A fact sheet about

Saying no without guilt

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Saying no without guilt

Why a fair no can bring guilt, and one thing to try when it does.



Key points

- Guilt after saying no does not mean you did something wrong. For many neurodivergent adults it is a habit learned over years of masking.
- Many people learned to please others to stay safe and fit in. This is sometimes called fawning (definition below).
- A no protects your energy and your rest, and you need both to get through the week.
- When the guilt comes, it may help to name it as the old habit and write down what the no protected.

What people-pleasing and fawning are

A cousin sends a message asking if you can help them move house on Saturday. You had planned a quiet day after a long week, so you write back "Sorry, I can't this time." Then the guilt starts. You read the message again, think about sending a long reason, and keep checking your phone for a reply.

Nothing was wrong, but your body acts as if it was. That feeling often comes from what you learned in the past, not from what you just did.

‘People-pleasing’ means putting what other people want ahead of what you need, often without choosing to. It can look like saying yes before you have had time to think, or saying sorry a lot. It can also mean doing more than your share so that nobody is upset with you.

Some people call this fawning. ‘Fawning’ means giving up your own limits and going along with what others want, to keep yourself safe from their anger or rejection. In one study of autistic adults who were learning to unmask, the researchers described people-pleasing in just this way.

Fawning sits close to masking. ‘Masking’ means hiding or changing how you naturally are so that you fit in. Many neurodivergent adults say they started young, to fit in and to avoid being teased or treated badly. You can read more about what masking is costing you here.

Why a fair no can still bring guilt

If you spent years keeping people happy so that you stayed safe, a no can feel like danger, even when you are safe now. Neurodivergent adults who mask more have more often been hurt by other people in the past. They also face stigma and unfair treatment, and that goes along with poorer mental health. So the habit of pleasing people often grew out of real events, and it made sense at the time.

That is why the guilt can arrive even when your no was fair and kind. It is an old alarm going off, and it does not tell you whether the no was right.

In the study about unmasking, adults said a big part of it was letting go of pleasing people. Some said they kept saying sorry for everything. Many of them were ADHD as well as autistic. One person put the balance like this: "This is what you need, and this is what I need."

A no also protects your energy. Autistic adults say burnout builds when life asks more of you than you have, again and again. Time off and lower expectations, from yourself and from others, helped them recover. So a no to one more thing can leave room for the rest you need. You can read more about preventing the next burnout here.Most of this research is with autistic adults, and there is less yet with ADHD and other neurodivergent people. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may relate to this too.

Research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: name the guilt, then write what the no protected

You do not have to stop feeling guilty before you say no. The guilt and the no can sit side by side.

Next time you say no and the guilt comes, try these three things:

- Tell yourself: "This is the old habit, not a sign I did wrong."
- Write one line about what the no protected, such as rest, a quiet Saturday, time for your interest or energy for the week ahead.
- Leave the no as it is, without adding a long reason or a second sorry.

A no can be short and still kind. It might be "No, but thanks for asking", "I can't this time" or "Not this week, I hope it goes well". You can send it by message if that is easier than saying it out loud.

You can keep your lines about what each no protected in the Understanding Zoe app, and look back on them after a few weeks. You may notice that most people were still there after your no.

For some people, pleasing others still keeps them safe with certain people or in certain places. So when and where you say no is always your call. This advice comes from what neurodivergent adults say helped them, it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. The guilt may keep coming for a while, and that is okay.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether saying no is hard every day or only with certain people. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with guilt, pleasing people and setting limits, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

> You may be afraid of how someone will react when you say no. If so, you can call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732, at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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hello@understandingzoe.com

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