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How to Say No, Resist Temptation, and Stick to Your Health Goals

Learning how to say no is one of the most useful skills you can develop, especially when it comes to living a healthy life.

Say no to unnecessary commitments, and you have the time you need to recover and rejuvenate. Say no to daily distractions, and you have the space you need to focus on what is important to you. And saying no to frequent temptations can help you stay on track and achieve your health goals.

This, of course, begs the question: how do we avoid distraction (<https://jamesclear.com/time-management-tips>) and get past the urgencies of everyday life (<https://jamesclear.com/are-you-living-an-urgent-life-or-an-important-one>), so that we can actually live healthy and do the things that are really important to us?

It seems like a big task, but research is starting to show that small changes can make a significant impact. In fact, here's one change you can make right now that will make it easier for you to say no, resist temptation and stick to your health and

fitness goals for the long-term.

How to Say No: Research Reveals the Best Way

In a research study published in the Journal of Consumer Research (<https://www.jstor.org/discover/10.1086/663212?uid=3739776&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21102001683777>), 120 students were split into two different groups.

The difference between these two groups was saying “I can't” compared to “I don't.”

One group was told that each time they were faced with a temptation, they would tell themselves “I can't do X.” For example, when tempted with ice cream, they would say, “I can't eat ice cream.”

When the second group was faced with a temptation, they were told to say “I don't do X.” For example, when tempted with ice cream, they would say, “I don't eat ice cream.”

After repeating these phrases, each student answered a set of questions unrelated to the study. Once they finished answering their questions, the students went to hand in their answer sheet, thinking that the study was over. In reality, it was just beginning.

As each student walked out of the room and handed in their answer sheet, they were offered a complimentary treat. The student could choose between a chocolate candy bar or a granola health bar. As the student walked away, the researcher

would mark their snack choice on the answer sheet.

Here's what happened...

The students who told themselves “I can't eat X” chose to eat the chocolate candy bar 61% of the time. Meanwhile, the students who told themselves “I don't eat X” chose to eat the chocolate candy bars only 36% of the time. This simple change in terminology significantly improved the odds that each person would make a more healthy food choice.

But the surprises didn't stop there...

How the “Right Words” Make It Easier to Say No

The same researchers were also interested in how the words “can't” and “don't” affect our willingness to say no over the long-term and stick to goals when faced with repeated temptation. After all, most of us can turn down a candy bar once, but eventually we slip up.

In other words, is there a way to say no that makes it more likely that we'll stick to healthy habits and avoid unhealthy ones?

The researchers designed a new study by getting 30 working women to sign up for a “health and wellness seminar.” All of the women were told to think of a long-term health and wellness goal that was important to them. Then, the researchers split the women into three groups of 10.

Group 1 was told that anytime they felt tempted to lapse on their goals they

should “just say no.” This group was the control group because they were given no specific strategy.

Group 2 was told that anytime they felt tempted to lapse on their goals, they should implement the “can't” strategy. For example, “I can't miss my workout today.”

Group 3 was told that anytime they felt tempted to lapse on their goals, they should implement the “don't” strategy. For example, “I don't miss workouts.”

For the next 10 days, each woman received an email asking to report her progress. They were specifically told, “During the 10–day window you will receive emails to remind you to use the strategy and to report instances in which it worked or did not work. If the strategy is not working for you, just drop us a line and say so and you can stop responding to the emails.”

Here's what the results looked like 10 days later...

- Group 1 (the “just say no” group) had **3 out of 10 members** who persisted with their goals for the entire 10 days.
- Group 2 (the “can't” group) had **1 out of 10 members** who persisted with her goal for the entire 10 days.
- Group 3 (the “don't” group) had an incredible **8 out of 10 members** who persisted with their goals for the entire 10 days.

The words that you use not only help you to make better choices on an individual basis, but also make it easier to stay on track with your long–term goals.

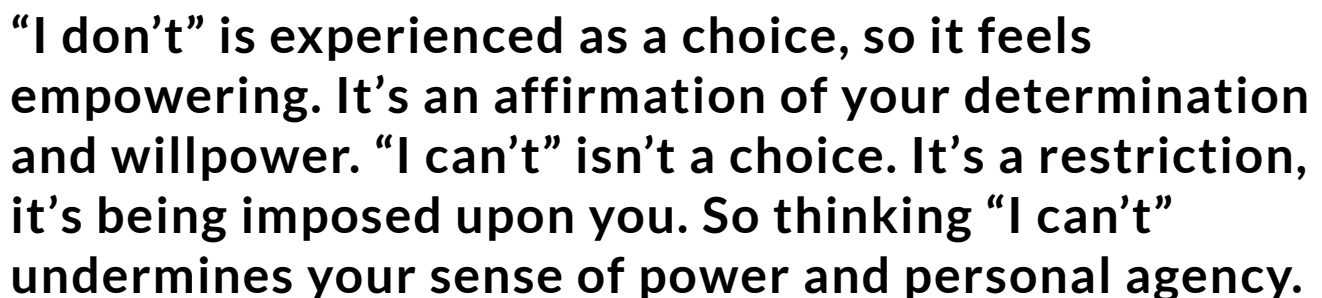
Why “I Don't” Works Better Than “I Can't”

Your words help to frame your sense of empowerment and control. Furthermore, the words that you use create a feedback loop in your brain that impacts your future behaviors.

For example, every time you tell yourself “I can't”, you're creating a feedback loop that is a reminder of your limitations. This terminology indicates that you're forcing yourself to do something you don't want to do.

In comparison, when you tell yourself “I don't”, you're creating a feedback loop that reminds you of your control and power over the situation. It's a phrase that can propel you towards breaking your bad habits and following your good ones.

Heidi Grant Halvorson is the director of the Motivation Science Center at Columbia University. Here's how she explains the difference between saying “I don't” compared to “I can't”...



“I don't” is experienced as a choice, so it feels empowering. It's an affirmation of your determination and willpower. “I can't” isn't a choice. It's a restriction, it's being imposed upon you. So thinking “I can't” undermines your sense of power and personal agency.

In other words, the phrase “I don't” is a psychologically empowering way to say no, while the phrase “I can't” is a psychologically draining way to say no.

How You Can Apply This To Your Life

One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself.

—Leonardo Da Vinci

There are situations everyday when you need to say no to something. For example, the waiter who offers you a dessert menu... or the urge to skip a workout and stay home... or the distracting call of texts, tweets, and updates when you should be focusing on something important.

Individually, our responses to these little choices seem insignificant, which is why we don't make a big deal about telling ourselves that we “can't” do something. But imagine the cumulative effect of choosing more empowering words on a consistent basis.

“I can't” and “I don't” are words that seem similar and we often interchange them for one another, but psychologically they can provide very different feedback and, ultimately, result in very different actions. They aren't just words and phrases. They are affirmations of what you believe, reasons for why you do what you do, and reminders of where you want to go.

The ability to overcome temptation and effectively say no is critical not only to your physical health, but also to maintaining a sense of well-being and control in your mental health.

To put it simply: you can either be the victim of your words or the architect of them. Which one would you prefer?

P.S. If you want more practical ideas for how to build new habits (and break bad ones), check out my book *Atomic Habits* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/atomic-habits>), which will show you how small changes in habits can lead to remarkable results.



Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

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With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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