

Respecting 'Yes' and 'No' - guide -

prepared by Root Cuthbertson 2020

Recognising Limits

Limits are common to many natural systems, and are an important feature of regenerative cycles. You may have experienced natural limits in several ways:

- time limits: daylight fading, or a season changing.
- food limits: the last of a food supply being eaten.
- energy limits: falling asleep after a long tiring day; or a flat battery that needs recharging.

When a limited resource runs out it is unlikely to be re-supplied right away. That resource is commonly unavailable for a time, and afterward it may regenerate and become available again later. Typically in nature, after a limit has been reached, there is a period of dormancy, and some time is needed to replenish and revitalize.

We can view humans in a similar way. Most people work with limits on the time, energy, and resources they have available. Limits can include:

- the number of hours in a work day.
- the amount of energy, focus, or capability to generate good ideas or outcomes.
- physical resources like materials and money.
- human resources like goodwill, patience, and skilled labor.

Recognising that humans have natural limits helps us to be more regenerative, as individuals and as groups.

Multiple Priorities

People who have multiple priorities, equally important things to take care of, will often try to budget their limited time, energy, and resources so that each priority gets some. E.g. parents of small children coordinating a daily schedule so that each child - and ideally each parent - gets the time, energy, and resources they need. E.g. Transitioners coordinating a weekly schedule so that several important projects get the time, energy, and resources they need.

Trying to give each priority the same amount of limited time, energy, or resources can lead to problems like 'spreading yourself too thin.' This is when some priorities get a small token amount of time, energy, or resources, but not what they actually need. This is a problem associated with 'multi-tasking,' where each task gets only a fraction of the time, energy, or resources that it needs. 'Multi-taskers' also run the risk of increasing stress, unsatisfactory results, and burnout.

Setting Boundaries

An alternative approach to coordinating multiple priorities is setting boundaries. The idea is to give each priority the full amount of time, energy, or resources that it actually needs. Individuals can set a boundary around limited time, energy, and resources, and 'ring-fence' or 'ear-mark' them, so that they are fully available for that priority. Setting boundaries is a visible expression of the value placed on a priority. When a priority is highly valued, an individual is willing to set aside limited time, energy, and resources for that priority.

This is like saying 'yes' to some things, and 'no' to other things. Saying 'yes' to one thing – such as self-care, or another work priority – can mean saying 'no' to another thing – as small as responding to a text, or as large as contributing to a new project.

When setting boundaries individually, helpful questions include: How much time, willingness, energy, focus, or capability do I actually have to invest in this thing? and how much do I want to reserve for other things?

When communicating with others about setting boundaries try using simple and firm language with a graceful or neutral tone. This may feel uncomfortable at first, and usually gets easier with practice. Try asking for support from a friend, family member, or colleague whose attention may help you to release any strong emotions. This can be beneficial before having a conversation about respecting boundaries with someone who may have ignored them.

Ignoring Boundaries

Someone might ignore a limit or a boundary for many reasons. Typically, these are based on a personal history where respecting limits or boundaries was not encouraged, resulting in beliefs like:

- people in general do not deserve or need boundaries, so neither does any specific individual.
- there will be bad consequences for respecting a limit or a boundary.
- ignoring a boundary or pushing past a limit is somehow valuable or praiseworthy.
- relationships based on respecting boundaries are somehow wrong or unimportant.
- respecting a limit or a boundary involves transactions that are too expensive.
- another priority is so urgent that respecting a boundary would feel shameful or wrong.
- any form of self-care, nourishment, reflection, or integration is either wrong or best kept to a minimum.

Respecting Boundaries: 'yes' and 'no.'

Respecting boundaries is a process of discerning when to say 'yes' or 'no.' This can happen on at least three levels.

Individual level

Individuals who set boundaries for themselves are often reserving time, energy, or resources to support healthy habits like self-care, nourishment, reflection, or integration. Individuals can respect their own boundaries by matching their intentions and their actions, resisting the temptation to change a 'no' to a 'yes.' This can increase self-esteem, a sense of integrity, and reinforce an individual's worldview.

Interpersonal level

Individuals can ask friends, family members, or colleagues for support with respecting their boundaries. E.g. If my friend is aware of a personal boundary of mine and how it may serve me, they will be more likely to respect my boundary if I say 'no' to them. They may also encourage me to respect my own boundaries when I am struggling with temptation. This can increase understanding, compassion, care for each other's well-being, and strengthen relationships.

Group level

Groups can help respect both individual boundaries and those that affect the entire group. Many groups make agreements about appropriate conduct, often making a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts.' Respecting these agreements is similar to respecting individual boundaries. Groups can agree to respect individual boundaries that encourage well-being and result in increased energy, focus, or capability that can be shared with the group.

Ideally, we are Transitioning toward a culture that encourages well-being and respects boundaries by trusting people to discern among multiple priorities. When someone says 'yes,' their time, energy, and resources will be fully available. And when someone says 'no,' they will receive support and understanding, since they are reserving time, energy, and resources for another equally important priority.

Because this kind of Inner Transition can involve disrupting behaviour habits or patterns, it can feel uncomfortable at first. Try allowing those who may be unused to setting or respecting boundaries some time to practice -- not getting it quite right and trying again. Patience, kindness, and compassion often help.

Ideally, setting and respecting boundaries will be a compassionate process, for individuals and for groups. Setting a boundary shows compassion by recognising it as valuable and important: well-being, effectiveness, empowerment, and the capacity to continue working long-term.

Activity: Invitation

With a partner, practice saying 'yes' and 'no.' Use a timer so you each get equal time, and swap roles so each partner can try both.

Listen as your partner invites you to join them for a real or imaginary activity or project. Say 'yes' to the invitation. With your partner's help, write down a list of all the things you will say 'no' to as a result.

Repeat with another invitation, and say 'no' this time. With your partner's help, write down a list of all the things you will say 'yes' to as a result.

Later, reflect on your lists. Would you make any changes?

Activity: To Do or Not To Do

On a piece of paper (8.5x11 in, 21x28 cm, or A4) draw a line in the center to make two columns. In one column list all the things you will actually say 'yes' to and do TODAY. Do not include anything you will actually do tomorrow, or anything you 'mean to do' or 'should do.' In the other column list all the things that you will *not* say 'yes' to or do TODAY. Include things that other people will do, or anything you'd like to give your attention but actually won't. These can be marvelous, wonderful, or important things that are simply someone else's responsibility for TODAY.

Activity: Identifying Boundaries

(adapted from "Building Better Boundaries" by Self Help Alliance 2010)

Complete the following sentences with at least 10 examples.

1. I have the right to ask for ...

(Examples: ...Time for self-care; More information before saying 'yes'; Support.)

2. To protect my time and energy, it is ok to ...

(Examples: ...Change my mind; Turn off my phone; Say 'No'.)

3. People may not ...

(Examples: ...Humiliate me in front of others; Disrespect or mistreat me; Go through my things without permission.)

Activity: Setting Boundaries

(adapted from “Building Better Boundaries” by Self Help Alliance 2010)

Practice setting boundaries in each of the following situations. Say 'no' using simple and direct language. Do not defend, debate, or over-explain yourself; be firm, gracious, and direct. You may reinforce your boundary by listing actions or consequences. Imagine some resistance, and repeat your statement or request. Stay strong and avoid giving in, which may lead to your boundary being ignored.

- Receiving a personal phone call at work.
- Declining an extra volunteer commitment.
- Confronting a colleague who expects you to be available for work in the evenings.
- Confronting a critical micro-aggression about appearance, race, weight, or preference.
- Giving yourself more time to make a difficult decision.
- Postponing or rescheduling a prior commitment.
- A request from a colleague to re-allocate resources to their project.
- An invitation to push your limits and try something outside your comfort zone.
- Confronting a friend who does not ask about your overwhelm, and assumes you can listen to how overwhelmed they are.

Related resources

Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience
Self-Care Guides x6
Burnout to Balance - Doing & Being
[Group and Personal Sustainability](#)
[Action-Reflection Cycle](#)
Task-Process-Relationship
[Offering and Receiving Feedback](#)

References

Selva, Joaquin. “How to Set Healthy Boundaries.” 2020
<https://positivepsychology.com/great-self-care-setting-healthy-boundaries/>
The Self Help Alliance. “Building Better Boundaries.” 2010
<https://cloudfront.ualberta.ca/-/media/medicine/departments/anesthesiology/documents/workbookbuilding-better-boundariesfeb2011.pdf>
“Setting Healthy Personal Boundaries”
http://www.recoveryeducationnetwork.org/uploads/9/6/6/3/96633012/boundary_setting_tips_1.pdf