

THE NO BOOK
BY TIM FERRISS
& NEIL STRAUSS

**HOW TO GET EVERYTHING YOU WANT
BY SAYING NO TO EVERYTHING YOU DON'T**

PLEASE NOTE

What follows is a work in progress and an uncorrected proof.

Translation: things will change. Chapters may be cut, reorganized, or completely rewritten by the time this becomes a real book.

Consider this a sneak peek for the curious and not the final product.

Please enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Tim', with a stylized flourish at the end.

INTRODUCTION

NEIL STRAUSS

The goal of life is to make good decisions.

And decisions are the simplest thing in the world. They just consist of a single choice between two words:

yes or no.

Through this binary choice, much like the way a computer builds digital worlds out of 0s and 1s, we create our destiny.

These two options, however, are not created equal. There is just a tiny sliver of the world that we have the time to experience. So we are called to filter through the nearly infinite spectrum of all that is available to us... and say no to almost everything. The more we can say no to the things that don't serve us, the more we are living our purpose.

And I am failing at my life purpose.

I say yes to fucking everything.

This is why I decided to help write this book. Not just to help you but to help me reclaim my life.

When I was trying to decide what to share in this introduction, I called Tim for his thoughts.

"Can you think of a recent example where you said yes to something you shouldn't have?" he asked.

My ex-wife was sitting next to me, and it took her 1.5 seconds to come up with an example: "Janet's costume party tonight."

We all probably have a Janet in our lives. She is so pushy and persistent, in the kindest and most enthusiastic way, that I have trouble saying no to her. To her, a yes is a legally binding agreement. A *maybe* is a yes. And a *no* is the beginning of a guilt trip that ends when you fold and say *maybe*—which she then takes to mean yes, making it a legally binding agreement.

"So just cancel," Tim wisely suggested.

"I can't," I replied unwisely.

"See?" Ingrid gloated. "I rest my case."

Her case was indeed rested. On my guilty conscience.

I grew up in a home where saying no wasn't an option.

A no would get you a stern lecture, a long grounding, or worst of all, a withdrawal of love. So as an adult, I became existentially terrified that every *no* would come with some sort of blowback, such as losing a friendship, an opportunity, or someone's good will. And now I give my time—and my life—away, sometimes to people who have been publicly shitty to me. They call this trauma bonding. It's my specialty.

Not like Tim.

Tim is the master of no. As I write this in mid-October 2023, his text messages have an auto-response that reads:

I'm traveling overseas until Nov 7. If your text is urgent, please reach out to someone on my team. Otherwise, please resend your text after Nov 7 if it still applies. Since catching up would be impossible, I'll be deleting all messages upon my return and starting from scratch. Thank you.

Deleting three weeks worth of messages! That is boss-level no.

It's basically saying: *The message you sent me is your priority, not automatically mine.*

It's a screaming yes to life.

It is truly an act of courage to not worry about how every single person who receives that text is going to react to being deleted. And this is just a small, everyday example of Tim's time mastery.

Here's how incredible Tim is at saying no at a world-record level:

Five years ago, he called to tell me he was writing a book on how to say no. He wanted me to contribute an essay to it.

I didn't have time to help out. So of course I shut it down with these four words: "Yes, I'll do it!"

I didn't want Tim to be mad at me or stop asking me to contribute to his books or abandon me as a friend and talk shit about me to Naval Ravikant.

Afterward, I spent a week writing a chapter for his project, and grumbling about how I should be spending the time working on my own book. After all, people pleasers like me live in constant resentment. We blame other people's requests for our bad decisions.

I finished the essay and sent it to Tim, as did many others. Tim sent some follow-up questions, just to take up more of our time and make sure we regretted our decision, then he did something incredible:

He said no... *to the whole book!*

He has so thoroughly mastered the art that he actually said no to the book on no. And then went on to return the largest book advance he'd ever been given.

Wow, that was an impressive act of self-preservation. While it may take you five days to read a book, it can take him three years to write and research it. That's three years of his life he gained back with a single *no*.

There was just one problem: I needed the book. As did so many others. It's a war zone out here. Our devices and apps, even some of our home appliances, are constantly studying us, determining how to focus more of *our* attention on *their* business models. Under the guise of helping us, they drown us in inboxes, notifications, and alerts, synced to phones, tablets, watches, even our cars. And if you don't respond to the Janets of the world within fifteen minutes, you get the inevitable "Are you okay?" or "Are you upset at me?" message. Or even worse, the insidious "???"

Whether the challenge is the phone, other people, or our own compulsions, most of us need help saying no to what doesn't matter and drains our life energy. So I reached out and told Tim that if he didn't want to finish the book, I would.

On the condition that he could cancel the whole endeavor anytime he liked with one *no*, he eventually sent me a 72,000-word Scrivener file of his notes, thoughts, writings, and collected information. I then set about organizing it into a book that would help me and others live a more meaningful, connected, purpose-driven life by following the path of *no*.

Whether the challenge is the phone, other people, or our own compulsions, most of us need help saying no to what doesn't matter and drains our life energy.

But simply dispensing rejections isn't the goal. You need amazing things worth defending. The path of *no* is also the path of *selective* yesses. This book is a guide to finding the critical few among the trivial many.

It's about finding the big yesses in our lives. Just a few. These may be people, partners, projects, places, and passions—yesses so incredibly fulfilling that they enable us to say no to everything else. In fact, you only have to get a few big yesses right to live a deeply successful and joyful life.

The book that follows was put together by the two of us from Tim's notes and experiences; further discussions and research; lots of hilarious video calls; and contributions from other gurus of *no*, some of whom actually said no to us. We have included their rejections in the book as templates. Unless otherwise stated, every chapter and first-person anecdote that follows is from Tim's perspective.

Hopefully, by the end of this guide, we can all learn that there is a highway to happiness. And the borders that keep us on it, that prevent us from straying into the abyss of meaninglessness, are paved with the word *no*.

TORSCHLUSSPANIK
TIM FERRISS

I first realized I had a problem when everything was going right for me.

The day was May 2, 2007, just after 5:30 p.m. in New York, when I received a phone call I'll never forget. My editor at Random House wanted to inform me that my debut book, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, had hit the *New York Times* bestseller list.

As her words sunk in, I staggered backward and collapsed against the wall in shock, gratitude, and relief. Overnight, I was transformed from a guy begging people to answer his emails to someone on the other side. All kinds of requests and offers poured in. Speaking gigs, interviews, consulting, partnerships, brand deals—it was a tsunami.

Flattered, unprepared, and afraid this might be my only 15 minutes of fame, I said yes to nearly everything, especially anything six, nine, or twelve months off in the distance. My calendar seemed like pristine water, clear as crystal for a brief lull. Then I had to pay the piper.

Rarely in the same place for more than a week, I felt more like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* than a jet-setting rock star. My assistants and I were getting hammered with hundreds, then thousands, of emails per day. Ninety percent of the time, I had no idea how people got my private email addresses. We were drowning.

The irony was that my systems worked great. It was pure operator error.

In the deluge, I had slipped from a mindset of JOMO (Joy of Missing Out) and following my own priorities to a mindset of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and reactively grasping at shiny objects and shiny people. I was succumbing to what the Germans call *Torschlusspanik*: literally, “door-closing panic.”

The term comes from the time of walled, medieval cities, when the gates would close at night—and any resident left outside would be forced to fend for themselves. Getting through those doors often meant survival.

Saying yes to other people's priorities made mine vanish like sand through my fingers.

In survival mode, I panicked. I stopped following my own rules. Once I made the first exception, the game was lost. It was death by a thousand paper cuts.

So, what the hell happened? Why didn't I see it coming?

These habits are formed early and embed themselves deeply. I come from a family full of lovely and conflict-avoidant folks. This isn't true for everyone in the extended clan, but it's enough for my default to be people-pleasing. Or, more accurately, *people-fearing*—a distinction we'll dive into later.

Before the publication of my book, with little inbound, the effects of people-pleasing were negligible. I came up with wild plans, went out hunting for opportunities, cold-emailed people to pitch ideas, and knocked things off my to-do list. After the success of the book, with 1000x more inbound, the effects of people-pleasing were catastrophic. The underlying fear and guilt came out in full force and wreaked havoc. I was being emailed and called by a Genghis Khan army of versions of myself (surprise, bitch!), and I didn't have a playbook. Saying yes to other people's priorities made mine vanish like sand through my fingers.

It took a while to unwind and figure out that I was doing it all wrong.

Twelve months later, I had stemmed a good portion of the blood loss. It was only possible because I had found a big YES that allowed me to focus and say no to at least 50 percent of the noise:

Startups.

I used the book's popularity with technologists to begin investing in and advising startups, and I soon moved to San Francisco to be in the center of the action. The timing was good, and I had incredible luck (Shopify, Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Alibaba, and more).

One afternoon, I found myself in the office of a CEO and friend. His company would later become one of the fastest-growing startups in history. That day, he was calm as usual, despite the chaos and noise of Market Street a few floors below. Once we'd caught up on the latest developments, the conversation meandered into productivity systems, and I asked how he thought about managing email. He spun his laptop around on his desk to show me his Gmail account. Once my eyes adjusted, I stood there slack-jawed, fixated on one thing:

84,000+ unread email.

Smiling at my shock, he said,

“Inbox zero is a fallacy.”

Completely unfazed, he went on to explain a few policies he had. He ignored 99 percent of what came in. For much of what remained, his answer was a short, “Not up my alley. Thanks.”

If 10 different but appealing people asked him to grab dinner, he would invite those 10 people to a group dinner and kill many birds with one stone.

If he wanted to preserve political capital but decrease contact with certain people, he'd do the “slow fade”: He might first reply to them in 5 days, then 10 days, and then 20 days. “They will stop asking,” he noted.

Clearly, there were levels to filtering, and then there were *levels* to filtering. I took a photograph of his 84,000 unread count as a reminder.

Right after that meeting, I created a digital swipe file called “polite declines” in Evernote, a product made by another startup I advised. Starting that week in 2009, if anyone said no in a way that struck me as elegant or clever, I saved it. If a rejection somehow made me feel good, I saved it. If someone had great policies on their contact form, I saved it. If I came across a trick, tool, or philosophical reset for saying no—whether over a meal, via email, or at the airport—I saved it.

This book contains the highlights from that swipe file.

It's taken me an embarrassingly long time to implement the advice here, but I've found rules, systems, and tools that make life a *lot* easier. Of course, these strategies apply to dealing with other people, including strangers, loose ties, and family. But they also apply to managing *ourselves*, especially those glitches in our mental operating system that act against our best interests.

I've also found ways to idiot-proof things and bring the lifeboat closer, such that when you do slip into overcommitting (it'll happen), it's one step to recovery instead of ten.

This book was originally written like my other books (i.e., Tim tests everything, writes about what works, then publishes), until I called Neil to see how a rewrite was coming on a rough draft.

“Hey, Tim, I’m in Copenhagen,” he screamed over a cacophony of background noise. “I’m at this conference I agreed to speak at, but now I’m hosting the whole thing, and it’s been taking up all my time.”

“That’s not good. I hope they’re paying you well.”

“They’re not paying me anything.” He paused and sighed. “And you’re not going to believe this, but I told the guy running the conference he could stay at my house when he’s in LA next month.”

“You what?! Has this book been working for you at all?”

He stammered a response, and we both came to realize that for a die-hard people pleaser, information and templates aren’t enough. As my friend Derek Sivers puts it, “If more information were the answer, then we’d all be billionaires with perfect abs.”

So we rebuilt the book from the ground up as a daily, step-by-step experience with readings, exercises, and a complete plan that is relentlessly action-focused.

The first test subject was Neil. As he went through these exercises and steps, he added his own experiences, notes, and struggles. Afterward, seeing the eventual transformation, it’s clear that *if you do the work, this book really, really works*. The book is designed to meet you where you are on your no journey and take you further than you think possible.

And unlike most self-help programs, there is no set of one-size-fits-all rules. Through these readings and exercises, you will pick up a toolkit that is uniquely your own, tailored to your specific goals, challenges, strengths, and weaknesses. Some chapters won’t be for you, but some will be *especially* for you.

***The No Book* is a Trojan Horse for becoming better at decision-making writ large. Decision-making is your life.**

Everything from a job offer to a marriage proposal is a yes to one thing and a no to hundreds of thousands of other opportunities. It’s easy—the universal default—to get pulled into the quicksand of half-hearted yesses and promiscuous overcommitment, ending up stressed and reactive, wondering where your time has gone.

The No Book re-examines how we navigate our finite path. It will help you build a benevolent phalanx—a protective wall of troops—that guard your goals, your relationships, and more, making everything more easeful.

As you get deeper into this book, you’ll begin to realize that how you handle *no* mirrors how you handle almost everything in life. Dramatically changing your nos will dramatically change your life.

If Neil can fix his Copenhagen debacle and do a 180—which he did—the sky is the limit.

So let’s start building you some wings.

Chapter One

CORE CONCEPT

The Wilson Letter

If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.

— [Jack Kornfield](#)

I can't give you a sure-fire formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure:
try to please everybody all the time.

— Herbert Bayard Swope, three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist

Edmond Wilson, recipient of both the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the National Medal for Literature, was one of the most prominent social and literary critics of the twentieth century.

His writing, honed at *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New Republic*, played a large role in introducing F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner to the mainstream.

He realized, like most uber-productive people, that, while there were many practices needed to guarantee high output, there was one behavior guaranteed to prevent all output:

Trying to please everyone.

He had a low tolerance for distraction and shunned undue public acclaim. In response to almost all letters, he would reply with the below, putting a check mark next to whatever had been requested:

Edmund Wilson regrets that it is impossible for him...

...without compensation to:

- read manuscripts
- contribute to books or periodicals
- do editorial work
- judge literary contests
- deliver lectures
- address meetings
- make after-dinner speeches
- broadcast.

...under any circumstances to:

- contribute to or take part in symposiums
- take part in chain-poems or other collective compositions
- contribute manuscripts for sales
- donate copies of his books to libraries
- autograph books for strangers
- supply personal information about himself
- supply photographs of himself
- allow his name to be used on letter-heads
- receive unknown persons who have no apparent business with him.

Ahead of his time not just in his literary taste, Wilson was also a trailblazer with his auto-response. It is an example of one of the most time-saving forms of *no* there is: The Pre-Emptive *No*. And the first step in your *no* journey is to understand the incredible, time-saving power of answering *no* before a request has even been made.

In brief, the pre-emptive no is a form of batch request processing.

It involves creating iron-clad policies of what you will say no to in an automated message, whether it be a form letter, autoresponder email, voicemail, website contact page, or otherwise. This type of blanket response allows you to ignore any incoming messages that fall in the pre-announced *no* pile. If handled correctly, this can change how you approach your entire life.

Note that you don't have to be as accomplished as Edmund Wilson to have a pre-emptive *no*. Every one of us is in the process of growing out of something we used to do. For some, like Wilson, that means signing books and giving free lectures. For someone else, it might simply be going to destination weddings, taking babysitting jobs, or doing shots when a friend is buying for the table.

Despite the length and severity of Wilson's pre-emptive *no*, he was not a hermit or loner. He had a keen sense of what mattered. With good friends and good boundaries, he was able to get more done in a few years than most people get done in their lifetimes.

Okay, here is where we take a very deliberate pause:

Slow down and check in with yourself. How are you feeling after reading his letter and learning about the pre-emptive *no*? What is your inner voice saying, if anything? Really take a minute.

If I suggested that you use something similar, how would you reply to me right now? Close your eyes and take stock.

I've found the Wilson Letter serves like a Rorschach inkblot test. Someone's reaction to it tells me a lot, very quickly, about their comfort or resistance to this type of *no*—and their psychology behind it.

There are two emotional responses to the Wilson auto-response that are, by far and away, most common, which I've seen over and over again. Broadly speaking, they are:

1. I'm not successful enough to do that.

Language like the following frequently shows up, often accompanied by resignation, dismissal, or scoffing:

"Must be nice."

"You can't do this if you're just starting out."

"If I did that, offers would dry up. I'd stop getting opportunities."

Interestingly, the "not successful enough" response has no correlation to someone's actual wealth. I've heard this type of response from people making \$50,000 per year, and I've heard the same from people making \$10,000,000+ per year.

More material abundance doesn't fix this default response, but a few new frameworks will.

2. I'm too nice/kind to do that.

Language like the below frequently pops up, often accompanied by anger or righteous indignation:

"I would/could never do something like that."

"He is so rude."

"I value kindness and generosity."

"I bet many people helped him become so successful, and now he's refusing to help anyone."

For the record, I do believe it is possible to be both successful *and* nice.

Kindness can be your companion. But it is not possible to be successful while running around trying to please everyone.

And, if you learn anything from this book, I hope it's that being constantly accommodating when you don't want to is not being nice. It's insincere, enabling, and manipulative. It also breeds long-term resentment. That's not nice; it's a time-bomb.

We all exist on a spectrum between being pure people pleasers, who bend to everyone else's wishes, and being complete psychopaths, who accommodate no one (e.g., Gordon Gekko). Most of us err on the side of people-pleasing because we want to avoid the discomfort and possible consequences of them being unhappy.

If you learn anything from this book, I hope it's that being constantly accommodating when you don't want to is not being nice.

The majority of you reading this book, who say yes too often, will benefit by pushing closer to the midpoint of the spectrum through this exercise. Rather than a 100 percent overhaul of your life, all you need to consider is a 10 percent shift of your default responses in the other direction. Ten percent more Gordon Gekko will give you a great dose of extra agency, not arrogance.

How much more could you get done—and how much happier would you be—if you refused even one type of request you commonly receive? Or an infrequent request that nonetheless causes you headache or heartache?

"Is it time for you to write your own Wilson Letter?"

I put quotation marks around the above question, as I posed that challenge rhetorically to some readers many years ago.

Much to my surprise, a bunch of people actually did it. Slightly edited for length, here is one fantastic example from a reader named Maggie:

Writing this out was cathartic. It was hard to stop once I got started, and the deeply rooted sick little people-pleaser in me is scared to put it out there at all, but what a thrill:

As I am joining the exodus from Brooklyn to a quiet, productive, groovy life upstate, I would be remiss not to inform you that I will no longer be able to:

- Respond to any email including the words “pick your brain” or “would love to get coffee sometime”*
- Continue using any glitchy online service that demands more than 5 minutes to take care of a minor account change or basic function*
- Have the same conversations again & again at the same next party*
- Read or listen to ANYTHING about any guy you heard from on match.com*
- Wait lugubriously for the F train on the weekend. HAHAHAHA! See ya!*
- “Catch up” with you on your sketchy cell phone when you are also filling up your gas tank/in line at the deli/talking in thinly veiled code while driving home with the guy you want to break up with*
- Read ANYTHING you want to publish, under any circumstances, unless the entire thing makes me nearly pee my pants laughing*
- Cheerily & spontaneously offer a fully formed, bulletproof, and complimentary PR plan for you when I bump into you outside the Tea Lounge mid-afternoon & we get to chatting about your projects*
- Chat about your projects*
- Listen to job complaints and either bite my tongue or get my head bitten off for suggesting a change might be possible*
- Listen to any sentence regarding how many calories breast feeding/your new cardio plan burns*
- Somehow mysteriously spend 60 dollars the minute I walk out my door every day, sort of like I exhaled it without even knowing*

Sincerely and with love,

Maggie

Go, Maggie, go!

Let us call this type of bullet list a “selfishness manifesto,” which is what another reader named it. It’s the perfect flippant name for this exercise, as folks who say yes too often tend to believe it’s selfish to prioritize their own needs.

But as [Arianna Huffington](#) has said, “You have to put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others.” Compassion begins with yourself. Without self-compassion, your projected compassion is a fraud.

Drafting your own selfishness manifesto will allow you to vent, laugh, and uncover truths that wouldn’t surface if you were taking things seriously. It’s a workaround.

COMFORT CHALLENGE: YOUR SELFISHNESS MANIFESTO

I was always ashamed to take. So I gave. It was not a virtue. It was a disguise.

— Anaïs Nin

As promised, welcome to your first assignment. It may be tempting to simply read the Comfort Challenges that recur throughout this book and *imagine* doing them.

Don't be that person. That person won't get anything from this book. This is a *workbook*. It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than it is to think your way into a new way of acting.

By analogy, no PhD in soccer by itself will help you play soccer. If you want skills that work under pressure (which you do), you have to get off the bench of passivity and develop a love affair with action: get on the field, kick the ball, do the drills, and play against live opponents who thwart your attempts. The little actions aren't hard, and the little actions add up surprisingly quickly.

So let's get on the field.

Start by getting a notebook, opening your favorite notes app, or creating a new document on your computer. Title it something like: Comfort Challenges, THE NO BOOK, or if bad puns are your thing, My *NO*-tebook. You will be adding all future Comfort Challenges to this workbook as well, so make it something that you have easy access to—and that can hold all your work in one place.

And then begin:

1. At the top of the page, write the words **My Selfishness Manifesto** as a header. This will be your new operating manual. Keep in mind that what we are calling "selfishness" is really just a playful way of saying that from now on, you will be taking better care of yourself and your time. If that phrasing throws you off, make it **My Self-Preservation Manifesto** or **My Wilson Letter**.
2. Either use Edmund's format below or write your own version of his pre-emptive *no* statement:

[Your name] regrets that it is impossible for him/her/pronoun...
...without compensation to:

[LIST]

...under any circumstances to:

[LIST]

3. In the spirit of the examples in this chapter, draft the most honest and direct rejection page that you'll never actually use. Have fun with it. Be brutal and 100 percent selfish. Unlike Edmund Wilson, there is no need for you to ever show your letter to anyone. So let loose.

Because this is just for you, there's no need to play nice. Consider throwing a few elbows instead. Name names, tell them how you really feel, and draw that line in the sand. Resist the impulse to soften anything. Let all the annoyance out. That's the whole point of the exercise. Also, keep in mind that this is a rough draft. Don't get bogged down with second-guessing things or considering exceptions. Just let it rip.

- 1.If you're having any trouble coming up with your lines in the sand, consider working on this with a good friend over a meal or bottle of wine. This is a great team sport. Ask your friend questions like, "What kinds of things annoys the &%\$* out of me? What do I complain about?"
- 2.Now that your list is complete, let your Wilson Letter be your internal compass. Read it each morning for a week. Before saying yes to a request, wait a moment. Check your list and see if the item is there. If it is, then it's a no.

Don't yet be concerned with *how* you're going to say no. We'll get there. Just don't say yes. Deflect. If you can't muster a clear no, say "Maybe. Let me check my calendar and I'll get back to you *if* I can do it." Note that this is a default *no* and closes the door unless you reopen it. *Just don't say yes off-the-bat.*

- 3.Keep your Wilson Letter as a living document that grows as you do. Over the next weeks, as various texts and emails come in, you may find yourself wanting to add items you overlooked to your list. Inspiration can come from unexpected places.

NEIL'S STRUGGLE JOURNAL

People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time, they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy.

— [Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*](#)

Tim assigned me this first comfort challenge, and it was an unexpected struggle for me. What I told myself is that I couldn't find the time because I was so busy. But the truth was that I wasn't making the time. Everything else seemed urgent—work deadlines, time with my children, dates with random people from random apps. Besides, I understood the general idea of the letter, so I didn't feel like I actually needed to write it all out.

Fortunately, after a conversation with a disappointed Tim, the people pleaser in me found a good way to keep myself accountable.

Like many people on Instagram with a following of more than 23 people, I have a coaching group. Every one of my students also struggles with saying no, people-pleasing, and setting boundaries.

So I asked them if they would be open to doing these Comfort Challenges with me, and they agreed. At the beginning of each monthly session, we dove into an exercise together. This not only gave me the accountability to do the challenges myself but the opportunity to fine tune them based on how they resonated with others with different experiences.

After finally creating my Wilson Letter, I had a revelation that affected how I thought about everything else in this book: For me personally, there was an important category missing. As instructed, I wrote down the behaviors I would no longer accept:

- People I met once who text me for years after just to stay in touch
- "Friends" who think my social media is their personal promotion service.
- And especially people who pester me about going to lunch, then, after I reluctantly accept, end the meal by inviting me to lunch again and immediately start texting to "lock a date in."

As I wrote all this, I realized something. In each of these cases, the problem wasn't really other people. They were just being themselves. They enjoyed staying in touch. They enjoyed going to lunch. They were completely innocent requests. The problem was **me**.

I was responding to them.

I was agreeing to their requests.

I was enabling the behavior that I didn't want.

So I added an additional section to the Wilson Letter:

Behaviors I will no longer accept from myself.

They included:

- Feeling like I have to respond to the stay-in-touch people because they'll be upset.
- Offering a social media promo when I can't do a book blurb because I feel people will be hurt and feel unsupported.
- Thinking I have to read someone's book or book proposal if someone has done me a favor.
- Saying yes to lunch if I like someone but don't have the time for a one-on-one lunch.
- Working in a room with the door open and the phone next to me. That's just inviting interruptions.
- Doing someone's podcast if I don't have a new project to discuss. I don't need to hear myself talk.
- My nine-year-old who is reading over my shoulder as I write this wants me to add: "I will no longer play Mario Wonder with my son instead of writing this book." And he's right.

As Tim pointed out when I shared these results with him (except for the last one), "You're directing the airplane traffic badly, then blaming it on the pilot when there's a crash."

One of Tim's favorite questions, borrowed from [Reboot](#) by [Jerry Colonna](#), is "How am I complicit in creating the conditions I say I don't want?"

So if you're finding yourself complicit in your own misery, and I believe this is almost always the case to some degree, then consider adding my category to your Wilson Letter as an experiment.

When I did this with the rest of the people in my coaching group, which I'm going to start calling a *test group* because I'm sure countless Wilson Letters mention something like "block any asshole who says he or she has a coaching group," not only did they find this helpful, but they discovered something powerful.

When the exercise ended, I felt like they were still waiting for some kind of conclusion or takeaway, so I asked: "If you had to estimate the amount of time you spend doing, resenting, or being annoyed by the things on your list, what percentage of each week would that be?"

The average answer was 30 percent! One person, who was in the midst of a divorce, said it was 60 percent.

That's a *lot* of time and attention you can recover by acting on your Wilson Letter.

If you're anything like me, you may not be ready to act on all these items in your Wilson Letter. But it all starts with self-awareness. Knowledge alone might help cut these things down by 10 to 20 percent, and, as I learned later, the tactics for tackling the remaining 80 percent will come in future Comfort Challenges.

So keep your letter handy.

ANATOMY OF A NO: Life Tetris

While writing this book, I invited best-selling author, coach, and Harvard-trained sociologist [Martha Beck](#) to an event. Her brief, eloquent response was an instant addition to my No Swipe File. Here is my favorite line:

"I would LOVE to come and participate, but I can't make it happen in the next couple of months due to life Tetris."

WHY IT WORKS: It's short, direct, positive, and clever. I included this because "but I can't make it happen due to life Tetris" can be used for practically anything and doesn't provide specifics someone can attempt to negotiate around.

Chapter Two

CORE CONCEPT BIG ROCKS AND THE NOTHING

“Is it very painful?” Atreyu asked. “No,” said the second bark troll, the one with the hole in his chest. “You don’t feel a thing. There’s just something missing. And once it gets hold of you, something more is missing every day. Soon there won’t be anything left of us.”
– [The Neverending Story](#)

Whenever I’m tempted to re-download Facebook or Instagram to my phone, or any of those messaging apps, I repeat the words from the mid-80s movie *War Games* in reference to thermonuclear war: “A strange game; the only winning move is not to play.”
– [Nick Bilton](#), *Vanity Fair* special correspondent and bestselling author

Long ago, [Stephen Covey](#), author of the mega-bestseller [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#), popularized a parable of the professor, big rocks, pebbles, and sand. He even added water for good measure! Perhaps you’ve read it. It’s a story of priorities. It’s worth retelling here, but I’ve added a few twists of my own.

On the final day of a college class, a professor brings four objects to the front of the room: a Mason jar, four rocks the size of golf balls, a handful of pebbles, and a big measuring cup full of sand. This professor, Professor Bastian, places the items on his desk and waits for the pre-graduation chatter to die down.

He then asks the students how they’d fit everything into the jar, inviting them to come up. One student puts in the cup of sand and then the pebbles—no rocks fit. Another puts in the pebbles, then the sand, and only two rocks fit.

The only way to make it all fit, a third figures, is to put in the biggest rocks first. Once the big rocks are in the jar, the pebbles settle around them, then the sand fills in the gaps. After doing this once, however, a healthy pile of sand remained on the table. The student tapped the jar on the table to settle the sand and added more. After repeating this several times, no more could be added, but still: sand remained.

And that’s the rub. The teacher deliberately made it impossible to fit everything in the jar. He used this exercise as a metaphor for priorities.

The jar is your life: all the time you have in your calendar. The rocks represent the most important things, the most exciting things, and the big dreams (e.g., launching a business, writing a book, spending time with loved ones, training for a marathon). The pebbles represent things that are still necessary but less exciting (e.g., paying bills, answering emails, running errands, routine work meetings). Last, the sand represents the things that are neither exciting nor mission-critical: all the B.S., the distractions, other people’s priorities, and “would you be open to…” requests that pull you from the big rocks and pebbles.

In the classic telling of this parable, the sand satisfyingly settles around the rocks and pebbles. Everything fits.

Here’s why I changed it—the sand doesn’t need to fit in your jar, and it never will. It’s a fool’s errand. In the modern digital world, there is more and more sand each year, and if you give it an inch, it will take a foot and ask for more.

It's like The Nothing in *The Neverending Story*, my favorite novel from childhood. In the imaginary world of Fantasia, a land of dreams, The Nothing is a foreboding mist and dark, chaotic storm that expands in every direction, consuming everything. But instead of leaving destruction, it leaves something arguably more disturbing: a void.

The purpose of The Nothing is to make people lose their ability to dream, turning them into empty, controllable beings. If you've ever felt "the real world" choking off your childlike wonder, feeding a creeping cynicism, or distracting your dreams into non-existence, that is The Nothing at work.

Sounds exactly like the sand.

Social media, doom scrolling, "keeping up" with the news, fashionable nihilism, drama-rich friends, requests from loose acquaintances, keeping up with the Joneses, and so on. Sand = The Nothing. It will fill your jar, crowd out your dreams, and turn them into frustration, cynicism, resentment, or apathy... if you let it. It is the nature of the sand to fill gaps, it is time-sensitive, and there's only one strategy that's truly effective for stopping it:

Big rocks worth defending.

That is the only defense against The Nothing. Big rocks placed in your calendar and defended.

If someone looks at lots of empty space in the calendar and sees only a handful of doctors' appointments, scheduled Zooms, and various unrelated bits and bobs, they're going to say yes to all sorts of requests and shiny objects. Why wouldn't they? It's an attempt to create meaning through the collection of commitments.

I've been there, and it isn't fun. That scattered feeling is far more anxiety-producing ("distress" = negative stress) than the focused, positive stress ("eustress" = positive stress) of having a bigger, worthwhile goal.

Scheduling big yesses will crowd out the questionable yesses. It is the solve-all.

Beware anything fashionable, as it's usually sand disguising itself as big rocks. Bestselling author [Seth Godin](#) touched on this on my podcast:

"You can't win while being everywhere," he said. "Most of the people on Earth have never heard of you or me, and most of the people online have never connected with either of us. It's a trap, a giant trap. A trap designed to suck our attention and our content away from us and give us very little in return. Maybe a little heart-shaped thing or a button that points up or a trend that makes us feel like we did a good job. This is all a trap. This isn't what's causing people to succeed. It's not causing people to be able to make the impact that they seek."

So don't pursue the small masquerading as big.

But just as important, ensure that your rocks are rocks and not boulders, mountains, or anything too big to fit in the jar. There are many people who set their goals so high and lofty that they aren't actionable. For example, "solve world peace" or "change the world" goals might sound great at dinner parties, but a better-sized rock is a better next action, whether organizing a specific campaign or event.

Seth advises: "My suggestion is, whenever possible, ask yourself what's the smallest possible

footprint I can get away with? ... What is the smallest possible project that is worth my time? ... What is the smallest group of people who I could make a difference for or to? Because smallest is achievable. Smallest feels risky. Because if you pick smallest and you fail, now you've really screwed up. We want to pick big because infinity is our friend. Infinity is safe. Infinity gives us a place to hide. So I want to encourage people, instead, to look for the small."

To summarize, you want your rocks to be small enough to fit in the jar but big enough that you're willing to fight for them.

THE NO HALL OF FAME: E. B. WHITE

My tardiness in answering your letter was not due to press of business. Do not listen to that sort of excuse; I am at liberty, and so is anyone else who wishes to be at liberty. No man is at the mercy of affairs. He gets entangled in them of his own accord, and then flatters himself that being busy is a proof of happiness.

— [Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, Letter 106](#)

In 1956, the writer [E. B. White](#) was selected for one of the most prestigious positions the United States had to offer an artist. Best known for the children's classics *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, White also co-authored the most popular writing instruction book of all time, *The Elements of Style*.

In the book, he advises: "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences." And there are few better examples of following this rule than White's 1956 response to a letter from President Eisenhower's chief of staff, Sherman Adams.

Adams had written to E. B. White and invited him to join the President's Committee of the Arts and Sciences to support and advise the president on cultural matters. This hand-picked group would have the ear of the most powerful person in the world.

White, however, did not look forward to traveling to Washington, D.C., and participating in this type of group activity. So he sat at his desk and typed out the following response:

Dear Mr. Adams,

Thanks for your letter inviting me to join the committee of the Arts and Sciences for Eisenhower.

I must decline, for secret reasons.

Sincerely,

E. B. White

If White could use this to decline an invitation from the president, perhaps you can trot out something similar for at least one friend, relative, or drunk pest you met once at a party.

The lesson from E. B. White's short and sweet response, and the reason for his entry into the No Hall of Fame, is this: we don't always need to explain our nos.

Our reasons can remain our secret. And if we are worried about how someone will react, remember that a little mystery is often better received than a flurry of excuses and apologies. It also makes our *no* much less negotiable, as there are fewer facts for someone to refute or try and work around (e.g., “You’re busy until May 15th? No problem. I’ll reach back on May 16th to set something up.”).

Of course, like horror movies and marmite, the “secret reasons” response is not for everyone. I’ll give you three alternatives that E. B. White could just as easily have sent to the White House. They use more empathic language but accomplish the same goal: a short, sweet decline that avoids giving specific reasons.

Each was adapted from three uber-busy but uber-thoughtful folks: HubSpot co-founder [Dharmesh Shah](#), financial guru [Ramit Sethi](#), and legendary restaurateur and Shake Shack founder [Danny Meyer](#), in that order. These are single lines pulled from longer emails, but they can often stand alone:

- 1. My heart says yes, but my schedule says no.*
- 2. Thanks so much, but I have to pass. I really appreciate you thinking of me.*
- 3. I thought carefully about this, as it’s clearly something I’d enjoy, but am going to decline—with gratitude.*

Borrow these and apply as needed to texts and emails, whether turning down a pot-luck dinner that requires you to do all the cooking, a co-worker’s birthday weekend in Cancun that’s out of your budget, or an invitation from the president.

Short often works where long fails.

Chapter Three

CORE CONCEPT FINDING BIG ROCKS AND THE PAST YEAR REVIEW

Every day of our lives, we are on the verge of making those slight changes that would make all the difference.

— [Mignon McLaughlin](#)

We don't beat the Reaper by living longer. We beat the Reaper by living well.

— [Randy Pausch](#) (1960–2008); “[The Last Lecture](#)” at Carnegie Mellon

San Diego, California, 2009

The juxtaposition was odd. Outside, I could hear the “untz, untz, untz” of club dance music and the hooting and hollering of revelers. Inside, I was sitting on a red, oversized chair that smelled like grandparents. I was trying to concentrate with a stack of papers, but the buzz from earlier champagne wasn't helping.

It was New Year's Eve, and my friends were on a beautiful outdoor patio of the hotel where there were fire dancers, cocktail servers, and a motley crew of about 100 people getting hammered and looking forward to watching the ball drop for 2010. It was 11:45 p.m.

Roughly 15 minutes earlier, I'd received a text from my mom: the 10-year-old daughter of a dear high school mentor had been diagnosed with liver cancer. She was his only child, and the prognosis looked terminal.

Several hours before that, I learned that one of my friends in his thirties had died of pancreatic cancer. I'd gone skiing with him the year before and he'd been in excellent shape, kicking my ass on the slopes without a care in the world.

Getting drunk was no longer on my to-do list.

If time was our scarcest resource, I wanted to befriend it... immediately.

I stumbled through the lobby bar and asked a waitress if I could borrow a pen. Paper was somehow procured. Then I settled back into the big red chair to work on my first Past Year Review, which I've done every year since.

“According to psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson, we have an unfortunate tendency to ‘miswant’—to want things that we won't like once we get them. ‘In a perfect world,’ they observe, ‘wanting would cause trying, trying would cause getting, [and] getting would cause liking.’”

— [William B. Irvine, *On Desire: Why We Want What We Want*](#)

Before December 31st, 2009, I'd written down something like New Year's Resolutions every year.

Some seemed reasonable, like “resurrect my high school Spanish” or “triple such-and-such income.” Some were ridiculous, like “develop the side splits like Jean-Claude Van Damme.” And others were speculative one-off experiences, like “visit Indonesia.”

Over the years, I'd noticed a few things:

- What I thought would make me excited or happy often didn't.
- The side splits never happened, even though they showed up every year for 10+ years.
- Anything that didn't get added to my calendar within two weeks of starting the year rarely got done. It was forgotten or got crowded out, such as the trip to Indonesia for more than a decade.
- What crowded things out? The main culprit was agreeing to things in the future that I later regretted.

I was thinking about all of this and more when I plopped down in the leather chair in San Diego with pen and paper.

Even to my booze-brain, it was clear that if I started with a blank slate (e.g., what do I want to do in the new year?), I was really bad at predicting what would make me happy in the future.

So I did something simple: I went upstairs to my hotel room, got my laptop, returned to the chair, and reviewed the entire past year's calendar, week by week.

That ended up changing everything.

The Past Year Review has three primary ingredients:

1. Identify peak positive and negative emotional moments from your past year.
2. Schedule blocks of time for positive people, activities, and places on the calendar immediately, before they get crowded out. You can figure out the details later. For now, just get them in your calendar and defend them like your life depends on it, because it kind of does.
3. Create a clear "no" list, based on 1 above. This will play nicely with your Wilson letter.

Even though this is a book about saying no, the most important part of this exercise is identifying the positive, finding things you'd say yes to again. You'll spend a lot of time looking at your nos, but you're going to put your big rocks in the jar first.

Let's walk through putting the whole recipe together.

COMFORT CHALLENGE: PYR — IT'S YOUR TURN

The Past Year Review (PYR) will be one of the more important exercises you do in this book, so don't skip it. Future steps will depend on your answers, and the 30-60 minutes you put in just might change your life.

New Year's Eve isn't necessary. Just review the past 12 months. It looks like this:

PHASE ONE — REVIEW THE PAST 12 MONTHS

1. Grab a notepad and create two columns: positive and negative. If you want to type, go for it, but I usually start with handwriting.
2. Go through your calendar from the last year, looking at every week. If you tend not to calendar items, review your texts or emails instead.

If you want to go the extra mile, one test reader went through the photo album on his phone, where he discovered all kinds of last-minute yesses that he had never calendared. Last but not least, I use [The 5-Minute Journal](#) on an ongoing basis, and a quick flip through helps the PYR tremendously.

3. For each week, jot down any people, places, activities, or commitments that trigger peak positive or negative emotions. Put them in their respective columns.

For peak positives, look for moments that make you think, “I’d love to do that again” or “I should do more of that.” For peak negatives, identify moments that elicit a wrinkle of the nose or thoughts such as “I never want to do that again.” The list will often include things done out of guilt, fear, or prestige-hunger. For bonus points, look at your sent messages and see which texts or emails provoke an automatic “ugh” or exasperated sigh. Listen to your physiology.

4. Once you’ve gone through the past year, look at the list you made and ask, “Which 20 percent from each column produced the most reliable or powerful peaks?”

PHASE TWO — ENGINEER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS FOR SUCCESS

1. Based on the answers, take your “positive” 20 percent and schedule more of them in the coming year. Get them on the calendar now! Book time with friends and prepay for activities, events, trips, experiences, and other things that you know “work” for joy and well-being. **It’s not real until it’s in the calendar. Use sunk cost to your advantage.**
2. Step two is to write NOT-TO-DO LIST at the top of a fresh page and add your “negative” leaders there. Then post it in a place where you can see these items each morning for the first few weeks after the exercise. This list should contain the people and things you know drain your batteries. The returns on your list can come fast!
3. Keep your NOT-TO-DO LIST up to date. In the weeks after this exercise, you’ll likely notice new “I wish I hadn’t done that” commitments. Add ‘em to the hit list.

Those are the basics, but if you want to go the extra mile with your PYR, here are a few questions that I find helpful:

1. Are there any months that look particularly busy or stressful to you? Are there months that are busy but not particularly stressful? What makes them different?
2. Did any relationships or commitments affect your sleep? When did you have your best sleep? When did your sleep suffer? To quote Jodie Foster, “In the end, winning is sleeping better.”
3. Is there anyone you would actually pay to never email or contact you again? If you had to put a maximum number on it, what would it be? \$10? \$100? \$1,000? More?
4. Were you anxious about anything that didn’t happen? Or did you worry a lot about something that ended up very little? Write them down on your phone to review when you start spinning with what-ifs, perseverating, and worry in the future. Don’t believe everything you think. Sometimes evidence is the best tool for calming our hallucinating hypervigilance.
5. Do you have positive clusters of experiences around any particular people or places? For instance, might you decide, as one of my closest friends did, that you’ll simply say yes to just 4–8 select friends or family for nearly any invitation, rather than deciding based on activities.

That’s it.

It might seem like a lot, but it isn't. Investing 30–60 minutes will save you a minimum of dozens of hours in the future.

Remember: it's not enough to remove the negative. That simply creates a void that will get filled by Janets, social media, or other wandering distractions that punish the unfocused. Get at least a few top positives on the calendar as soon as possible, lest they get crowded out by the bullshit that is always waiting around the corner to mug you.

Later in this book, we'll explore how Neil and I choose major projects, career moves, and much more, but the PYR is the first critical chess move.

Do you now have a few big rocks blocked out in your calendar? If not, do not pass Go.

To quote the great sage, [Ferris Bueller](#): "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

ANATOMY OF A NO: LET ME PING YOU...

This *no* was written by yours truly to an acquaintance asking for a catch-up dinner.

Thank you, [NAME]. I'd love to meet up, but things are nuts for me right now (stories for another time and a glass of beer!).

Let me ping you when the dust settles a bit!

All the best to you and yours,

Tim

WHY IT WORKS:

First, it's important to note that I actually do like this person, but my time was short, and I wanted to invest in my closest friendships with the limited time I had.

If that weren't the case, I would replace "I'd love to meet up" with "I really appreciate the invitation," and I would replace "Let me ping you..." with something like "I'll have to raise a glass from the sidelines for now!"

Take a moment to re-read this *no* and see if you can identify the lesson? If you guessed the "let me ping you when the dust settles" sentence, then you're correct. Most people might write, instead, something like, "let's discuss next month" or "feel free to check back next month."

This might feel like a success, perhaps even like a *no*. But in fact, all you've done is punted the *no* ball a month ahead. When that person reaches back, not only will you be back in the same position of having to say *no*, but it will be even harder to decline because you've already deferred once.

Offering to reach out at your convenience doesn't invite a follow-up and doesn't offer a timeline. Whenever possible, get the ball in your court and keep it there.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim Ferriss has been listed as one of *Fast Company's* "Most Innovative Business People" and one of *Fortune's* "40 under 40." He is an early-stage technology investor/advisor (Uber, Facebook, Shopify, Duolingo, Alibaba, and [50+ others](#)) and the author of five #1 *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestsellers, including [The 4-Hour Workweek](#) and [Tools of Titans](#). *The Observer* and other media have called Tim "the Oprah of audio," due to the influence of [The Tim Ferriss Show](#) podcast, the first business/interview podcast to exceed 100 million downloads. It has now exceeded one billion downloads.

Neil Strauss is a ten-time *New York Times* best-selling author. His books, [The Game](#) and [Rules of the Game](#), for which he went undercover in a secret society of pickup artists for two years, made him an international celebrity and an accidental hero to men around the world. Both books topped the *New York Times* best-seller list and were #1 on Amazon, and the former has the dubious distinction of being the most stolen book at Barnes & Noble besides The Bible. His other best-selling books include [Emergency](#), [How to Make Love Like a Porn Star](#) with Jenna Jameson, [The Dirt](#) with Motley Crue, and [The Long Hard Road Out of Hell](#) with Marilyn Manson.