

You could have said no

A short book about agreeing to things you don't want to do,
because a moment of awkwardness feels worse than a lost
weekend

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. Four seconds on the pavement
3. The awkwardness is real
4. What the yes buys
5. The empty Saturday
6. What you think a no will do
7. "It would look like I don't trust them"
8. "But I like helping"
9. What your yes is worth
10. How you became the person they ask
11. "They'd do it for me"
12. The dentist you don't have
13. Getting out of the moment
14. The words
15. The decision
16. Managers, mothers and people who ask three times
17. The pavement again
18. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. Someone asks you to do something. You don't want to do it, and you know that as they're asking. You say yes anyway, because saying no to their face feels impossible for the few seconds it would take. Later you pay for those few seconds with an evening, a weekend or a month of Tuesdays.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the pull towards yes is strong and you're not feeble for feeling it. Researchers have measured it, and it's much stronger than people expect, including the people doing the asking. The second is that the yes buys very little. It buys relief from a discomfort that started when the person opened their mouth, and it's priced in hours. You make the trade because of a forecast about what a no would do to the other person and to their view of you, and that forecast is mostly wrong. The third is practical. Nearly all of the pull lives in the moment of being asked, face to face. You can move your answer out of that moment with one sentence. Chapters 12 to 14 cover how.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't a case for helping less, looking after yourself first or dropping people who need you. Chapter 10 is about the things you don't feel like doing and ought to do anyway. It also isn't a book of clever scripts for winning arguments. The words in chapter 13 are short and dull on purpose.

Four cautions.

The title is about tombolas, spare rooms and committee jobs. It is not about situations where somebody frightened, threatened or forced you. If you went along with something because refusing didn't feel safe, that wasn't this habit and it wasn't your fault. Nothing in this book is addressed to that.

If saying no to your partner, or to someone you live with, leads to threats, punishment or fear, please don't treat that as a problem with your phrasing. The NHS describes domestic abuse as being about power and control, and it says you can speak to your GP. In the UK the freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline is open day and night. In an emergency, ring 999.

If the fear goes well beyond requests, so that ordinary conversations, phone calls or being watched while you do things fill you with dread, that may be social anxiety. It's common and it's treatable, and chapter 15 says where to start.

And if the person asking is your manager, I know that a flat no may not be on offer. Chapter 15 deals with that. Nothing here tells you to risk your job over a rota.

The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Four seconds on the pavement

It's Thursday evening and you're putting the bins out.

The woman from number fourteen is doing the same. You know her to nod to. She waves, comes over, and says the residents' association has its summer fair a week on Saturday and they're short of people. Could you run the tombola? It's eight till four, in the church hall. "You couldn't, could you?" she says, and smiles, and waits.

You know the answer before she's finished. That Saturday is the first one in five weeks with nothing in it. You'd been looking forward to the nothing. You were going to sleep late, read the paper and possibly do something about the garden. What you say is, "Yes, of course. Happy to." It takes about four seconds. She says you're a star and goes back to her bins, and you go back to yours, and for a minute you feel rather good. You've been kind to someone and it's all been pleasant.

A week on Saturday you're in the church hall by eight. There's a trestle table with bubble bath, tinned peaches and a bottle of sherry on it, each with a raffle ticket taped to the side. Tickets ending in a five or a nought win. You explain this about two hundred times. The tea from the urn tastes of the urn. You get home at half past four with sore feet and a jar of chutney, too flat to do anything with the evening. On Sunday you do Saturday's washing and shopping. On Monday you're back at work, and your next free Saturday is three weeks off.

Nothing here is a disaster. The fair is a good thing and someone has to run the tombola. Your neighbour isn't a villain. She asked a fair question and would have been entitled to a fair answer. I'm not going to tell you that you were used.

What I'd like you to look at is one odd fact. Suppose she hadn't caught you at the bins. Suppose a slip of paper had come through the door instead. "Could you run the tombola on Saturday the 14th, eight till four? Please tick yes or no." You'd have ticked no. You might have felt a small pang, but you'd have ticked it and put the slip back through her door without losing any sleep.

It's the same request, from the same person, to the same you, about the same Saturday. On paper the answer is no. On the pavement the answer is yes. Whatever made the difference, it wasn't your wishes, your diary or your feelings about the residents' association. None of those changed. What changed was that a person was standing in front of you, smiling and waiting.

I'll use a few terms all the way through, so here they are. **The moment** is the few seconds between the end of someone's request and the start of your answer. **An unwilling yes** is a yes you'd have ticked as a no on the slip of paper. **A willing yes** is any other kind, and that includes plenty of things you don't feel like doing. You might not fancy driving your brother to the airport at five in the morning, but you'd tick yes on the slip. That's a willing yes, and this book has no quarrel with it.

Unwilling yeses have four features, as far as I can tell. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

They're fast. Hardly anyone deliberates for a minute and then agrees to something they don't want. The yes is out before any thinking has been done.

They're said to a face, or to a voice on the phone. It's rare to give one by letter.

The thing agreed to is in the future, usually more than a few days off.

And the cost arrives when the asker isn't there. She saw you smile and say "happy to". She didn't see you on Sunday with the washing.

Each of those features comes up again later, because each one is part of why the habit works and each one suggests something you can do about it.

Here's something you can do before chapter 2, if you'd like to. Look back through the last month in your diary or your messages. Pick out the things you did because somebody asked. For each one, imagine the request had come on a slip of paper with two boxes. Count how many you'd have ticked no. You're not going to do anything about the number. It's only so you know how much of your month we're discussing.

The awkwardness is real

A book like this could start by telling you that the discomfort of saying no is all in your head and you should get over it. I'm not going to say that, because it isn't true. The pull towards yes is one of the better-measured things in social psychology, and it's a good deal stronger than most people would guess.

Here's the study I find most striking. Roseanna Sommers and Vanessa Bohns brought people into a laboratory one at a time, and an experimenter made an outrageous request. Would they unlock their phone and hand it over, so the experimenter could look through it while they waited in another room? A second group of people was only asked to imagine the situation. Most of that second group said a reasonable person would refuse. I expect you'd say so too. I would.

Of the 103 people who were asked for real, 100 unlocked their phones and handed them over.

Afterwards, the people who'd been asked said they had felt less free to refuse than the imaginers thought they would. In a second study the experimenter told people plainly that they had the right to say no. It made no significant difference to how many complied.

Think about what that involved. There was no threat, no reward and no friendship at stake. The experimenter was a stranger they'd never see again. Their messages, photographs and search history were on that phone. They still handed it over, because a person was standing in front of them, had asked politely, and was waiting.

Bohns has run many studies of this kind. In one set, with Mahdi Roghanizad and Amy Xu, students were sent out to ask other students to tell a small lie or to commit a small act of vandalism. Before they went, they predicted how easy it would be to get people to agree. It was easier than they predicted. The researchers' explanation was that the askers failed to see how uncomfortable it is to refuse a suggestion from someone standing in front of you. In an earlier series with Francis Flynn, people who were about to ask strangers for favours underestimated how many would agree by as much as half. The askers were thinking about what a yes would cost the other person. The person being asked was busy feeling what a no would cost.

I take two things from this.

The first is that you're not unusually weak. If nearly every person in a laboratory will hand a stranger their unlocked phone, then agreeing to run a tombola for a neighbour you'll see every week is no defect of character. People do this. The you who'd tick no on the slip of paper is like the group who imagined the request. The you on the pavement is like the group who got it for real. Both are you, and the gap between them is ordinary.

The second is that the pull sits in a particular place. It's in the moment, with a person present. The people who imagined the request felt free to refuse because nobody was standing there. Hold on to that, because the practical half of this book depends on it.

Why is the pull so strong? Here I'm giving you my own reading and not a finding. Conversations run on small expectations. A greeting expects a greeting back, a question expects an answer, and a

request expects a yes. A no breaks the pattern, and the break is felt straight away, in the body, by both people. We've had a long time to get good at staying on the right side of whoever is in front of us, and mostly that's a fine thing. It's why queues work and strangers hold doors. The unwilling yes is what happens when that useful reflex meets a request that costs eight hours.

Underneath the reflex there are real needs, and I won't pretend otherwise. You want to be on good terms with the people around you. You want to be thought kind, and to be kind. You want your street, your office and your family to be places where people help each other. None of that is foolish, and nothing in this book asks you to give it up.

What I'm going to do is ask some narrower questions. What does the unwilling yes buy you, and what does it cost? Is your forecast of what a no would do any good? Does the yes serve those real needs as well as you think? And is there a way to give your answer somewhere other than in those four seconds?

What the yes buys

Go back to the pavement and slow it down.

At one minute to seven you're wheeling a bin and you feel fine. Your neighbour comes over and you still feel fine. She starts to ask, and somewhere around the words "eight till four" a small tension arrives. It sits in the chest or the stomach. It's made of several things at once. There's her hopeful face, the silence that's about to need filling, and a picture of how her face will change if you say the wrong thing. Then you say "Yes, of course" and the tension goes. She beams. You feel good.

So what did the yes buy? It bought the end of that tension. I'd like you to notice that the tension wasn't there at one minute to seven. You weren't walking around with a need that the yes met. The request produced the discomfort, and the yes removed it. At five past seven you're back where you were at one minute to, except that you now owe somebody a Saturday.

I don't want to push this further than it goes. Agreeing to things isn't a drug and I'm not going to dress it up as one. Your neighbour didn't set out to make you uncomfortable, and some of the good feeling afterwards is real. Her thanks are real. The small glow of having been generous is real too, although I'd say you were generous with a Saturday you hadn't looked at yet. But most of what you felt at five past seven was relief. Relief is pleasant, and it's also nothing more than the removal of something unpleasant. It gives you nothing you didn't have ten minutes earlier.

Now the price. The tension would have lasted, at a guess, ten or twenty seconds if you'd said no. There'd have been a moment of awkwardness, a "no worries" from her, a slightly stiff goodbye, and perhaps a few minutes of replaying it as you went back inside. Against that you gave eight hours in a church hall, plus the Sunday that had to absorb Saturday's jobs, plus the rest you didn't get, plus a fortnight of mild dread whenever the fair crossed your mind.

Nobody would make that trade on paper. If a stranger offered to spare you twenty seconds of awkwardness in return for a Saturday of unpaid work, you'd laugh. You make it on the pavement because of how the two sides of the trade appear to you. The awkwardness is here, now, in your chest, with a face attached. The Saturday is an idea. It has no feel to it yet. One side of the scales has a weight you can sense and the other has a label. My reading is that this lopsidedness explains most of the habit. You're not choosing the church hall over your free day. You're choosing the end of a bad feeling over nothing in particular, because the free day isn't in the room.

There's an honest objection here. "It isn't only relief. If I'd said no I'd have felt guilty all week, and she'd have thought less of me. The yes bought me out of that as well." That's a forecast, and it deserves a proper look. Chapter 5 is about how accurate it is. For now I'll only say that the week of guilt and the neighbour's low opinion weren't things you experienced. They were things you predicted, in under four seconds, with a face in front of you.

A second objection is fairer still. Sometimes the yes does buy something. Streets where people muck in are nicer to live on, and your help is part of what makes them so. I agree. But that benefit

comes from willing yeses too, and it comes from smaller ones. You could have said, "I can't do the day, but I'll bring a cake and come and spend a tenner." That serves the street and costs you an hour you wouldn't have minded. The unwilling yes is an expensive way to buy something that was on sale for less.

I'm not asking you to change anything yet. The next time someone asks you for something, watch the order of events. You're fine, then you're asked, then the tension comes, then you answer, then relief. See if the relief arrives whatever you've agreed to. I'd bet that it does, and that its size has nothing to do with whether the thing is worth doing.

The empty Saturday

There's a reason the Saturday didn't weigh anything on the pavement, and it's more than the fact that it wasn't in the room. It looked empty. "A week on Saturday" nearly always does.

Gal Zauberman and John Lynch studied this in a series of seven experiments. They asked people about their spare time and spare money now, and about how much they expected to have at various points in the future. People expected to have more slack later than they have today. That's the researchers' word for spare capacity. The effect was stronger for time than for money. Most of us know roughly what we'll earn next month. We're vaguer about our hours, and the vagueness runs in one direction. Next month we'll be less busy. Things will have calmed down.

They don't calm down, of course. Next month turns out to be about as full as this one, and its contents are the same sort of thing. There's work and shopping, a relative's birthday, a form that has to be in by Friday and a cold. You couldn't see those from four weeks away because they hadn't arrived yet. A car park at six in the morning is empty too. That isn't because nobody's coming.

So when your neighbour said "a week on Saturday", you consulted a mental diary and found a clear day. It was clear in the way the car park was. By the time it came round it had a week of tiredness behind it and a Sunday's worth of chores leaning on it, the same as every other Saturday you've ever had.

This gives you a test that I find more useful than any amount of resolve. When someone asks you to do something in the future, ask yourself this.

Would I say yes if it were tomorrow?

Tomorrow is a day you can feel. You know how tired you are and what's already waiting to be done. If someone asked you to spend tomorrow running a tombola from eight till four, you'd know at once whether you were willing, and you'd find it much easier to say so. "Tomorrow? I can't, I'm sorry" comes out without a struggle. The tomorrow test borrows that clarity for a date that's still too far off to have any weight. If the answer for tomorrow is no, the honest answer for a week on Saturday is no as well. A week on Saturday will be tomorrow when it arrives.

An objection. "Some things really are easier later. I'm in the middle of a house move this month and I won't be next month." That's fair, and the test allows for it. What matters is whether you can name the specific thing that will be different. "The move will be over by the 20th" is a reason. "It should be quieter by then" is the car park at six in the morning. If all you have is the general feeling that the future has more room in it, that's the very feeling Zauberman and Lynch measured, and everybody has it all the time.

There's one more thing about that Saturday. It wasn't empty even on its own terms. You had a plan for it, and the plan was rest. I think a lot of unwilling yeses happen because "nothing" doesn't feel like a proper entry in the diary. If you'd had tickets for something, you'd have said so without effort. "I'm sorry, I've got something on" is one of the easiest sentences in English. But the first slow

Saturday in five weeks is something on. You need it as much as you'd have needed the tickets, and you're allowed to defend it in the same words.

In practice, when a request has a date on it, move the date to tomorrow in your head before you answer. It takes about two seconds, and it's the quickest way I know to make the far side of the scales weigh something.

What you think a no will do

In chapter 3 I put off an objection. The yes doesn't only end a few seconds of tension, you said. It also saves you from what a no would have caused. She'd be hurt, she'd think you selfish, things would be cool between you, and you'd feel guilty for a week.

That's a forecast, made in about four seconds. Forecasts can be checked, and researchers have checked this kind.

Julian Givi and Colleen Kirk ran a series of studies on people turning down invitations to things like a meal, a match or an evening watching television together. They compared what the person declining expected with what the person who'd done the inviting said they felt. The decliners got it wrong in a consistent direction. They overestimated how angry the inviter would be. They overestimated how much the no would signal that they didn't care about the inviter, and how likely it was to cost them future invitations. Givi and Kirk say in so many words that this is part of why saying no is hard, and that it leads people to accept invitations they'd sooner refuse.

They also found a reason for the mistake. The person declining assumes the other will fix on the bare fact of the no. But inviters gave more weight than expected to what had gone through the decliner's mind. They thought about the other person's circumstances and reasons, as you would if a friend turned you down. You expect them to see a rejection and what they see is a busy person.

This fits an older finding. Kenneth Savitsky, Nicholas Epley and Thomas Gilovich had people commit or imagine small social blunders and public failures, and then predict how harshly observers would judge them. People expected harsher judgments than they got. The researchers' explanation was that the person who slips up is fixed on the slip. The observers take in everything else about them and the situation as well, and the slip is a small part of their view.

As for your own week of guilt, Daniel Gilbert and colleagues showed in six studies that people overestimate how long they'll feel bad after things go wrong. Their events were far bigger than a tombola. They included a break-up, a rejected job application and being turned down for tenure. People recovered faster than they'd predicted, because they didn't allow for how quickly the mind makes its peace with things. Carrying that over to the guilt after a refusal is my step, not theirs. But if people overestimate how long they'll grieve a job, I think it's likely you overestimate how long you'll brood over a neighbour's fair.

I should be honest about the limits of all this. Givi and Kirk studied invitations to enjoyable things, and a request for help isn't the same. Someone who needs a tombola run has a problem to solve, and your no leaves her with it. I still think the finding carries over, and here's why. You can check it against your own experience from the other side.

Think of the last time you asked someone for something and they said no. Perhaps you asked a colleague to swap a shift, or a friend to come to something. What did you feel? I'd guess a flicker of disappointment, then "fair enough", then you asked someone else. I

doubt you concluded that they were selfish, and I doubt you remember it now without effort. You had a list of other people to ask, and so has your neighbour. You were one of fifteen doors to her, but the conversation felt like the only one happening in the world, because it was the only one happening to you.

There's an objection that I take seriously. "Some people do take it badly. My sister sulks for a fortnight." Yes. Some people do, and chapter 15 is about them. But notice how the habit treats everyone as though they were your sister. You give the mild neighbour, the reasonable colleague and the friend who'd never think twice about it the same automatic yes. You're paying to insure against a reaction that most of them would never have.

The unwilling yes is a trade made on a forecast, and the forecast is wrong in a known direction. It expects too much anger, too much judgment and too much guilt, lasting too long. None of this makes the four seconds comfortable. It does mean that what you're buying your way out of is smaller than it looks from inside them.

"It would look like I don't trust them"

Some requests are hard to refuse for a particular reason. A no seems to say something rude about the person asking.

A friend has started selling skincare products and asks if you'd like to host an evening for her. A colleague wants to borrow your car for the weekend. Someone you half know asks if they can stay in your spare room for a week while their flat is being done. A man on your doorstep with a lanyard and a clipboard says it's only three pounds a month. In each case there's the usual awkwardness, and on top of it there's a second worry. If you say no to the car, aren't you saying he's a bad driver? If you turn down the skincare evening, aren't you saying her new business is a bit embarrassing? If you refuse the man with the clipboard, aren't you as good as calling him a crook?

Sunita Sah, George Loewenstein and Daylian Cain have studied a version of this and given it a name, insinuation anxiety. Their setting was advice. They looked at what happens when an adviser, such as a doctor, discloses a conflict of interest. An example would be a doctor who gets a fee for every patient referred to a particular trial. You'd expect the disclosure to make people warier of the advice, and it did. People trusted the advice less. But it also made them feel more pressure to follow it. Once the conflict had been mentioned, turning the advice down felt like an accusation. It would have implied that the doctor was biased by the fee. The researchers found this in four experiments, three built on medical scenarios and one a field experiment with real money at stake. It held whether the conflict was large or small. It weakened when

someone other than the adviser made the disclosure, which suggests the pressure comes from having the person in front of you.

So people went along with advice they trusted less, so as not to seem distrustful. That's the unwilling yes in a white coat.

Carrying this over from advice to favours is my step, so treat it as an interpretation. But I think the same thing is happening with the car and the spare room. The request has got tangled up with the person. A no to the thing feels like a verdict on them, and since you don't hold that verdict, or wouldn't dream of delivering it, you say yes.

It helps to separate them again, and one way of doing that works better than any other I know. Have a policy.

"I don't lend the car to anyone. It's nothing personal, it's the insurance." "We don't do anything at the door, but good luck with it." "I don't host selling evenings, but I hope it goes well. Tell me how you get on." A policy is a decision you made before this person turned up, which applies to everybody. It can't be a comment on him, because it would have been the same for anyone. Most people hear that at once. A policy is also easier to say than a judgment made on the spot, because you aren't deciding anything in front of them. You're reporting something already settled.

The objection is that this sounds like a trick, a way of hiding behind a rule. It's only a trick if the policy is invented on the spot. I'm suggesting the reverse. Sit down on some quiet evening and work out what your policies are. Most people have three or four

areas where requests keep coming and the answer, on reflection, is always the same. Common ones are lending money, lending the car, buying at the door, having people to stay and joining committees. Decide the answer once, at your kitchen table, with nobody waiting. Then when the request comes, the deciding has been done by someone calmer than the person on the doorstep.

You can hold a policy and still make exceptions. If your brother's car is off the road and he needs to get to a funeral, you'll lend him yours. That's you choosing, which is the point of the whole book. A policy only takes care of the ordinary case so that you don't have to decide it four seconds at a time.

"But I like helping"

There's a deeper objection than any so far, and it's about who you are.

You may have read the last six chapters with growing unease. You're someone people can rely on, and you like being that. You were brought up to muck in. When you think about the people you admire, they're the ones who turned up with a casserole and a van, and you don't want to become someone who weighs up every request and asks what's in it for them. If that's what this book is selling, you'd sooner keep the tombola.

It isn't, and I think the research is on your side here, so let me set it out.

Netta Weinstein and Richard Ryan ran four studies on helping. In one, people kept a daily diary of the helpful things they did, their reasons, and how they felt. In the others the researchers arranged for some people to help by choice and others to help under pressure. The results pointed the same way throughout. Helping went with better wellbeing for the helper when it was done willingly, because the person wanted to or thought it mattered. Help given because they felt they had to didn't show the same benefit. The part I find most telling is that the same held for the person on the receiving end. Being helped by someone who chose to do it did the recipients more good than being helped by someone who'd been pressed into it.

So the casserole counts for more when it's freely given, and the person eating it can tell.

A second line of work comes from Vicki Helgeson and Heidi Fritz. They drew a distinction between two things that look alike from outside. One is a warm concern for other people. The other is a focus on other people to the exclusion of yourself, where your own needs never make it on to the list. Reviewing the research, they reported that the first isn't linked to psychological distress and the second is, including symptoms of depression. These are associations, so they can't show which causes which. Even so, the distinction is worth having. Caring about people is not the problem. Leaving yourself off the list is.

What this book is after is a small thing. It's the unwilling yes, the one you'd have ticked as a no. It leaves every willing yes alone, including the hard ones. If you removed every unwilling yes from your last year, you would still be the person with the casserole and the van. You'd have dropped a committee, two leaving collections you organised because nobody else would, a weekend minding someone's dog, and the tombola.

And I'd go further. I think you'd be a better helper. This is my own view and I can't point to a trial of it. Time and good temper are limited, and unwilling yeses are paid for out of the same account as willing ones. On the Sunday after the fair you were too flat to ring your father. The month you ran the collection was the month you never got round to visiting a friend who'd just had a baby. Your father and your friend didn't ask. The people who matter most to

you often don't, which means that a habit of giving your time to whoever asks hands it to the askers and takes it from the ones who never do.

You were asking whether saying no makes you less generous. I'd turn it round and ask who your generosity is going to at the moment, and whether you chose them. If the answer is that it goes to whoever happens to catch you at the bins, then saying no to some of them is how you get to decide who you help.

What your yes is worth

So far I've counted what the unwilling yes costs you. This chapter is about what it costs the other person, which is more than you'd think. Most of it is my own reasoning, and I'll say where it isn't.

Start with what your yes tells them. If you agree to everything, then your agreeing tells nobody anything. It's like a reference from an employer who gives everyone a glowing one. Once people know that, the reference is worth nothing. When a friend asks, "Do you fancy coming to the lakes with us in October?" and you say you'd love to, she'd like to be able to believe you. If she's known you a while, she can't. She's seen you say you'd love to about things she knows you dread. So she has to guess, or probe. "Are you sure? You're not just saying that?" You'll have heard that question. It's what people ask when someone's yes has stopped carrying information.

A yes only means something from a person who also says no. The friends whose enthusiasm you trust are the ones who've told you, at other times, "No, that's not for me."

Next, consider what happens to unwilling yeses between the asking and the day. They go off. You agreed on Thursday with a smile. By the following Wednesday you're looking for a way out. Perhaps you find one, and on Friday night your neighbour gets a text saying something's come up. Now she has twelve hours to find someone for the tombola, where a no at the bins would have given her nine days. Or you don't cancel, and you turn up, but you turn up ten minutes late and leave at the first chance, and spend the day

looking at your watch. The previous chapter gave the finding that matters here. In Weinstein and Ryan's studies, people helped by a pressed helper got less from it. Your neighbour asked for someone to run the tombola, and she hoped for someone cheerful. A prompt no would have let her go and find that person.

I think most askers, if they could see inside your head, would choose the prompt no over the grudging yes every time. They can't see inside your head, which brings me to the third cost.

In chapter 1 I said the cost of an unwilling yes arrives when the asker isn't there. She saw "happy to". She didn't see Sunday. So as far as she knows, you were happy to. You told her so. She isn't being careless with your time. She's acting sensibly on false information, and you supplied it. If she asks again next year, and the year after, and mentions you to the man who organises the Christmas lights as someone who's always glad to help, none of that is unfair of her. Everything she knows about you says it's welcome.

People can only treat you fairly if they know roughly what things cost you. The habit hides the price from them and then, often, resents them for not paying attention to it. That resentment is worth a moment. You may know the feeling of doing a favour with a smile and then being short with the person for a week, or telling a third party how put-upon you are. I'm not scolding you for it. Any real cost with no honest outlet comes out this way. But from the other person's side it's baffling. They asked a question, got a warm yes and were then punished for believing it.

I said this chapter was about the other person, and what it comes to is that the unwilling yes isn't the kind option it looks like. It feels kind for four seconds. After that it hands the other person unreliable help, false information about you, and sometimes a grudge they can't account for. A clear, friendly no is often the more considerate answer, and it's the only thing that makes your yes worth having.

How you became the person they ask

If you did the count at the end of chapter 1, you may have noticed that the requests don't come from everywhere equally. They come from the same people, and they come to you where they don't come to others. You may have wondered why it's always you who gets asked to take the minutes, mind the dog or organise the card.

Part of the answer is sixty years old. In 1966 Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser reported two experiments on what they called the foot-in-the-door technique. People who had first agreed to a small request were more likely to agree to a larger one later. That held even when a different person made the second request. One yes made the next yes more likely.

Their work looked at it from the side of the person agreeing. There's also the asker's side, and a careful study of that comes from four economists, Linda Babcock, Maria Recalde, Lise Vesterlund and Laurie Weingart. They studied the kind of job that everyone in a group would prefer someone else to do, such as writing up the report or sitting on the committee. It helps the group and does nothing for the person who does it. They found that women, more than men, volunteered for these jobs, were asked to do them, and said yes when asked. The important part for us is why. A large part of the difference came from what people believed. Those doing the asking expected women to say yes, so they asked women.

Their study was about men and women at work, and I don't want to stretch it beyond that. But I think the mechanism underneath applies to anyone, and this is my reading. Asking is a small effort

and carries a small risk of refusal, so people ask where they expect a yes. They usually mean no harm by it. They take the easy route in the way walkers cut the corner of a lawn, and after enough feet have gone that way there's a path. Every unwilling yes you've given has worn the path a little deeper. Your neighbour didn't pick your door at random. Somebody, at some meeting, said "try number nine, they're always obliging".

So the habit feeds itself from both ends. Each yes makes you a little more likely to give the next one, and makes other people a little more likely to bring you the next request. That's how someone ends up, at forty-five, on three committees and the rota for the church flowers, without having decided to be on any of them.

It would be easy to read this as a story about being exploited. Mostly I don't think it is. The people who ask you aren't plotting. They need things done, and you're where things get done. The reputation is accurate. The question is whether you'd like to keep it.

Reputations built this way can be changed the same way. They run on recent evidence. You don't need to make an announcement or have a difficult conversation with anyone. Three or four friendly nos over a few months are enough to change what people expect, and you'll notice it in how they ask. "Try number nine" becomes "you could try number nine, though they're pretty busy". Requests start to arrive with a way out attached, along the lines of "I know you've got a lot on, so do say if not". That's the sound of people taking your time into account, which they couldn't do while they thought it was free.

This matters most at work, where the jobs nobody wants are handed out by the same logic. Think of the minutes, the induction of the new starter, the leaving present and the office move. If you're the one who always ends up with them, it's worth knowing that this probably rests on a belief about your answer and says little about your abilities. The belief will change when your answers do. Chapter 15 has more on doing that with a manager.

"They'd do it for me"

I've been hard on the unwilling yes for nine chapters. This chapter is here to stop the argument going too far, because there's a bad version of this book that tells you to do only what you feel like. I don't believe that, and I doubt you do either.

Some things you don't want to do are things you should do. Your friend is moving out after a separation and needs a hand on Saturday. Your mother has a hospital appointment and doesn't like to go alone. A colleague who covered for you in March needs the same from you now. You don't feel like doing any of these. You'd still be ashamed to refuse, and you'd be right to be.

The slip of paper from chapter 1 handles these well. Imagine the request arriving in writing, with nobody watching and two boxes to tick. For your friend's move, you'd sigh and tick yes. That sigh matters. A willing yes isn't the same as an eager one. It's a yes you'd give with time to think and no face in front of you. You give it because you care about the person, or you owe them, or it's plainly right. The test doesn't ask whether you'd enjoy it. It asks whether you, thinking it over, would choose it.

So when you hear yourself say "they'd do it for me", take it seriously and check it. Sometimes it's true. There are people in your life with whom you have a long account of favours running in both directions, and with them, turning up is the whole point. Help them, and don't count too carefully.

But the feeling of owing is less choosy than it should be. It goes off for the neighbour who once took in a parcel. It goes off for the colleague who bought you a coffee in 2019, and for the acquaintance who asks in a warm enough voice. In the moment, all of these feel like "they'd do it for me". Often they wouldn't, or you've no idea whether they would. With some of them the favours have only ever run one way. Ask who usually does the asking, and you'll know which kind of relationship it is.

A few questions sort most cases, and none of them can be answered in four seconds, which is one more reason to get your answer out of the moment. Who is asking, and what are they to me? What does it cost me, with the date moved to tomorrow? What is it for? Would I be glad afterwards that I'd done it? Helping at your friend's move passes the last question even though the day itself is grim. The tombola, for you, didn't. For somebody else on your street it would have. There are people who love a tombola, and your no would have left the job open for one of them.

One more limit needs stating. This book is about refusing things you don't want. It isn't about refusing things that frighten you. If you're asked to a party where you'll know nobody, or asked to give a talk, the reluctance you feel may be nerves and not unwillingness. The slip of paper won't help there, because the you at the kitchen table is nervous too and would happily tick no. With requests of that kind there's another question to ask. If the fear were taken away, would I want this? If yes, then the no is protecting the fear, and fear grows when it's protected. That's a different habit from the one in this book, and what I say in these chapters shouldn't be used as cover for it.

None of this makes the sorting hard in practice. Most requests fall quickly into a pile. There's a small pile of things you'll do gladly. There's a larger pile of things you'll do with a sigh because they're right. And there's the pile this book is about, the things you'd refuse on paper and accept to a face. Only the third pile needs to change.

The dentist you don't have

You may be thinking that you do say no sometimes. You have a way of doing it, which is to be busy.

"Oh, I'd have loved to, but I've got a thing that day." "Work's mad at the moment." "I think we've got family coming." Sometimes the thing, the madness and the family exist. Often they're invented on the spot, because a no with an excuse attached feels so much safer than a bare one. The excuse tells them it isn't that you don't want to. It's that you can't.

I understand the appeal, and I think the invented excuse is a poor tool, for three reasons. Two are mine and one is a finding.

The first is that it invites a solution. If the obstacle is the date, a helpful person moves the date. "Oh, that's fine, we could do the Sunday instead." Now you need a second excuse, and the second one is always weaker than the first. People who rely on excuses end up saying yes at the third attempt, worn down by their own story.

The second is upkeep. You have to remember the dentist you don't have. You have to not be seen in the garden that afternoon. It's a small strain each time, but it adds up, and being caught out does far more damage than a no would have done.

The third is that the most popular excuse doesn't work as well as people assume. Grant Donnelly, Anne Wilson, Ashley Whillans and Michael Norton ran six studies on the excuses people give when turning down invitations. They compared "I don't have time" with "I don't have the money". The time excuse came off worse. People

hearing it judged it less trustworthy and felt less close to the person afterwards, and they were less willing to help that person later. The reason the researchers found was control. Everyone knows that time is something you allocate. "I don't have time" is heard, correctly, as "I've chosen to spend my time on something else." The people giving the excuse didn't see this coming. They expected "I'm too busy" to land softly, and it didn't.

I wouldn't take from this that you should plead poverty. The point is that the vague busy excuse, the one that feels like the polite choice, is heard as a slightly dishonest no. You pay the cost of a refusal and also the cost of a fib.

There's a related habit, which is the no that never gets said. "Maybe." "I'll try." "Let me see how the week goes." Or the message left unanswered in the hope that the question goes away. Gili Freedman, Kipling Williams and Jennifer Beer have written about this from the point of view of the person doing the rejecting. Drawing together research from several fields, they argue that a clear, explicit no hurts the other person less than an ambiguous one or silence, and leaves the person who gave it better off too. I should be plain that theirs is a theory paper. It proposes this and doesn't test it. But it fits what it's like to be on the receiving end. You can do something with a no. A maybe leaves you unable to ask anybody else.

So I'd suggest giving up the invented excuse and the maybe along with the unwilling yes. They're the same habit, which is avoiding the four seconds.

What goes in their place is simpler than you'd think. You don't owe anyone a reason. "I can't do that one, I'm sorry" is a complete answer, and most people accept it without a follow-up. If you'd like to give a reason, give a true one and keep it short. "I've had a run of busy weekends and I need that one to myself" is true, it's about you, and it can't be solved by moving the date. When Donnelly and his colleagues had people stress that their time wasn't under their control, the time excuse did less harm. I'd read that as support for being specific and honest. "I'm working the next three Saturdays and this is my one day off" tells her something real. "I'm just so busy" doesn't.

Getting out of the moment

Chapter 1 asked you to imagine the tombola request arriving on a slip of paper, and claimed you'd have ticked no. That was a thought experiment, but researchers have run the real thing.

Mahdi Roghanizad and Vanessa Bohns had people make the same request of strangers, either face to face or by email. The face-to-face requests did far better. In a later pair of experiments they added video calls and phone calls. People are much more likely to agree to a request made in person than to one made in text, and the richer channels fell in between. The askers didn't expect any of this. They thought the channel would hardly matter, and it mattered a great deal.

One limit should be stated. In the first study the emails came from strangers, and the researchers found that part of the gap was suspicion. An email from someone you've never met looks a bit dubious, and a person on the pavement doesn't. A message from your neighbour won't look dubious, so I wouldn't expect a gap of that size between people who know each other. I'd still expect a gap, for the reason the phone study gives.

Those studies were written for people who want a yes, and their advice is to ask in person. Read them from the other side and they tell you something more useful. The request and the person being asked stay the same. Change the channel from a face to a screen, and the person being asked gets a good deal of their freedom back.

The pull lives in the moment and the presence. That's the same thing the phone study showed in chapter 2, where the people who only imagined the request felt free to refuse.

You can't stop people asking you things in person. What you can do is decline to answer in person, and it takes one sentence.

"Let me check and come back to you."

I'll call this the holding line. It has several things going for it.

It's easy to say. The moment punishes a no, but it barely notices a holding line, because nothing has been refused. Your neighbour's face doesn't fall and nobody has to fill a silence. If you can't yet say no to a face, you can almost certainly say this.

It's also true. You are going to check. You'll check your diary, and you'll move the date to tomorrow as in chapter 4. You'll imagine the slip of paper, and if the case is a close one you'll ask the questions from chapter 10. None of that can be done in four seconds on a pavement, and nobody reasonable expects it to be.

And it moves your answer to the kitchen table, where you stop being the person in the laboratory and become one of the people imagining the request. You give your answer as the version of you who can weigh both sides.

There are two rules that keep the holding line honest. Put a time on it, and keep to the time. "Let me check and come back to you tomorrow evening" is a promise, and your neighbour can plan around it. A holding line with no time attached, never followed up, is the "maybe" from the last chapter. It would be the same old

avoidance with a delay added. Come back within a day whenever you can, and come back even when the answer is no. The answer being no is when it matters most that you do.

The obvious objection is that this is a dodge, and that you ought to learn to say no to someone's face like an adult. In time you probably will. After you've sent a dozen considered nos and watched the sky stay where it is, the face-to-face version gets easier, and chapter 13 has words for it. But I see no virtue in doing this the hard way first. You're trying to give honest answers, and the holding line gets you there this week. The asker loses nothing by it. They get a considered answer tomorrow in place of an unreliable one today.

A second objection is that some people won't accept it. "It's only a yes or no, surely you know if you're free?" Then the answer is this. "If you need to know now, I'll have to say no. If it can wait till tomorrow, I'll check." Make that your fixed rule. An answer that someone presses you for on the spot is a no. It isn't rude. It follows from everything in chapters 2 to 5. An answer given under pressure will lean towards yes for reasons unrelated to what you want, so you correct for the lean.

Two smaller points. A phone call counts as a face. The voice and the waiting silence do the same work, so the holding line applies. And a request that arrives by message doesn't need an instant reply either. If you feel the pull as you read it, put the phone down and answer after you've done the checking. The channel helps you, and an hour's delay helps more.

The words

Once you're at the kitchen table and the answer is no, you have to write it. People make this harder than it is. They draft four paragraphs, or they wait three days for the right wording to come, and by then they're back in the territory of chapter 11.

A good no is short and has two parts, with a third if you choose. You say something warm that's also true. Then you say the no, in words that can't be mistaken for a maybe. The optional third part is a smaller thing you'd be glad to do.

Here are three, as examples.

"Thanks for thinking of me for the tombola. I can't do it this year, I need that Saturday. I hope it goes really well."

"I've had a look and I can't take on the treasurer job. It needs someone with more evenings free than I've got. I'm happy to show whoever does it how the spreadsheet works."

"That's kind of you to ask. I'm going to say no to the weekend away, but I'd love to see you both. Could you do a Sunday lunch next month?"

None of the three apologises more than once, and the first and third don't apologise at all. None gives a reason that can be argued with or fixed. "I need that Saturday" is a fact about you. Nobody can offer to move it. And in each one the no is a plain statement, "I

can't" or "I'm going to say no". It isn't "I'm not sure I'll be able to", which the other person will read, hopefully and reasonably, as a possible yes.

I'd leave out the following things.

Leave out the long apology. One "sorry" is fine if you mean it. Five of them tell the other person you think you've done something wrong, and they may start to agree.

Leave out the invented reason, for the reasons in chapter 11.

Leave out "maybe next time", unless you'd welcome being asked next time. If you wouldn't, you've booked yourself another of these conversations.

And leave out the request for permission. "Would that be all right?" and "I hope that's OK?" hand the decision back to them. You're telling them your answer. You aren't applying for it.

The offer in the third part deserves some care, because it can smuggle the old habit back in. "I can't do the whole day but I could do the morning" is fine if you'd tick yes to the morning on the slip of paper. If you wouldn't, you've given an unwilling yes to half the job. The test for the offer is the same as the test for everything else. When in doubt, leave it off. A no with good wishes is complete on its own.

Sometimes the other person comes back. "Are you sure? It's only a few hours. We're really stuck." Say the same thing again, a little shorter. "I know, and I'm sorry you're stuck. I can't do it." Don't add a new reason. Each new reason is a fresh thing for them to answer,

and it suggests the first reason wasn't the real one. People who keep getting the same friendly sentence run out of replies quickly. It almost never goes past the second round.

When the day comes that you'd like to say it to a face, the words are the same. "Thanks for asking. I can't, I'm afraid, but I hope it goes well." Say it at normal speed, and then stop talking, which is the difficult part. The silence afterwards lasts about two seconds and feels like ten. The other person nearly always fills it with "no worries" or "fair enough". The moment you've been paying whole Saturdays to avoid has then come and gone in the time it takes to put a lid on a bin.

The decision

Up to now this book has asked you to notice things and to try one sentence. This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes this late because I wanted you to see the reasons first. Without them a rule like the one below is only gritted teeth, and gritted teeth last about a fortnight.

The decision is this. **Nothing that will cost you more than an hour gets an answer in the moment.**

It has six parts.

The hour. Small things carry on as before. Passing the salt, holding a door, giving someone a lift when you're going that way, reading a colleague's two-paragraph email before they send it. Say yes to those as freely as you always have. They're most of what makes you pleasant to be around, and they cost little. The rule only applies when the thing would take more than an hour of your life, or when it has no end date, like a committee. If you can't tell how long something will take, assume the rule applies to it.

The holding line. For anything over the hour, whoever asks and however nicely, you say, "Let me check and come back to you," and you name a time. You say it even when you think the answer will be yes. That way it becomes what you always say and doesn't signal that a no is coming. You'll be glad of that when it's your manager asking.

The check. At home, or at your desk once they've gone, you do three things. You move the date to tomorrow and ask whether you'd say yes. You picture the slip of paper with its two boxes. And if it's close, you ask the questions from chapter 10. Who's asking, what does it cost, what is it for, and would I be glad afterwards? This takes a few minutes. Most cases are clear inside one.

The answer. You reply by the time you said you would, in writing if that's easier. A yes should be a proper one, with the date in your diary. A no should have the two or three parts from chapter 13. Either way, you keep your word about coming back.

The policies. Some evening this week, write down the three or four kinds of request where your considered answer is always the same, as in chapter 6. Keep the list where you'll see it. These requests don't need the holding line, because the checking has been done.

The yeses already given. Look at the next two months in your diary and find the unwilling yeses already in there. My advice is to honour most of them. You gave your word, people have planned around it, and pulling out late does the damage described in chapter 8. Do them as well as you can and let them be the last of their kind. The exception is the commitment with no end, such as the committee seat, the weekly lift or the rota you never chose. For those, send one clear message with a date in it. "I'm going to step down from the committee after the September meeting. I wanted to give you plenty of notice." That gives them time to replace you, and it's fair to everyone, including you.

It helps to decide in advance what you'll do at the difficult points. There's a well-tested way to do that, a plan in the form "when this happens, then I'll do that". Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests of plans like this and found they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three I'd suggest. Change the wording to suit you, and say them aloud once.

When someone asks me for something that would take more than an hour, then I'll say, "Let me check and come back to you tomorrow."

When someone presses me to answer on the spot, then I'll say, "If you need to know now, it's a no."

When I sit down to reply, then I'll move the date to tomorrow before I do anything else.

Here's what to expect, and I'll be careful because I can't promise you an outcome. The first few nos will feel bad, even by message. Your heart will go a bit as you press send. You may check your phone more than usual for the next hour. Then a reply will arrive, and in most cases it will say something like "No problem, thanks for letting me know". After a few of these the dread gets smaller, because your forecast is at last being corrected by evidence. Some replies will be cooler than that, and chapter 15 covers those. You'll also still say the odd "yes, of course" at the bins, and chapter 15 covers that too. What I'd expect after a couple of months is a diary with fewer things in it that you dread, and an easier conscience about the ones that remain.

Managers, mothers and people who ask three times

The method in chapter 14 is simple to describe. It's harder in some places than others, and it would be dishonest to stop without saying where.

Your manager. With the person who sets your work, a plain no is often not available. That's a fact about employment and doesn't mean you've failed at anything. What you can nearly always do is make the cost visible, which chapter 8 argued is the thing the habit hides. "Yes, I can take that on. It'll mean the quarterly report moves to the following week. Is that the right way round?" You haven't refused. You've given a fact about your time to the person whose job it is to decide how your time is used. Managers who were piling work on you because you always said "fine" often stop once they're shown what "fine" was costing. For the jobs nobody is strictly required to do, like the minutes, the collection and the social committee, the ordinary method works. "Let me check what I've got on and come back to you" is an unremarkable thing to say at work. If your workload is unmanageable whatever you say, the problem is bigger than this habit. It calls for a proper conversation with your manager, human resources or a union representative.

Family. These are the longest-running accounts you have, and the feeling of owing is at its strongest here. Much of it is justified, and chapter 10 applies in full. But families are also where the path from chapter 9 is worn deepest. If you've been the one who always hosts Christmas, drives your aunt or sorts out your parents' paperwork, then your first no will surprise people, and surprised people aren't

at their best. Expect one or two rough conversations. Use the same words as you'd use with anyone, stay friendly, and don't get drawn into defending your whole character. "I can't do it this year. I'll happily bring the pudding." You'll probably have to say it more than once.

People who push. Most people take a no well. A few don't. They ask a third time and a fourth, or go quiet, or tell you how let down they are, or remind you of everything they've done for you. Stay with the repeated sentence from chapter 13. And take note of what you're learning. Someone who can hear a no and stay friendly was really asking you a question, and someone who can't wasn't. Their request was an instruction in the form of a question. It worked for as long as you never tested it. You needn't do anything dramatic with that knowledge. It's worth having when you next decide how much of your time that person gets.

Lapses. You'll be caught off guard. Somebody will ask at a bad moment and "yes, of course" will be out before you've thought of the holding line. This proves nothing about you or about whether the method works. Chapter 2 described a pull strong enough to get 100 people out of 103 to hand over their phones, and a book doesn't switch that off. What you can do is go back, and soon. "I spoke too soon yesterday. I've looked at my diary and I can't do it after all. I'm sorry to mess you about." Sent the next morning, that's a small nuisance to the other person and easy to forgive. If you leave it for nine days, you've sent the Friday night text from chapter 8. So when you catch yourself, correct it within a day. Then work out what caught you. It's usually a particular person or place, and you can make a when-then plan for it.

When a book isn't enough. For most readers this is a habit, and understanding it is a good part of changing it. For some it's tied to something that deserves proper help. Please talk to a GP, or look into the services below, if any of these sounds like you.

- The fear isn't limited to refusing. Everyday conversations, phone calls or being watched while you do something fill you with dread, and you arrange your life to avoid them. The NHS says social anxiety is common, that it often doesn't go away without treatment, and that it's a good idea to see a GP. In England you can also refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without seeing a GP first.
- Someone you live with, or a partner or relative, responds to your no with threats, punishment, control or violence. That is not a communication problem and this book's method is not the answer to it. The NHS advises telling someone, such as your GP. The freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge, is open at any time of day or night, and men can ring the Respect Men's Advice Line. Ring 999 in an emergency.
- You've been low, anxious or exhausted for weeks and can't see a way to reduce what you're carrying.

It may help to know that saying what you do and don't want is something therapists teach as a skill. Psychologists call it assertiveness training. A review by Brittany Speed, Brandon Goldstein and Marvin Goldfried describes it as a well-researched treatment that helps across a range of problems, and one that has been rather neglected in recent years. If you find you can't do alone what this book describes, asking for that kind of help is a sensible next step, and it doesn't mean you've failed.

The pavement again

Here's the scene from chapter 1 again, a year on. It's an example of how things might go and I'm not promising it.

It's a Thursday evening and you're putting the bins out. The woman from number fourteen waves and comes over. The fair is a week on Saturday, they're short again, and you were so good on the tombola last year. "You couldn't, could you?" She smiles and waits.

The tension arrives exactly as it did before. I'd like to be clear about that. Nothing in this book makes it go away. Your chest still tightens and "yes, of course" is still sitting there ready. What's changed is that you know what the tension is. You know it started five seconds ago, that it will be gone in a minute whatever you say, and that it tells you nothing about the Saturday.

"Let me check and come back to you tomorrow evening," you say.

"Course," she says. "No rush." She goes back to her bins. The thing you dreaded for years is over in a few seconds, and nothing bad has happened.

At the kitchen table you move the date to tomorrow. Would you run a tombola tomorrow from eight till four? You would not. You picture the slip of paper and tick no. Then you ask what the request is for. You like the street and you like the fair. You'd be glad to have done something for it, as long as the something was small. So you write this.

"Thanks for asking me again. I can't do the day this year, I need that Saturday. I could come at eight and help put the tables out for an hour if that's useful, and I'll bring a cake. Hope it's a good one."

You read it through once and send it. Your heart goes a bit. Twelve minutes later your phone buzzes. "No problem at all. Tables at eight would be brilliant, nobody ever wants to do that bit. See you then."

On the Saturday you carry trestle tables for fifty minutes. You buy five tombola tickets from a man you've never met, who is plainly having a lovely time, and you win a tin of peaches. You're home by half past nine with the whole day in front of you.

They won't all go like that. Some replies will be shorter than you'd like. Some weeks you'll give the old yes and have to go back the next morning, and once in a while you'll get the judgment wrong in the other direction and wish you'd gone. That's what deciding things is like. But you'll be the one deciding, at your kitchen table, with both sides of the trade in view. The four seconds won't be deciding for you any more.

If you take one thing from this book, take the holding line. Say it aloud now, once, so that it's been in your mouth before you need it. "Let me check and come back to you." The next time someone asks you for a Saturday, that's all you have to say. You can do everything else later, sitting down, in your own time.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical, psychological or legal advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 3, 8, 10, 13 and 16, the policies in chapter 6 and the method in chapter 14. The NHS pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England or the UK, and services differ elsewhere. Most of the research was done in North America, much of it with students, and much of it with requests between strangers. Requests between neighbours, friends and relatives have been studied far less, and carrying the findings over to them is my step throughout.

Before you start. The description of domestic abuse and the helpline details are from the NHS page "Getting help for domestic violence and abuse". The remarks on social anxiety are from the NHS page "Social anxiety (social phobia)".

Chapter 2. Sommers and Bohns, "The voluntariness of voluntary consent: consent searches and the psychology of compliance", Yale Law Journal 128, 2019. Two preregistered laboratory studies with 209 people who received the request and 194 who imagined it. The figure of 100 out of 103 is from the first study. The authors' interest

was in police searches, and using the result to explain a tombola is my step. Bohns, Roghanizad and Xu, "Underestimating our influence over others' unethical behavior and decisions", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, 2014, pages 348 to 362. Two of the four studies used real requests between students, and two used written scenarios. Flynn and Lake, "If you need help, just ask: underestimating compliance with direct requests for help", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, 2008, pages 128 to 143. The account of why the pull is strong is mine.

Chapter 4. Zauberman and Lynch, "Resource slack and propensity to discount delayed investments of time versus money", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 134, 2005, pages 23 to 37. The question "Would I say yes if it were tomorrow?" is my application of their finding and hasn't been tested.

Chapter 5. Givi and Kirk, "Saying no: the negative ramifications from invitation declines are less severe than we think", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 126, 2024, pages 1103 to 1115. The studies concerned invitations to enjoyable activities, not requests for help. Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich, "Do others judge us as harshly as we think? Overestimating the impact of our failures, shortcomings, and mishaps", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, 2001, pages 44 to 56. Four studies. Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg and Wheatley, "Immune neglect: a source of durability bias in affective forecasting", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 1998, pages 617 to 638. None of their six studies was about guilt after a refusal.

Chapter 6. Sah, Loewenstein and Cain, "Insinuation anxiety: concern that advice rejection will signal distrust after conflict of interest disclosures", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45, 2019, pages 1099 to 1112. The doctor with a referral fee is my illustration of the kind of conflict they studied and isn't taken from the paper. Applying the idea to favours, and the suggestion of policies, are mine.

Chapter 7. Weinstein and Ryan, "When helping helps: autonomous motivation for prosocial behavior and its influence on well-being for the helper and recipient", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98, 2010, pages 222 to 244. Four studies. The summary doesn't give sizes of effect, and I haven't read the full text. Helgeson and Fritz, "A theory of unmitigated communion", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 2, 1998, pages 173 to 183. It's a review of correlational work. The authors developed the idea partly to explain differences between women and men in depression, which I haven't gone into. The claim that dropping unwilling yeses makes you a better helper is mine.

Chapter 9. Freedman and Fraser, "Compliance without pressure: the foot-in-the-door technique", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4, 1966, pages 195 to 202. It's an old study and I haven't looked into how well it has replicated. Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund and Weingart, "Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability", *American Economic Review* 107, 2017, pages 714 to 747. Extending their mechanism from gender to anyone with a reputation for agreeing is my step. What I say about reputations changing after a few refusals is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 11. Donnelly, Wilson, Whillans and Norton, "Communicating resource scarcity and interpersonal connection", Journal of Consumer Psychology 31, 2021, pages 726 to 745. Six studies. Freedman, Williams and Beer, "Softening the blow of social exclusion: the responsive theory of social exclusion", Frontiers in Psychology 7, 2016, article 1570. This paper sets out a theory and its predictions. It doesn't report tests of them.

Chapter 12. Roghanizad and Bohns, "Ask in person: you're less persuasive than you think over email", Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 69, 2017, pages 223 to 226. I read the authors' full manuscript. Forty-five people each made requests of ten strangers. The authors found that people receiving the emails viewed them with suspicion, which is the limit mentioned in the chapter. Roghanizad and Bohns, "Should I ask over Zoom, phone, email, or in-person? Communication channel and predicted versus actual compliance", Social Psychological and Personality Science 13, 2022, pages 1163 to 1172. The holding line is my suggestion. I know of no study that tests it.

Chapter 14. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule, its six parts and what I say to expect haven't been tested together. They're my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 15. Speed, Goldstein and Goldfried, "Assertiveness training: a forgotten evidence-based treatment", Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice 25, issue 1, 2018. The advice on social anxiety, talking therapies and domestic abuse is from the

NHS pages "Social anxiety (social phobia)", "Talking therapies" and "Getting help for domestic violence and abuse". Self-referral to talking therapies applies in England, for people registered with a GP. I've left phone numbers out because they change. The NHS page lists them.