TMI: “If I don’t get back to work in the next 10 minutes, I’ll never finish my report on time. I already had to get an extension on the deadline because of a problem I had when I got back from my LA trip.”

OR

Naked: “I need to get back to work now.”

Aren’t the naked no’s so strong and confident? There’s just zero wiggle room in a clear and simple, “No thanks.” It’s a conclusion. Doesn’t let anyone in on your thought process or give away personal information or hand someone an opening to question your plans, standards, choices, or anything else.

Whether they realize it or not, information-packed reasons, explanations, and excuses are fuel for boundary crashers on the lookout for anything they can use to poke at or break apart your no. The



more reasons you give, the more of a “conversation” this becomes instead of a conclusion, and the easier it is for them to knock your no right out from under you. Before you know it, there you are, baking the brownies, moving the piano, heading the clean-up committee, or taking on the 16th project.

TMI can also be a sign that you’re insecure about your answer, and you keep talking to try to hide that fact. You believe you can only refuse if a.) you have a solid reason, and b.) the person finds that reason acceptable. Need to decline an invitation? Change a date? Disagree with someone? You don’t have to provide an explanation anywhere near as often you might think. No can just be no—naked, confident, and crystal clear.

And when someone responds to your naked no with: “Well, if you don’t like my idea, you must have a better one. Tell me!” or “If you can’t go, you must have something more important to do. What is it?” take it in stride by remembering the wise words of my incredible friend Tom who finally realized, as he put it, “I don’t need reasons or a better idea to reject someone’s plan. Not liking theirs is enough.”

Start with thanks

Now, before you start thinking that a naked no is an excuse to be blunt or inconsiderate (it isn’t), I have a strategy for you: start with thanks. When a friend invites you to a party you don’t want to go to, thank them: “Thanks for thinking of me,” followed immediately by a version of the naked no: “...but I can’t make it.”

When your cousin asks if you can squeeze her brand new boyfriend into a table at your wedding two days before the \$125-a-plate reception, thank her: “Thanks for asking!” followed by a naked, “but we can’t. Everything’s all set at this point.”

When a coworker wants your help on a project you don’t have time for, thank the person: “Thanks so much for wanting to include me” followed by, “but I don’t have the availability right now,” and then maybe a forward-facing offer: “Let’s work together on something soon, though.”

3. Ditch the disempowering small talk

There’s a special kind of small talk we use when we’re uncomfortable or unsure of ourselves. Listen to the difference between: “I just wanted you to know the meeting is cancelled” and “I wanted you to know the meeting is cancelled.”

And the difference between: “I only have one idea for you” and “I have one idea for you.”

And a favorite of those of us for whom dining alone is meditation, the difference between this answer to “How many people in your party?": “Just one” (an apology laced with embarrassment) and “One” (with a confident smile that says, “I am totally comfortable eating alone, and yes, I have exquisite table manners.”)

In all these cases, ditch a single word—“just” or “only”—and you instantly sound 100 percent more confident.



So in the world of making no-zones stick...

"I just can't do it on Thursday" **becomes** "I can't do it on Thursday" after a deletion makeover.

"I only have time for two appointments after lunch on Monday" **becomes** "I have time for two appointments after lunch on Monday."

And while we're on the topic of disempowering small talk, here are a few more ditchables for you, beautiful someone:

Drop the qualifiers that we too often tag on to the end of sentences out of insecurity: "This is an important idea, don't you think?" or "I can handle that project, I think" or "That's going to be a problem, at least a little bit." Your views have value! Say them—tag-free!

Don't ask for permission to talk or change your mind: "Can I ask a question?" "Would it be okay if I change my order?" or the all-too-common, "I would like to thank John and Jill for making tonight happen" (isn't that exactly what you're doing?). Go with a powerful, "I have a question," "I'm going to change my order," and "Thank you, John and Jill for making tonight happen."

If you can, stay away from phrases like "I believe" or "In my opinion" when you're trying to make an important point, since these can make it seem like you're disqualifying what you're saying as not necessarily credible ("It's just my opinion after all, but..."). Make sure you've done your research, then state your point as the fact that it is:

"I think our house must be worth a little more than they're offering" *becomes* "Our house is worth 15% more than they're offering. I've looked at recent sales in our town."

...from your opinion to a solid, provable fact.

Boom shakalaka.

4. Just SAY it!

It's really tempting to answer a boundary crasher's request with a flimsy "maybe" instead of a clear "no," especially when you're stressed and don't need the additional hassle of letting someone down.

But that ambiguity—that "maybe"—while it makes life easier in the moment, is a short drive to Crazytown because it leaves room for confusion and disappointment and spectacular no-zone crashes. And sometimes it may actually be "maybe," but most times it's not. "Maybe" is a hedge, a way to put off a refusal that might be uncomfortable, but is actually the right thing to do.



Take a look at the difference between strong responses that enforce no-zones and flimsy ones that don't:

Strong: "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not interested."

Flimsy: "Thanks for the offer. I'll think about it." [*When you have no intention of thinking about it. Get ready for another conversation about this offer, whatever it is, because it's coming.*]

Strong: "No thanks."

Flimsy: "Much as I'd like to, I don't think I can." [*Would you really like to? Because you're going to get another invitation soon.*]

Strong: "No thanks."

Flimsy: "Maybe next time." [*Really? Or is this a definite no ad infinitum? Again, expect another invite in the future.*]

Strong: "I never make exceptions to this policy."

Flimsy: "I'm not sure I can make an exception to my policy right now, but I probably can't." [*But maybe you can in the future? They'll ask. And ask.*]

Strong: "I'm sorry. I won't be able to join you."

Flimsy: "You go on ahead. Maybe I'll find you later." [*They'll be looking over their shoulder for you all night and really disappointed when you don't show. Get ready to explain yourself.*]

Strong: "My fee for this work is \$2,500."

Flimsy: "What's your budget?" [*...and if the budget's lower than the fee I should charge, I'll do it anyway! No problem!!*]

Strong: "Wednesday's too soon, but I can have it ready by Friday."

Flimsy: "I think I might be able to finish at some point this week. I can shoot for Wednesday." [*But there's no way you'll make it without killing yourself. Get ready for a disappointed manager, with all the consequences.*]

Can you hear how clear the **Strong** answers sound? I call this "taking the pain up front." If you're not interested or too busy or you just don't want to do something, it's so much better to say no and do it right away. Just saying it and handling someone's brief disappointment is a piece of cake compared to cleaning up the mess you make when you lead them to believe you're thinking about their request when you really aren't. In the wake of the **Flimsy** answers you'll find confusion, bad feelings, unfulfilled expectations, and damaged relationships...oh no, no, no! Take the pain up front and be done!

5. When someone questions your no—be ready ([Video](#))

Flexing your no-zones isn't going to be easy at first, especially if "Yes!" and "Sure thing!" have been your go-tos for a while (maybe forever?). And believe me, the people in your life who are used to



hearing you say, “You bet!” and “Of course I will!” won’t make it easy. They’ll jump back at your first few nos, especially if they’ve known you for a while and been able to depend on you to agree to every request.

You’ll be oh-so-tempted to change your mind because the moment after you say no will be *really* uncomfortable. To add to the pressure, you’ll hear things like, “Wow, *that’s* unexpected! Since when are you too busy to help me?” and “You’ve never said no before” and “Is something wrong? This doesn’t sound like you.”

Be ready: when someone questions your no, keep things simple:

- “No, everything’s fine! That’s just not something I’m interested in, thanks.”
- “So sorry, but I can’t make that a priority in my schedule.”
- “No reason that I really want to talk about right now. I can’t do it.”

...and then, beautiful someone, STOP talking! Remember the naked no, and resist the temptation to cover up your no with a bunch of stuff to soften the blow or ask for the person’s permission to live your life (not theirs).

You’ve said what you needed to say.

The situation’s under control.

You did the right thing to keep everyone healthy and sane (remember if you don’t want to be there, you won’t be doing right by the person or situation).

Your no is a gift to the asker, even if they don’t know it yet. Hand it over with a giant bow on top and leave the person free to move on to another more willing, available, and interested helper.

Just not you.

6. Start small

If you’re just starting out on your no-zone adventure, it’s really helpful to practice on small things, like why you want to return something to a store. When the salesperson asks why (and remember this may be the person just trying to make small talk), keep it simple: “It wasn’t the right purchase.” They may have to know whether anything is wrong with the item, but again, keep it simple and brief: “No, nothing is wrong with it.”

If you need to change a dentist appointment and are asked why (again with the small talk), don’t give information about your schedule like, “Well, I had to take two days off last week when the leak in my pool was being fixed, and if I take one more personal day, I’m in trouble!” Keep it simple: “This time no longer works.” You do not owe—and ironically, most people aren’t really expecting—an explanation for your choices.



Subscriber Exclusive Excerpt

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Try setting mini-boundaries that give you some control and send a message that someone's wish is not your command:

"I can be there at 7, not 6."

"I can lend you \$50 but not \$100."

"I can stay for an hour, but not the whole time."

This lets you keep some control and starts to let people know that you won't just say yes to every request. You'll do a little "editing" to their request first to make sure it accommodates your schedule or budget or any other boundary you have. Don't make it so easy for people to ask and ask. It's time to let the world know: "There's a line with me, and just so you know, your toes are on it."

After practicing on small, low- or no-risk refusals, you'll be ready to handle more challenging situations like staying late at work every Friday, doing a favor that really puts you out, or helping people who never, ever seem to reciprocate.

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