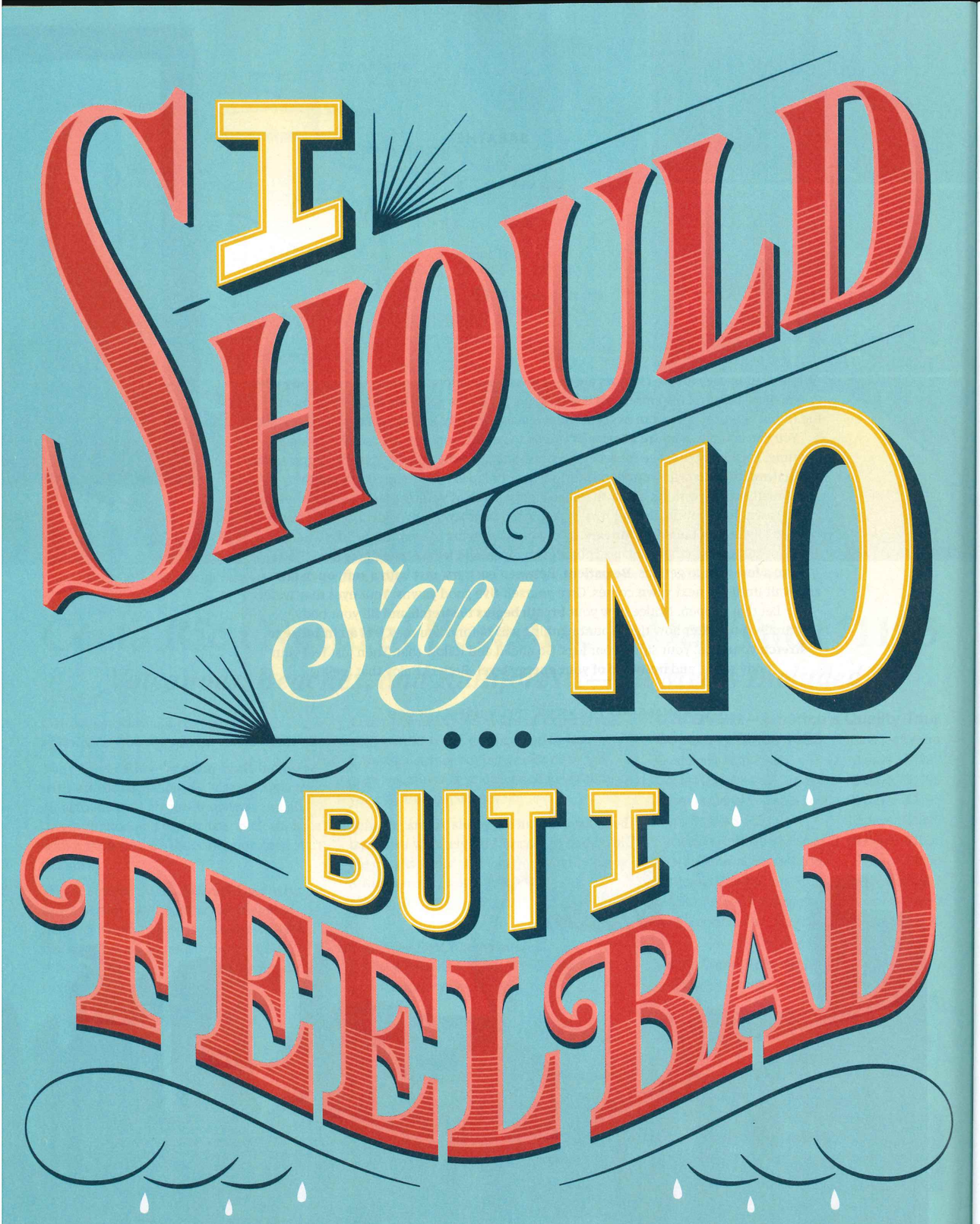


THIS IS THE YEAR TO GET BETTER AT SAYING

NO

It's rarely easy, and it's not always popular, but it's necessary for your sanity—not to mention your overpacked schedule. Do you need help? Yes? Here it is.

Written by Jennifer King Lindley
Illustrations by Jessica Hische

A REQUEST TO HOST the swim-team party. Coffee with a young colleague who wants to "pick your brain." Drinks with the new neighbors. Every day, we are peppered with requests—for our help, for our time, for a caterer's quantity of our famous meatballs. They fill our brimming in-boxes and arrive through our bleating phones, and our usually knee-jerk response to the deluge? *Yes! Yes! You got it! Yes!*

Of course, there's much to be said for saying yes. We want to help friends in need, to put ourselves out there. (Television producer Shonda Rhimes's 2015 best seller, *Year of Yes*, was a celebration of this open-arms approach to life.) But too often we agree without thinking, take on way too much, or, when cornered by a coworker in the break room, say yes only because it feels too awkward to refuse. The result is that too many of us have serious yes hangovers. We now dread hosting the potluck *(What was I thinking?)* or become exhausted meeting everyone else's needs. "We all have limited resources," says Sheila Heen, a coauthor of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, who teaches negotiation at Harvard Law School. "That means that every time you say yes to something, you are automatically saying no to something else." And it's not hard to guess what that is: most likely, time with your loved ones or time for yourself.

The solution, say experts, is to master the delicate art of declining. Let this be your guide: how to—at last!—set boundaries and rebuff those nonessential, burdensome requests that we all field daily. Then you will have room in your no-longer-maxed-out life for what's really important.

WHY SAYING NO IS HARD

It's such a little word, but wow is it tough to choke out in certain moments. "We have an instinctive need for connection to other people—it's essential to our survival. We worry that saying no will break these bonds," says Vanessa Bohns, Ph.D., a professor of organizational behavior at Cornell University. Specifically, we fear that the other person, whether a child or a coworker, will feel rejected or take it as a personal affront. "Saying no stirs up intensely negative emotions—embarrassment and guilt," says Bohns. To avoid those feelings, we often say yes even when it goes against our ethics. In one of Bohns's studies, published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, more than half the subjects agreed to deface a library book (by writing the word *pickle* in pen) when asked to by an interviewer in the library. "The subjects voiced objections like 'It's not right to hurt property' but complied anyway, because saying no to another person felt so difficult," says Bohns.

Also at stake: our own self-image. "We all have identity stories we tell ourselves. 'I'm someone who lends a hand.' 'I'm a very involved mom,'" says Heen. Refusing a request calls this rosy bio into question. And women—who, it seems, are called on more often than men to pitch in—seem to have a harder time saying no. "We are socialized to feel responsible for the feelings and well-being of those around us," says Julie de Azevedo Hanks, Ph.D., a licensed clinical social worker in Salt Lake City and the author of *The Assertiveness Guide for Women*.

So you say yes. To too much. And while that approach may help you avoid immediate discomfort, there's a long-term toll. Instead of protecting relationships, it can build resentment. *(Is she just using me as a free babysitting service?)* It's also a major source of burnout. "I see lots of women who come in depressed, anxious, and depleted," says Barbara Greenberg, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Fairfield County, Connecticut. Block out regular time on your calendar for the things that sustain you—exercising, meditating, talking to your sister—and stick to those commitments. If someone asks you to post bake-sale flyers during that time: Sorry, you're already booked.

"I tell clients, 'Pay yourself first.' Self-care is what allows you to show up and say your yeses later," says Melissa McCreery, Ph.D., a psychologist and the founder of toomuchon herplate.com. Decide on your priorities and make them Official Personal Policies. *I'm out only two nights a week so I can eat dinner with my kids.* Or, *I budget for these five charities, so I can't give to other pledge drives this year.* Write them down and post them where you field requests (by your computer perhaps), says Maralee McKee, an etiquette coach in Orlando and the founder of mannersmentor.com.

Still lying awake at 3 A.M. imagining your book club assembling with pitchforks because you declined to host? Know this: "Humans have a harshness bias. We believe others judge us a lot more critically than they actually do," says Bohns. "Most people have completely forgotten about your answer and have moved on to ask someone else," says Susan Newman, Ph.D., a social psychologist and the author of *The Book of No*.

HOW TO DO IT WELL: A CHEAT SHEET

The goal is to convey two things: *I can't accommodate that request and I still value this relationship.* These seven tips will help you master a good no.

1
START SMALL

If you are a people-pleaser by nature, practice in low-stakes settings, suggests psychologist Melissa McCreery. Set a goal that you are going to say no three times a day. *No, I don't want to apply for your store credit card.* "Like any skill, it gets easier with practice," she says.

2
HAVE A GO-TO PHRASE

A rehearsed script can head off panic when you are put on the spot. "Thank you so much for thinking of me. I'm sorry, but I have other commitments then, so I'm not available" will dispatch many of the requests thrown your way.

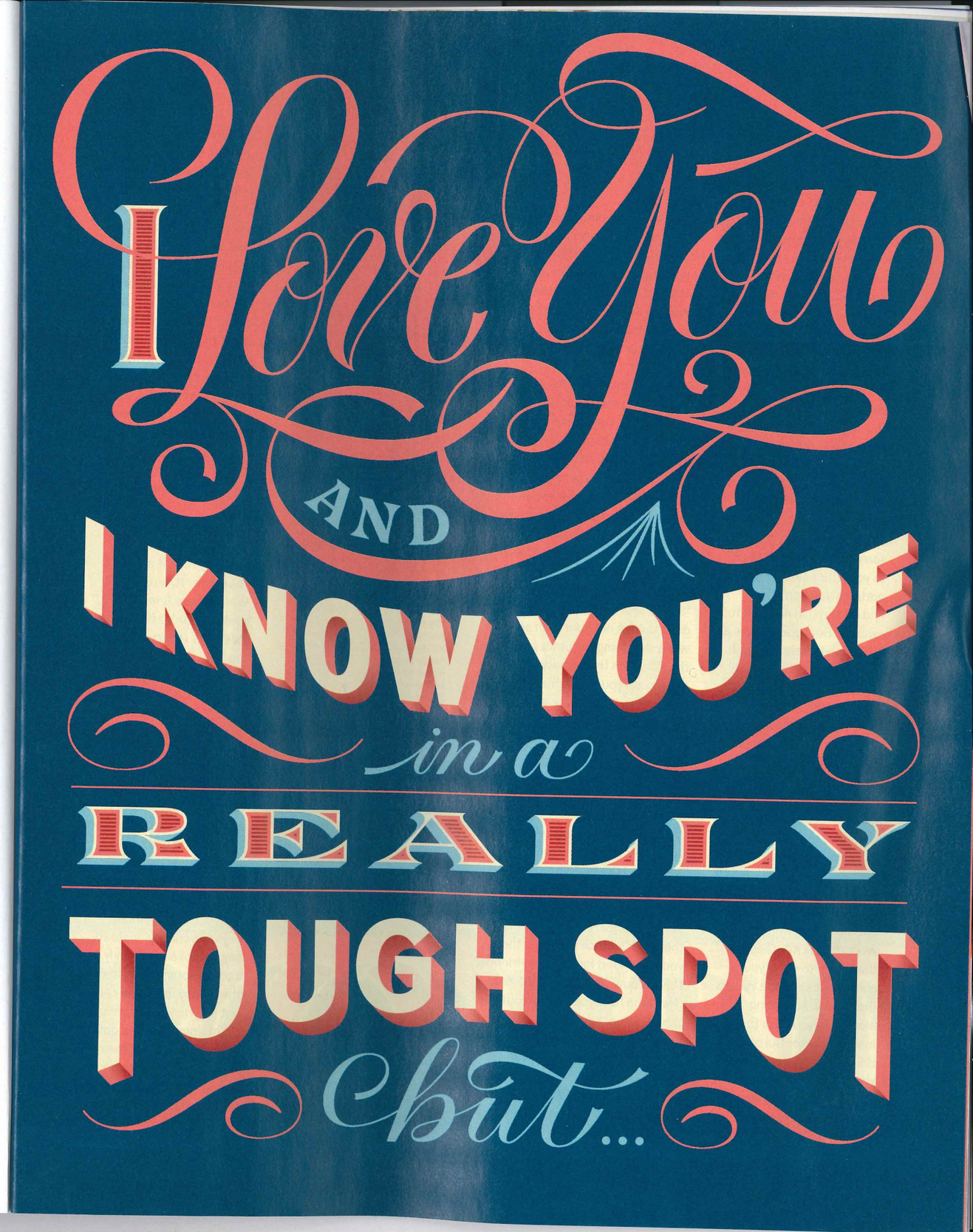
PRACTICAL ADVICE

Chances are, you'll find common ground—and useful lessons—in the following scenarios from *Real Simple* readers and staff.

My friend constantly sends me invitations and e-mails for a product line that she sells from home. I feel so much pressure to buy, and I want to help her, but I don't want to be guilted into spending money on stuff I don't want.

WHY IT'S HARD: These pitches rely on the fact that it's difficult to refuse friends and family. Her relentless drumbeat adds to the pressure: "If someone says no to a first request, research shows that person is more likely to say yes to a second out of guilt," says Bohns.

HOW TO SAY NO: Be supportive but direct. "I'm so glad you've found a passion you can use your great skills in!" suggests Hanks. "But I'm just not interested in buying any candles right now." Humor can help. Maybe, "I have enough candles for the rest of my life even if the power went out forever." End it there or, if you're close, offer to support her in a way that doesn't involve your credit card: "I'm happy to help you set up for your open house." If her invitations keep flowing, ignore them. You are not obligated to keep answering, says McKee.



I work part-time and volunteer at my child's school when I can. One parent asked me to take on a weekly job that would suck up my only free day. Instead of saying no, I've ignored her e-mails. I see her at school, and I hide.

WHY IT'S HARD: Ignoring a difficult request can seem like the path of least resistance. But it's ineffective and impolite to leave people guessing, says McKee. Over time, this tack can be more anxiety-producing for you than being direct.

HOW TO SAY NO: Send an apologetic e-mail. "I'm so sorry that I never got back to you. This year has totally gotten away from me, and I realize I'm not able to swing it. But I could make a little time to help with publicity next month." She will probably be sympathetic—everyone can relate to being overwhelmed—and you won't have to spend the Spring Sing hiding behind your program.

We have couple friends whom we enjoy seeing but don't feel super close to. Yet they are always asking us to drinks and dinner. We need to take a break without hurting their feelings.

WHY IT'S HARD: Clearly they seem to value your company more than you do theirs. Still, accepting more than you wish to will make you resentful of the time you do spend together.

HOW TO SAY NO: Resist the urge to let them down gently by being vague. "With a 'That sounds fun...maybe' you give the other person false hope, and it just puts you in the position of having to have more conversations," says McKee. Again, be direct but kind: "We love seeing you, but the next few months are so busy for us. Can we check in with you in early March?"

My boss wants me to take on a new project. My plate is full. I know that I'll be spread too thin to do a good job. But I am afraid that if I say no, she won't think I'm a team player.

WHY IT'S HARD: Your boss wields power over your annual review, your salary, and your career trajectory. "But if you say yes to everything, your work may suffer," says Newman.

HOW TO SAY NO: This is not your problem to solve alone, says Heen: "Say to your boss, 'I would love to do it, but I'm not sure I can add this while still giving my other projects the attention they deserve. I would appreciate your thoughts on how to prioritize.'" That way, allotting your time becomes a mutual yes or no.

My sister is going through a divorce and asked to move in with us until she can get back on her feet. My own marriage is strained, and having her in the house would ratchet up the pressure even more.

WHY IT'S HARD: It's hardest to refuse those we are closest to. "But think of your priorities as concentric circles. In the center is you, then your spouse and kids, then your extended family, then friends, then acquaintances," says Hanks. "Reframe how you think about the decision. You are saying no to save your marriage, not because you are a bad sister."

HOW TO SAY NO: First, be empathetic. "What people most want is to feel understood," says Hanks. Say, "I love you, and I know you're in a tough spot." Briefly let her know why it wouldn't work to have her stay with you now. Then pivot to offer some other kind of support. Can you help her apartment hunt for something reasonable? Buy her groceries for a while? If she comes back with "You're my sister! You would if you loved me!" repeat your position as calmly as you can. Don't get caught up in the emotional maelstrom. "You have set your boundary, and now she is manipulating you," says Hanks.

My teenage son is embarrassed by our old car. One day he got a little teary over it, and I said I would trade it in. I now realize I can't afford that.

WHY IT'S HARD: Even if we are able to say a stalwart no to the rest of the planet, we wither at disappointing our kids. "It hurts to see them upset," says Greenberg. "But by being so sensitive to their grievances, we miss out on opportunities to teach them resilience."

HOW TO SAY NO: "I tell parents of teenagers not to use the word *no* directly—it shuts down conversation," tricky at this age under the best of circumstances, says Greenberg. Instead, say, "I spoke too quickly, and I'm sorry. I don't have the money for a new car, but maybe we can get a slight upgrade if you get a job to help with payments." That teaches independence—even better (really) than that new-car smell. ■

3 TAKE A PAUSE

Some decisions are easy. *Yes:* Watching a friend's kid during a family emergency. *No:* Pet-sitting the neighbor's corn snake. On the fence? "It's OK to say you'll get back to someone and take 24 hours," says etiquette coach Maralee McKee.

4 TRY "YES, NO, YES"

Negotiation expert Sheila Heen recommends sandwiching the no: **Yes** to the relationship *(Tim is such a fun kid!)*; **no** to the request *(I'm sorry we can't host him all weekend while you're away)*; and then **yes** to something that you can offer instead *(I'm happy to give him a ride to hockey on Sunday, if that helps).*

5 SAY "I DON'T," NOT "I CAN'T"

It's a simple shift, but it suggests that your refusal is based on your strongly held position and is nothing personal. *I have a policy that I don't lend money to friends.*

6 KEEP IT BRIEF

"Long answers give the asker more loopholes to come back at you," says social psychologist Susan Newman. "Your brother can say, 'If you can't help me move on Saturday because of your hair appointment, let's do it Sunday!'" After you've said no—this is crucial—don't start waffling. *(Are you OK about this? Ask me again if you can't find anyone else.)*

7 DON'T WHITE-LIE

We often think that we're protecting people's feelings by concocting an excuse. *(I would love to come to your party, but my in-laws are in town.)* "There's no need to be that specific. And because you lied, you now *do* have something to feel guilty about," says Heen. Plus, you set yourself up to have to lie again. *(How was that visit?)* It's likely, in our Instagram age, that you'll be busted anyway.