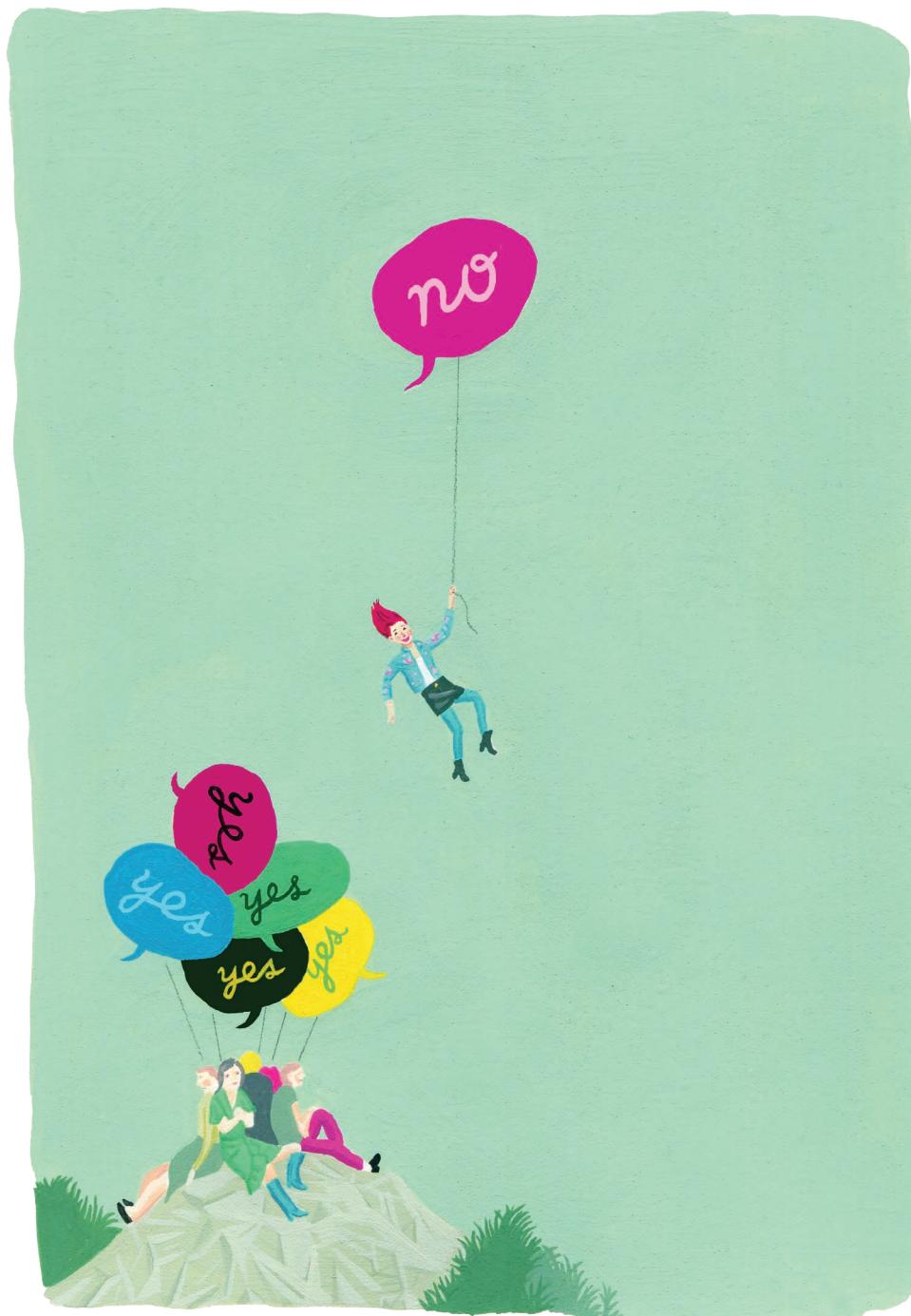


Just Say No

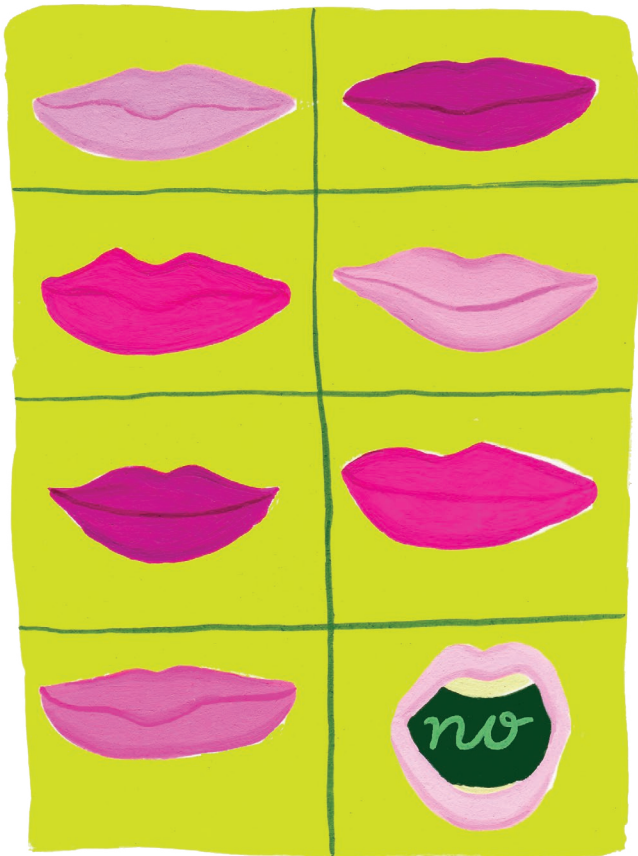
Contrary to popular belief, no is not a four-letter word. Here's what everyone missed about two little letters that can change your life for the better. BY KAITLYN PIRIE



Whether we're asked to volunteer at our kid's school, take on more clients at work or do a favor for a friend, many of us say yes more often than we should. One reason: fear of how others will react if we say no, particularly if they're in a position of power, like a boss or an overbearing sibling. "The anxiety triggered by the request is uncomfortable, and giving in is the quickest way to feel less stressed," says assertiveness researcher C. Albert Bardi, PhD, chair of psychology at The University of the South Sewanee in Tennessee.

Further complicating matters are the built-in rewards for saying yes. We enjoy the prestige of becoming PTA president and the ego-boosting kudos for planning that big fundraiser. "We often don't think about the work we're taking on or the energy it may require. But we do focus on how others see us," says Sarri Gilman, MA, author of *Transform Your Boundaries*. Saying yes seems straightforward when you don't take into account the potential consequences, such as exhaustion and less time with your family. "Once you're aware of the costs, you may realize you can't afford it," says Gilman. Acknowledging to ourselves that we can't do everything is not easy, but the first no we voice is liberating.

Don't get us wrong. In some situations—say, when your boss hands you an extra project—there's more at stake, like your job. You'll need to examine your skills and the expectations of your position to decide whether the task you're being asked to do is an efficient use of your time, says Bardi. Although managing power and politics at work can be tough, assertiveness



benefits both you and your team in the long run.

No helps you regain what yes took away—such as hobbies, relationships and rest. “It shows that you value yourself and your time and enables you to practice self-care,” says Julie de Azevedo Hanks, PhD, author of *The Assertiveness Guide for Women*. The best part? By saying no, you create opportunities to say yes. “Knowing what’s a big YES for you—maybe a daily walk or a regular date night—makes it easier to say no to whatever interferes with your yes,” says Gilman. When you reconnect with the things that bring you joy, you’ll prioritize them.

Saying no also empowers the people around you. It gives everyone—coworkers, friends, spouse, kids—the chance to step up, take responsibility and grow from their experiences. “Plus, when others see you being assertive, they’ll respect you more and put more thought into their requests,”

says Bardi. You may even inspire them to get picky about what they opt in for.

Ultimately, no is a choice, even if it doesn’t seem that way in the moment. You may feel obligated to attend that party or sit on that committee, but you’re doing a disservice to yourself when there’s already too much on your plate. “It’s perfectly okay to turn down an event and stay home to read a book,” says no-pro and etiquette expert Jodi R. R. Smith. “Grant yourself permission to say no and express regret, but you do not need to give a reason.”

Although it may be daunting, we all have the capacity and, most important, the right to say no. You may agonize over it—especially if you’ve said yes your entire life—but the more you embrace no, the better you’ll get at saying it. Let someone else slave over the perfect bake-sale brownies while you enjoy date night and you’ll see what we mean.

TRY THIS!

Prevent conflicts by making your limits known up front. Say something as simple as “After 7 p.m. my phone is off.”

LESS IS MORE.

“State your position and say nothing else,” suggests Bardi. “There is power in silence. You think you’re making the situation better by giving an elaborate excuse, but you’re forcing the other person to pay attention to your no.” Excuses also allow room for negotiation.

How to Say No

“If you can’t say no immediately, don’t say yes,” says Jodi R. R. Smith, author of three etiquette books. Tell the other person that you’ll consider their request but need to sleep on it. Then formulate a solid no in just three steps.

1. Identify your why.

Ask yourself your real reason—be honest—for saying no and write it down. “You don’t need to tell anybody, but it’s important that you know because that’s going to keep you motivated,” says therapist Sarri Gilman.

Try: “I’m not going to do their laundry—they need to learn to do it for themselves.”

2. Choose your words.

Jot down exactly what you plan to say in two sentences or less. “Practice saying it firmly so it has a period at the end, not a question mark,” suggests Smith.

Try: “Thank you so much, but I’m sorry I can’t attend. It was nice of you to include me.”

3. Prepare for pushback.

Some people don’t like taking no for an answer, especially if they’ve become used to you responding with a yes. Stand firm and make clear it’s not negotiable.

Try: “This is still something I’m not taking on.”