

## 21 Tips to Stop Being a People-Pleaser

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Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.

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People-pleasers “want everyone around them to be happy and they will do whatever is asked of them to” keep it that way, according to [Susan Newman, Ph.D](#), a New Jersey-based social psychologist and author of [The Book of No: 250 Ways to Say It—And Mean It and Stop People-Pleasing Forever](#).

“They put everyone else before themselves,” she said. For some, saying “yes” is a habit; for others, “it’s almost an addiction that makes them feel like they need to be needed.” This makes them feel important and like they’re “contributing to someone else’s life.”

People-pleasers yearn for outside validation. Their “personal feeling of security and self-confidence is based on getting the approval of others,” said [Linda Tillman, Ph.D](#), a clinical psychologist in Atlanta, GA and assertiveness expert. Thus, at the core, people-pleasers lack confidence, she said.

They worry how others will view them when they say no. “People don’t want to be seen as lazy, uncaring, selfish or totally egocentric,” Newman said. They fear “they’ll be disliked and cut from the group,” whether it’s friends, family or co-workers.

What many people-pleasers don’t realize is that people-pleasing can have serious risks. Not only does it put a lot of pressure and stress on you, Newman said, but “essentially you can make yourself sick from doing too much.” If you’re overcommitted, you probably get less sleep and get more

anxious and upset. You're also "depleting your energy resources." "In the worst case scenario, you'll wake up and find yourself depressed, because you're on such overload because you possibly can't do it all," she said.

Here's a slew of strategies to help you stop being a people-pleaser and finally say no.

### **1. Realize you have a choice.**

People-pleasers often feel like they have to say yes when someone asks for their help. Remember that you always have a choice to say no, Newman said.

### **2. Set your priorities.**

Knowing your priorities and values helps you put the brakes on people-pleasing. You know when you feel comfortable saying no or saying yes. Ask yourself, "What are the most important things to me?" Newman suggested.

### **3. Stall.**

Whenever someone asks you for a favor, it's perfectly OK to say that you'll need to think about it. This gives you the opportunity to consider if you can commit to helping them. (Also important is to ask the person for details about the commitment.)

Newman suggested asking yourself: "How stressful is this going to be? Do I have the time to do this? What am I going to give up? How pressured am I going to feel? Am I going to be upset with this person who's asking?"

Asking yourself these questions is key because, as Newman said, very often after you've said yes or helped out, you're left wondering, "What was I thinking?" I neither have the time nor the expertise to help out.

If the person needs an answer right away, "your automatic answer can be no," Newman said. That's because "Once you say yes, you're stuck." By saying no automatically, "you leave yourself an option" to say yes later if you've realized that you're available. And "you've also gotten it off your must-do or don't-want to do list."

### **4. Set a time limit.**

If you do agree to help out, "limit your time frame," Newman said. Let the person know that "I'm only available from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.," for example.

### **5. Consider if you're being manipulated.**

Sometimes, people are clearly taking advantage of you, so it's important to watch out for manipulators and flatterers, Newman said. How do you spot them? She said, "Often the people who flatter you will say [statements like], 'Oh you're so good at baking cakes, would you make a cake for my child's birthday?' or 'I don't know how to put this bookcase together, but you're so handy, can you help me out?'"

A classic line is "Nobody does this better than you do," she said. Also, these people "will either coax you into doing something or try to tell you what your availability is or what your time frame is." Basically, before you know it, they make the decision for you.

#### **6. Create a mantra.**

Figure out a mantra you can say to yourself to stop you from people-pleasing. It can even be a visual as simple as a big "No" flashing when a certain friend who "can always talk you into something" approaches you, Newman said.

#### **7. Say no with conviction.**

"The first no to anyone is always the hardest," Newman said. But once you get over that first bump, "you will be well on your way to getting off the yes treadmill." Also, remember that you're saying no for good reasons. "You get time for yourself and for the people you really want to help," she said.

#### **8. Use an empathic assertion.**

Some people initially think that being assertive means "stepping all over people," Tillman said. Instead, she explained that "assertiveness is really about connection."

Using an empathic assertion "means that you put yourself in the other person's shoes as you assert yourself," Tillman said. So you let the person know that you understand where they're coming from, but unfortunately, you can't help. "People need to feel heard and understood," and this is a respectful way of asserting yourself and saying no.

#### **9. Consider if it's worth it.**

When asserting yourself, Tillman suggested asking yourself, "Is it really worth it?" It's probably not worth it to tell your boss about his annoying habit, but it is worth it to tell your friend that you can't do lunch because you're super busy.

#### **10. Don't give a litany of excuses.**

It's tempting to want to defend your decision to say no to someone so they understand your reasoning. But this actually backfires. According to Newman, "As soon as you start explaining, you give the other person lots of wiggle room to come back and say, 'Oh, you can do that later,' 'You can adjust your schedule' or 'That's not as important as what I'm asking.'"

### **11. Start small.**

"Everything we learn how to do we learn through a process," so take baby steps, Tillman said. Instead of barging into your boss's office to ask for a raise, talk with your immediate supervisor first about how to prepare yourself for the talk, she said.

### **12. Practice successive approximation.**

Successive approximation means taking "one step in the direction you want to go" and rewarding yourself for getting that far, Tillman said. If your neighbor's dog's barking is driving you crazy, make efforts to confront the person by first saying "Good morning," as you're both leaving the house, she said. Another time, you might mention how noisy the neighborhood has been. If he doesn't get the hint, you can knock on his door and use an empathic assertion.

It can help to write down "how you get from A to Z," Tillman said. This also helps you gain courage to confront the person, she added.

### **13. Don't apologize — if it's not your fault.**

People-pleasers tend to be serial apologists, Tillman said. Pay attention to when you're apologizing and consider if you're really at fault. Ask yourself if you're responsible for the situation, she said. Usually, the answer is no.

### **14. Remember that saying no has its benefits.**

As Newman said, "you as a person are entitled to your time and you need to rest and rejuvenate to be there for the people you want to help out." Look at saying no as an opportunity to spend your time doing what you value in your life.

### **15. Set clear boundaries — and follow through.**

"We all have physical or emotional limits," Newman said, and because of these limits, we have to set boundaries. Ask yourself what you're willing to do, and don't go beyond these limits. Also, be clear in communicating your boundaries. Say what you're thinking and what you want.

Letting someone step over your boundaries without voicing your frustrations can lead you to “bottle up this negative feeling about a person...to the point when you have a blowup and really hurt someone’s feelings or end the relationship” completely,” she said.

For instance, you might “have a friend who’s just so emotionally needy and negative that she calls you all the time with her problems and wants you to listen,” Newman said. But “even just listening is asking a favor...[and] every time you hang out, you’re miserable and she feels better.” Respect your boundaries, and at some point, say to her, “I can’t help you,” Newman said.

There also are subtle ways to respect your boundaries. You might “start taking every other call and wean yourself off of her.” You can do the same thing with a person who calls you at your busiest time of day. You might say, “I can’t be available for you at 2:30 because I’m at the office; let’s set up a particular time to talk,” she said. When setting up the time, offer one that works best for you.

Setting physical boundaries might mean telling a person that they can’t just pop over when they want to or borrow your things without asking, she said.

#### **16. Don’t be scared of the fallout.**

People-pleasers often worry that after they say no, the fallout will be catastrophic. But as Newman said, “the fallout is never as bad as we think it is.” In fact, “it’s usually very insignificant.” Why? For starters, “people are not thinking about you as much as you think.” Usually after you say no, a person is more focused on who they’ll be asking next to help them than your so-called betrayal, she said.

Even a significant request such as being the maid of honor at your friend’s wedding isn’t disastrous. Being the maid of honor “takes a lot of time, energy and money,” which you may not have. You saying that “I’m really honored and this means so much to me, but I won’t be able to do it,” “isn’t going to ruin the wedding,” Newman said. “If you have a solid friendship, this isn’t going to end it.”

#### **17. Consider who you want to have your time.**

Newman suggested asking yourself, “Who do I really want to help?” As she put it, “Do you want to be there for your parents or some friend from college who lived down the hall who you partied with a lot who’s back in your life and really demanding?”

#### **18. Self-soothe.**

Using positive self-talk is “like being a good mother to yourself,” Tillman said. You can use this to remind yourself of your priorities and boundaries. For instance, you might say “I can do this,” “I have the right to park in this parking spot,” “I made the decision that’s right for me” or “My values are more important than saying yes in this situation.”

### **19. Recognize when you’ve been successful.**

Many people-pleasers tend to focus on what went wrong, Tillman said. Counteract this tendency by keeping a journal with the times you handled a situation well, such as when you were assertive or didn’t apologize. In fact, you might be surprised at “how many more times you’re responding confidently,” she said.

### **20. Keep a confidence file.**

Since a lack of confidence can cause your people-pleasing ways, keep a file with positive and praising emails, cards or anything else, Tillman said. (For instance, Psych Central associate editor Therese Borcard keeps a self-esteem file.) It can even come in handy when asking for that raise. Tillman suggested printing out any emails or letters of praise you’ve received from co-workers or higher-ups and taking them to your boss as another reason why you deserve a raise.

### **21. Realize that you can’t be everything to everyone.**

Again, people-pleasers want to make everyone happy. While you might make someone happy temporarily, Newman said, it doesn’t work long term. And you can get hurt in the process. “People who preserve their time and energy and don’t say yes to everyone also realize that they can’t make other people happy,” she said. People-pleasers must realize that the only thoughts and feelings they can change are their own.