

# Building a Successful Academic Career: Learning When to Say No and When to Say Yes

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“The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything.”

-Warren Buffet

“Focusing is about saying no.”

- Steve Jobs

- “The art of leadership is saying no, not saying yes, it is very easy to say yes.”

-Tony Blair



# No In Academic Medicine

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- PubMed Search
- The power of saying no. EMBO rep 2020, [Antentor O Hinton Jr](#)
- Striving for equity in academia: embracing the power of no in decision-making. FEMS Microbiol Lett, 2023, [Talia H Swarts](#) .
- Saying "no" to academic service Immune Cell Biol, 2023 [Arian Liston](#)
- Why four scientists spent a year saying no. Nature 2022 [Amanda E Cravens](#).
- Saying 'no' in science isn't enough Nature 2022 [Linda Babcock](#)

# My Journey

- 1993 – Assistant Professor
  - Vision to be a translational scientist
  - No Mentor, no set surgical schedule, clinical schedule always changing.
  - Took control of my clinical schedule**
- 1997 – Associate Professor
  - Based on scholarly work in surgical education
  - “Token girl” on hospital committees
  - Gyn Onc partner left – I was asked to absorb her practice and not to get pregnant
  - I delivered my daughter**
  - Divided up patients 3 ways
  - AAMC mid career women’s conference**



# My Journey

- 2002 – Professor/Adjunct surgery
  - “Token girl surgeon/professor” on Department/hospital/SOM committees
  - Often 2-3 early (6 or 7am) meetings every week
  - Missed opportunities to be on NIH Study sections**
  - Took a 6 month sabbatical**
- 2005 – Division Director, Gynecologic Oncology
- 2015 – Surgeon-in-Chief, 0.1 FTE
- 2017 – Department Chair 0.3 clinical, 0.1 research, 0.6 administration



# When to Say Yes and When to Say No

## Yes to everything:

- Do many things poorly
- Fall behind on deadlines
- Impacts family relationships
- Leads to burn out/poor health

## No to everything:

- Damage reputation
- Perceived as uncooperative
- Miss out on valuable opportunities
- Impact team dynamics

# Just Say No! Historical Note

- Nancy Regan's signature campaign to reduce drug use
- Prevented youth from receiving education about the dangers of drugs and how to use responsibly
- Kids more likely to use drugs and alcohol
- Contributed to mass incarceration

Rated as the second worst First Lady campaign behind Melania Trump's "Be Best" to Stop Bullying.




# Yes vs. No - Sigmund Freud Pleasure Principle

- Saying yes is easier than saying no
- It takes less time and requires no thoughtful explanation
- You make your requester happy and don't disappoint them – this makes us happy and avoids discomfort
- Short-term gains for long-term pains. Humans seek out pleasure and the pain is in the future
- Our Id wants immediate gratification





# The Reasons we struggle to say no



- Avoid offending people
- Avoid disappointing people
- Avoid seeming selfish
- Desire to help others
- We want other to like us
- We want to appear valuable
- We fear missing out on opportunities
- We are adverse to conflict
- We develop a people pleasing habit
- We feel bullied by superiors

# Yes Damn effect

Saying yes to things you later regret

Reduces anxiety and avoids conflict now

— Can often come from decision fatigue

Because it is in the future we think we will have more time then now

Always saying no is not the answer either

# Yes Damn Effect

Think about the last time you agreed to do something you weren't remotely interested in.

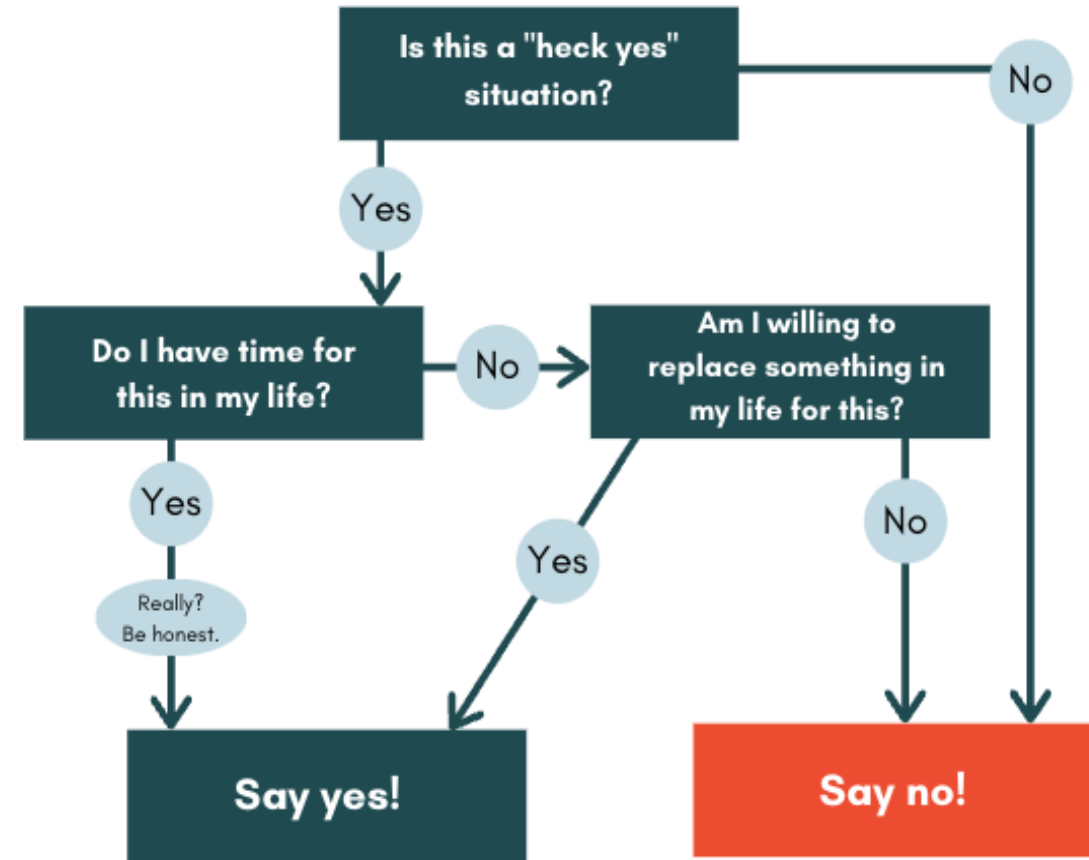
Did you automatically say yes without considering the impact on you?

What were the reasons?

- Motivated to please requestor
- FOMO
- Made you feel valuable
- Felt too guilty to say no

# How to Avoid the Yes Damn Effect

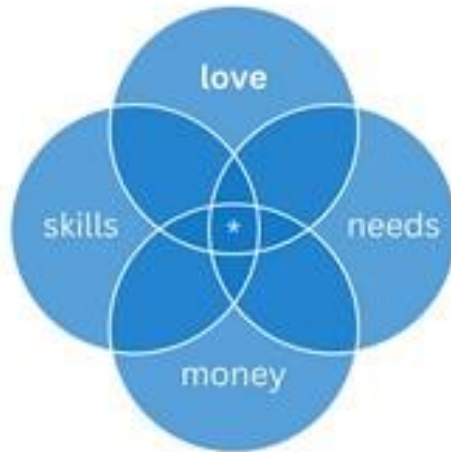
1. Mindful decision making. Take time to assess all relevant information
2. Imagine being asked to do the “thing” this week
3. If you do have time this week, is it aligned with my purpose?



# Striving for Equity in Academia: embracing the power of no in decision making

## Decision-Making in Academia Prioritizing when to say “no”

(A)



\* Ikigai

(B)



*Swartz and Abdul-Mutakkabir, 2023, FEMS.*

If a task doesn't fall into at least one of these buckets then the answer should be no

# Set up Policies for yourself

1. How much time do you have for committees and admin activities? FTE support?
2. How many speaking engagements will you do a year? Do you have rules about where and when you will speak? How many journal reviews?
3. Is the request going to impinge on protected scholarly time or personal time?
4. If you accept a commitment in the future have you built time in your schedule to accomplish the task?

“What you don’t do determines what you can do.”



-Tim Ferris

Author: 9 Habits to Stop Now

# Habits We Should Eliminate to Free Up Time for More Important Activities

1. Don't take calls from unrecognized numbers or sometimes even from those you do
2. Don't email first thing in the morning or late at night
3. Do not agree to meetings or calls with no clear agenda or end time





# Habits We Should Eliminate to Free Up Time for More Important Activities

4. Do not check emails all the time, set clear times to do this work ( this includes EPIC)
5. Do Not let people interrupt you during protected time or personal time
6. Understand the 80/20 rule. 20% of people will take up 80% of your time. Need to keep the proportions balanced



# Habits We Should Eliminate to Free Up Time for More Important Activities

7. Do not work more to fix being too busy

- If you don't have time, you don't have priorities

8. Do not stay connected 24/7

9. Do not expect work to fill a void that nonwork relationships and activities should



# How to Say No at Work Without Making Enemies

Don't simply say no

Show appreciation for being asked to take on a  
new activity

Share the reasoning behind your decision

Don't have skills

Not enough band width because of x, y, z

Need to meet these deadlines

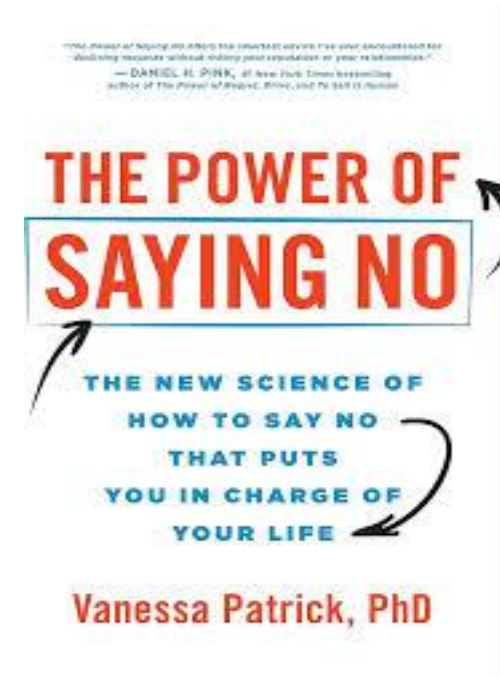
Don't waffle – this can invite increased pressure

HBR: Aug. 2019

# How to Say No (Without Feeling Guilty)

- Remember saying yes means saying no to something else
- Saying no is a way to maintain your productivity
- Saying no can be self-care
- Being courteous and candid is not offensive
- Other's disappointment in you saying no is not your fault

Yes, this is an important activity and I am a good fit.  
Unfortunately I cannot give it the time and attention it deserves  
right now. Please consider me in the future



# How to Say No to Your Boss

Say “Thank you” make sure they feel respected

Be straightforward and candid

Never lie

Let them know what you have on your plate

Ask permission to take something off your plate

Suggest an alternative

The Power of  
Saying No

UW Medicine

# Evaluating Requests

1. Today's date, date the request is due
2. Who is the asker?
3. What is the deliverable being requested?
4. What resources will be required including time?
5. What are the possible benefits?
6. What are the costs?
7. Does this align with my priorities?

# Bad Nos – Can Cause Problems

- Hastily decided
- No proper assessment of the ask
- Don't like the requestor
- Said yes to too many other things
- Can lead to bad reputation among colleagues and missed opportunities

HBR: 2020 Learning When to Say No

# Good Nos Make Room for a Better Yes

- Can invest in tasks aligned with your priorities
- Allows opportunities to build new skills and relationships
- Allows time to do things you are good at and will be successful at
- Grows your reputation

HBR: 2020 Learning to Say No



# How (and When) to Say No at Work

- Know your workload and capacity
- Lead with positivity
- Politely and clearly decline
- Explain why
- Offer a different solution
- Be consistent
- Set boundaries around communication

Asana 2024

# Assertive vs. Aggressive

- Saying no requires you to be assertive
- The two are often confused – especially in women
- Assertive: Confidently communicating your position
  - Examples: Listening to others then sharing a different opinion, disagreeing in a respectful manner
- Aggressive: Communicate in a manner that is rude, dismissive or threatening
  - Examples: Interrupting people, speaking over them, dominating the conversation, tearing down others ideas

# Saying No When Someone Asks You to Do Something

- Assertive: Being direct in declining the request. Suggesting another person or another solution
- Aggressive: Barking no! Being inconsiderate or belittling (this often happens when we say yes to too many things and we reach a tipping point)
- Learning to say no with grace and without guilt

# Saying No to Yourself

- Temptations can threaten time, money and health
- Distract us from goals and priorities
- Saying no to ourselves is the key to living healthy and rewarding lives
- Takes a lot of practice
- Helps to make I don't statements:
  - I don't binge watch Netflix when I have a paper to write
  - I don't miss deadlines
  - I don't skip visits to the gym

# Early Career Mistakes

- Over commitment
- Excited with new job
- Want to be a people pleaser
- Appear valuable
- Often lack time management skills
- Leads to increased stress, less productivity and lack of focus
- Having less distractions means more time to think, complete highest priorities and develop new ideas

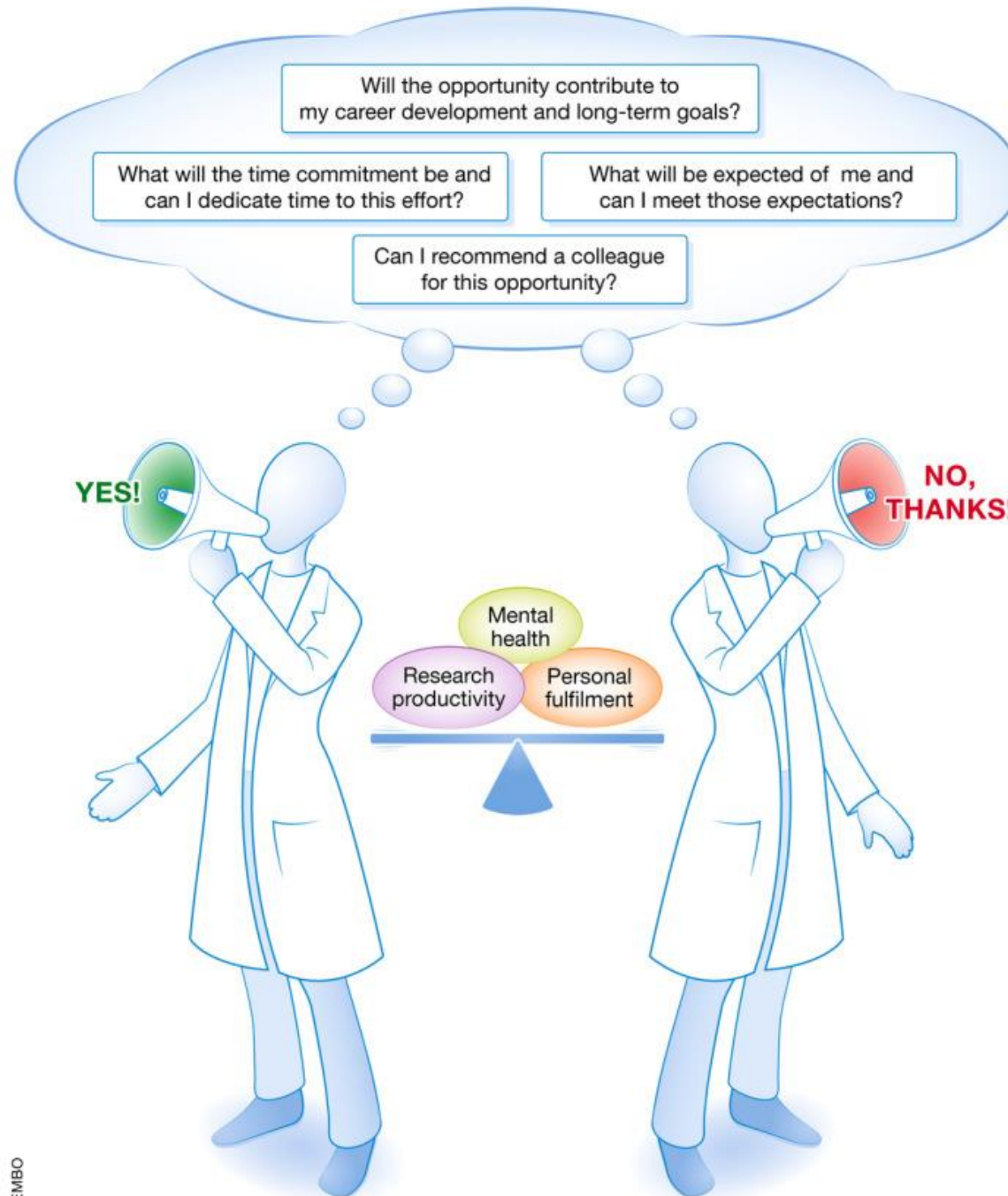
The Power of Saying No. EMBO reports, 2020 Hintan et al

# Early Career

## Don't Say Yes Without Discussing With Your Mentors

1. What is the time commitment?
2. Does this activity help you achieve your primary goal?
3. Will you interact with people who will be helpful in your career?
4. Is this something you want to do or just feel obligated?

Mentors can be a great excuse



# Be Careful With Non Promotable tasks

Examples:

Organizing a team building event

Committee service

Student/resident interviews

Editing or reviewing someone else's work

Planning journal club

Collecting money and buying gifts

- NPTS not instrumental to your departments mission
- NPTS may not require specialized skills and many people can do it



# Women Take On the Bulk of NPTs

- In business, female consultants spend an average 200 more hours per year on NPTs compared to male colleagues
- In mixed gender groups women as compared with
  - 48% more likely to volunteer for NPT
  - 49% more likely to say yes when asked
  - 44% more likely to be asked to do NPT

Underlying reason:

- We expect women to do these tasks
- We judge them harshly when they say no
- Women internalize this expectation and feel a lot of pressure

# Organizations/Departments Can Find Better Ways To Share These NPTasks

- Don't ask for volunteers, equitably assign NPTs
- Set expectations that everyone must participate in NPTs as service to their departments
- Consider rewards for the NPTs

# Are You Taking on Too Many Non-Promotable Tasks?

by [Linda Babcock](#), [Brenda Peyser](#), [Lise Vesterlund](#), and [Laurie Weingart](#)



- Evaluate the indirect benefits of NPTs, not all are the same
- Some NPTs can help you gain knowledge, develop skills or connections that can help you
- Other NPTs align with personal mission, like advancing DEI
- We all have to do NPTs so choose those that are best for you

# 75/20/5 Focusing Your Effort

- 75% Effort:
  - Family/friends
  - Exercise
  - Chair activities (meetings, supporting faculty and trainees, recruiting, strategic planning)
  - Answering emails (problem solving)
  - Clinical/surgical activities
  - Urology Chair Search
- 20% Effort
  - Surgeon-in-Chief
  - Teaching
  - Research
  - President elect, AGOS
- 5% Effort
  - Co-Chair of LCME Committee
  - Speaking engagements/journal reviews
  - National activities
  - EPIC

# No vs. Yes

Knowing which opportunities to accept and which to turn down can be a challenge

- Outsmart the pleasure principle
- Estimate the time required (generously), consider the whole iceberg
- Adopt hard rules
- Ask advice



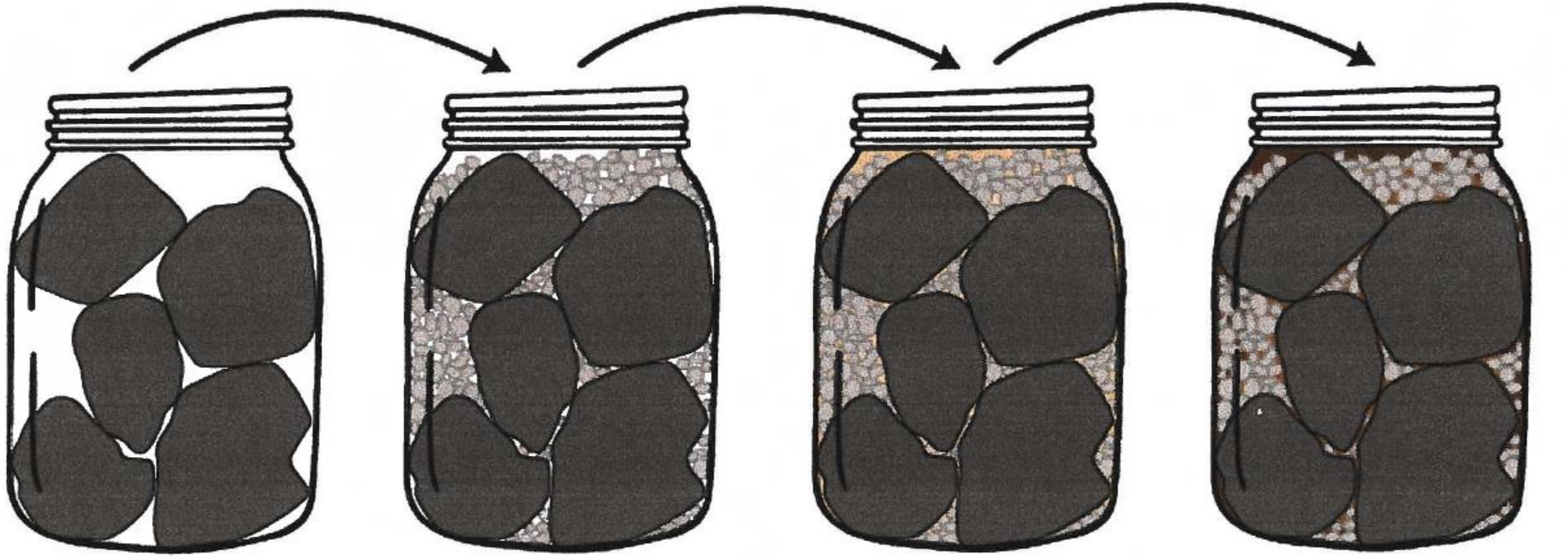
# Conclusions

- Just saying no isn't the right answer
- Saying yes to everything is a career buster
- Deliberate decisions making is critical

# Conclusions – Things You Can Do Today

- Get comfortable with saying no or at least not saying yes right away
- Make a not to do list
- Set up personal policies - what you will and will not agree to
- Set up a list of what you will say no to your self
- • Make a list of your priorities – set time aside each week (rocks, pebbles, sand)
- Spend as much effort in planning enjoyable things as you do planning work (book a vacation for next year)
- Take your birthday off
- Set time to read for pleasure





**BIG ROCKS FIRST**

75%

**GRAVEL SECOND**

20%

**SAND THIRD**

5%

**THERE'S ALWAYS  
ROOM FOR COFFEE  
WITH A FRIEND**



# Conclusions

- Critical to set your own priorities first
- Can attend to other peoples requests when you have enough time and energy

Put your own mask on before helping others

# Questions or Comments

