

BRAIN MATTERS

How to say 'no' to social invitations

Declining an invite does not hurt the person inviting you as much as you may fear, research shows



By Richard Sima

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Have you been to a social event you didn't want to go to simply because you were concerned about saying no?

Next time, freely say no. Research shows that declining an invitation does not pose as severe a social consequence as we fear.

"What we found over and over is that people overestimated these negative implications," said Julian Givi, assistant professor of marketing at West Virginia University and co-author of the study.

Saying no is hard, but there are downsides to *not* saying no.

It can put us in uncomfortable situations or cause us to bail or ghost later, said Vanessa Bohns, a professor and the chair of organizational behavior at Cornell University who was not involved in the study. "It can lead to all these negative consequences for both parties."

And there are opportunity costs. Think "about the things you are implicitly saying no to by saying yes to this thing," Bohns said. That includes quality time with yourself, perhaps basking in the joy of missing out. "Burnout is definitely a real thing," Givi said. "It is important to take some time for yourself and just relax."

Overestimating negative consequences

Givi and his colleague Colleen Kirk, an associate professor of marketing at New York Institute of Technology, conducted five experiments with more than 2,000 online participants. In the first experiment, one group of participants imagined saying no to a friend's invite to go to the museum and how that friend would feel. A second group imagined a friend rejecting their invite to a museum outing.

Those rejecting the outing consistently overestimated both the immediate negative ramifications (for instance, their friend feeling angry, disappointed or neglected) or more long-term harms (such as fewer future invitations or more rejections from the friend) than those who were rejected.

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The pattern even held for real invitations among romantic couples. In another experiment, one partner was asked to invite the other to a social event; the other partner was instructed to reject that invitation. Similar to the first experiment, the one rejecting the invite overestimated how hurt their partner would feel.

“We really think people are going to be offended and upset and angry with us when we say no,” Bohns said. “But that tends to be overblown in our minds.”

The study suggests people find it difficult to accurately understand the perspective of the person whose invitation is rejected — even neutral third-party observers overestimated the negative effects of a rejection.

In the fifth and final experiment, participants played both inviter and invitee to a dinner party, in a randomized order. The results showed that experiencing rejection to a social invitation helps people recalibrate the effect of saying no. The participants who first invited someone to socialize, and were then rejected, became more accurate at predicting how an inviter really feels when an invitation is declined.

So next time you're too tired to go out but are worried about hurting someone's feelings, try imagining your reaction if the situation were reversed. Would you be upset if a friend declined your social invitation because they were tired or money was tight? Or would you understand and just make plans for another time? When you want to say no, thinking about how *you* feel when someone declines your invite, can make you more accurate in your predictions, Givi said.

We matter to other people

In the experiments, the social events were relatively common ones — dinner parties, museum visits and hiking excursions. The researchers did not test more socially significant or rare social events where a ‘no’ may pack more weight, such as a wedding or baby shower. (Givi suspects that though the social costs would be higher, people would still overestimate it.)

Another limitation is that each time, the excuse for saying no was the same — the person wanted to stay home and relax. But other research has shown that the reason we decline a social invitation matters. For example, a previous

study found people tend to be more understanding if your reason for declining is a lack of money than a lack of time, possibly because financial constraints are less changeable. Other research shows that it feels worse to be rejected for someone else (vs. nobody).

But the new study fits into broader research that shows a mismatch between how we see our effect on other people and how others feel it. We not only tend to overestimate the consequences of doing something socially negative, we also underestimate how good we can make another person feel when we give gratitude, compliments or a helping hand. “We don’t give ourselves enough credit,” Givi said.

On the flip side, the study adds to growing research “suggesting that people are not as fragile as we think they are,” Bohns said. “They’re not as judgmental as we think they are.”

How to say no to social invitations

Don’t decline social events willy-nilly. Research has consistently shown the benefits of socializing with friends. But if a particular invitation does not strike your fancy, here are some best practices for declining it.

Don’t say “maybe.” If you are not planning to go, don’t leave the other person in limbo. For the inviter, ‘maybe’ can be hurtful, because they aren’t sure of your answer which may affect their plans, Givi said.

Address the challenges to saying no. We find it difficult to say no because we fear looking bad (we aren’t fun, nice or helpful), making the other person angry or hurting the relationship, Bohns said. Address each of these hurdles in your reason with this template: “It’s not about me. It’s not about you. It’s not about us,” Bohns said. For example, “I’d love to hang out and it’s great you asked, but I’m exhausted and want to stay home.”

Try saying “no, but ...” If you decline a proposed activity, suggest a different one in the future. “That way you’re still engaging with the person,” Givi said.

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