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Overcommitted

He who never says no is no true man. . .
Saint-Exupery

And yes I said yes I will Yes.
James Joyce, *Ulysses*

It's hard to say no.

The problem begins in childhood. At about age two we learn to demonstrate our independence by declaring no, over and over, to no one in particular. But after years of socialization, we learn that negative words are bad. We see that people who say no are stigmatized as uncooperative and aloof. Then there is the knowledge, gained through experience, that to say no is to expect no in return. How do we say no to individuals we respect, or to those who we may have to seek favors from in the future?

It's quite a dilemma.

Without the courage to say no, *maybe* becomes an acceptable choice; offering a glimmer of hope, without making a clear promise.

But things usually don't work out that way.

For those with the knack, a *maybe* can easily be turned into a yes. The special invitations that are accompanied by "only you can. . ." make our ego-stroking colleagues very effective at getting us to say yes. It is also very easy to be unrealistic about the competing demands for our time when invitations are issued far in advance. To avoid the feelings of guilt and the appearance of arrogance, we rationalize "yes" when our whole being is pleading for "no"!

Uninhibited agreement to meet everyone's expectations makes us slaves. We stay late at the office to complete the work, fret over the report that was due last week, and wistfully recall the research article we promised our colleagues. The outcome of saying yes too often is an inability to deliver high quality material, on time, as promised.

Some people relearn how and when to say "no". They have discarded the feelings of guilt usually associated with no and replaced them with an understanding of their physical limitations. Their brash honesty makes them very special people. When they say yes, they mean yes, *no ifs, ands, or buts*.

However, even individuals with great resolve may have difficulty getting to "no". To overcome the problem, it helps to stand in front of a mirror and practice the many variations: the soft, gentle "no"; the clear decisive "no!"; the less decisive but still clear, "I don't think so."; and the long, drawn out "Nooooooooo."

No matter how you say it, no is a word which when regularly used can give us control of two precious commodities: time and reality testing

H. William Strauss
Editor, *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*