WORKSHEET · PERSON-CENTRED AND SENSORIMOTOR APPROACHES

Boundaries and learning to say no

Understanding why saying no can be so hard, and practising it with kindness

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Why boundaries matter

A boundary is the line between what is okay for you and what is not. Boundaries let us stay connected to other people without losing ourselves. Nedra Glover Tawwab (2021) describes six kinds: physical, sexual, intellectual, emotional, material (your belongings and money) and time.

When we say yes but mean no, we often pay for it later: in tiredness, resentment, feeling taken for granted, or a quiet sense of having abandoned ourselves. Over time, this can contribute to stress and burnout.

Why saying no can feel so hard

- **It may once have kept you safe.** The psychotherapist Pete Walker (2013) described the “fawn” response: alongside fight, flight and freeze, some of us learn to stay safe by pleasing others and keeping the peace. If that was needed in childhood, putting yourself first can feel dangerous now, even when it isn’t.
- **We fear disconnection.** Many of us learned that being loved depended on being helpful or easy to be around. Carl Rogers (1961) called these “conditions of worth”.
- **Our inside and outside don’t match.** Rogers (1961) wrote about congruence: when what we feel inside matches what we say and do. Saying yes while feeling no is a small moment of incongruence, and the body usually notices.

Listening to the body

The body often knows a boundary has been crossed before the mind does: a tight throat, a clenched jaw, a sinking stomach, or the urge to pull back. In Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, noticing these signals, and sensing our boundaries physically, helps us feel steadier and clearer about what we need (Ogden & Fisher, 2015).

Your yes and no hand

> When you say no to someone else, you are saying yes to yourself.

1. Hold one hand up in front of you, palm facing out, as if gently saying “stop”.
2. Imagine the word **NO** written on your palm.
3. Now imagine the word **YES** written on the back of your hand, facing you.
4. Notice: every time your palm says no to someone else, the back of your hand is saying yes to you, to your time, your energy, your needs and your values.
5. Take a slow breath and notice what you feel in your arm, your shoulders, your chest and your belly as you hold this position.

What did you notice in your body?

Think of something you would like to say no to. What would you be saying yes to instead?

Noticing my patterns

Where, or with whom, do I find it hardest to say no?

What happens in my body when I want to say no but hear myself saying yes?

What do I fear might happen if I say no? How likely is it, really?

Where do I think I learned that my needs came second?

Practising no

You don't have to explain or justify a no. Start small, with low-stakes situations, and notice that you get through it. Some ways in:

- "Let me think about it and get back to you."
- "I can't this time, but thank you for asking."
- "That doesn't work for me."
- "I can do this part, but not that part."
- "No, thank you."

A no I would like to practise this week, and what I will say:

Afterwards: what happened, and what did I notice in my body?

Guilt or discomfort after saying no is common, especially at first. It doesn't mean you did something wrong; it often means you did something new.

Go gently. If saying no feels unsafe because of someone's behaviour towards you, please reach out for support. Women's Aid (1800 341 900) and Men's Aid (01 554 3811, weekdays) offer confidential help. This worksheet is for self-reflection and is not a substitute for therapy.

If you are struggling right now: Samaritans 116 123 (free, any time) · Pieta 1800 247 247 or text HELP to 51444 · text HELLO to 50808 · emergency 112 or 999.

Ogden, P., & Fisher, J. (2015). *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: Interventions for Trauma and Attachment*. W. W. Norton.

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Walker, P. (2013). *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*. Azure Coyote.

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