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Saying no can be a positive

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By **Judy Mandell, Special for USA TODAY**

Some people seem to have little difficulty saying no — like bosses refusing a bigger raise or actors who won't give interviews unless they have a new movie to promote.

"The rest of us," notes social psychologist Susan Newman, "have difficulty saying no to our children, no to relationships that aren't working, no to our bosses or to the friend who wants to borrow our brand-new car."

As the pace of society quickens, Newman says, there is an epidemic of yes-people, people who try to please everyone. "It often seems easier to say yes or slide along with the status quo," says Newman, author of *The Book of NO: 250 Ways to Say It — and Mean It and Stop People-Pleasing Forever* (McGraw-Hill). "In the long run, it isn't."

Jessica Bacharach was dating a sweetheart of a guy. Even though she wanted to end it — there was just no chemistry — she couldn't.

"Every time I tried to have The Talk, he did something super-cute, like bring me brownies or put together my new Ikea furniture," the New York fashion publicist says. "He kept asking me out, and I kept saying yes." She finally ended it when she met someone else. "I realized I didn't want to settle for anything less than amazing."

Such behavior isn't unusual, psychologists and self-help writers says. Most of us have been programmed to think — and say — yes, sure, no problem, without considering the consequences of what we agree to do. Whether it's kids who beg to stay up late or a relationship that's going nowhere, people often try to accommodate others, saying yes when they really mean no, even if it's to their own disadvantage.

"Most people hate confrontations — and that includes the rudeness and discomfort that comes from saying no to somebody," says Mira Kirshenbaum, psychotherapist and author of *Is He Mr. Right? Everything You Need to Know Before You Commit* (Harmony). "Because of their fear of that short-term unpleasantness, they're willing to subject themselves to years of an unhappy relationship."

Says Newman: "More often than not, yes is uncalled for. While the worry is that someone won't like you or will think of you as uncaring, the reality is, especially in relationships, it's better to have closure so both parties can move on.

"People don't think about you as much as you worry about what they think."

Newman says people view saying no as something negative, and that perception has been ingrained from childhood. "If you said no to sharing your toys as a toddler, you were sent to your room; as you got older and refused a parental rule or direction, you had privileges taken away. These early experiences translate into concrete fears of saying no."

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And men say they have the same problem.

W. Thomas Smith Jr., 47, a divorced journalist and military expert in Columbia, S.C., believes women are "simply more complex" when it comes to conflict and men have never developed the skills to engage them properly.

"It's men who are terrified of giving women bad news," Smith says. "A woman's reaction is rarely predictable to a man."

Says April Masini, author of *Think & Date Like a Man* (iUniverse): "Men are different from women, and that's the bottom line. They have different needs and ways of expressing themselves. If a man doesn't call, he's not interested in making the time to call." But a woman "will spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out all the reasons he hasn't called, rather than just ... moving on."

Newman says parents also can't say no to their kids today.

The pressure to raise "star" children is high, and when combined with parents' own work, family and community pressures, the word "no" seems to be extinct in parenting by the time a child reaches his or her fifth birthday.

"Parents say yes because they have e-mail to check, the Internet to search, phone calls to return, or another child to drive to another scheduled activity that will look good on his or her college application," she says.

Lisa Jacobson, CEO of Inspirica, a test preparation and tutoring firm, believes today's baby boomers want to do everything possible to help their children achieve.

"Subconsciously, most of what we do is about helping our kids ultimately get accepted into a 'good' college," Jacobson says. Parents see ways they can help their kids get an edge, so they do, she adds: "Most parents truly want their children to be happy and think this is the way they will be happy."

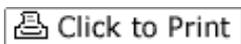
It may take work to learn to stop saying yes when you don't mean it, but Masini says it can be done.

"The first step is to realize when you're doing it — and sometimes the step before that is to realize you don't feel good when you say yes when you mean no," she says.

Once you're conscious of it, "you can stop."

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