

# Your Life Well Lived

Wellness Advice for Mind, Body and Spirit

## Just Say *Yes*

So often we  
shut down conversations  
without even meaning to.  
Here's how to stop.

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*“The real art  
of conversation  
is not only to say  
the right thing at  
the right place,  
but to leave unsaid  
the wrong thing at  
the tempting  
moment.”*

— Dorothy Nevill

In the words of Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” On our own private stage, we live out this reality in every scene and every conversation.

We all want to be understood, and we want to be heard. We seek validation and real connection, even when we aren’t terribly aware of these basic drives. When we tell someone good news, we want them to be happy for us. When we tell someone of our sadness, it helps to hear a warm reply, “Yes, I hear you are sad.”

But many of our conversations are thwarted by these all-too-familiar responses: “You think that’s good? My grandson graduated with highest honors!” “I’m glad someone is happy.” “Must be nice.” “That’s nothing ... I need surgery next month!” “You don’t seem sad to me.”

Comments like these hijack good conversation and undermine our attempts at meaningful connections. We end up feeling angry, hurt, insulted, misunderstood, or any number of other well-worn forms of miserable.

### A Lesson From an Improv Artist

We can learn a lot about creating better conversations from the men and women who study acting. According to comic Tina Fey, improvisational theater offers us life-actors a treasure chest of director’s do’s and don’ts that we can use to hone our conversational craft.

In her book *Bossypants*, Fey lays out one essential rule for inspired improvisation. The secret to moving an improv scene forward, according to Fey, is surprisingly simple: Say “Yes” or “Yes, and ...” (Fey, 2011)

On the improv stage, if I tell you there is an (imaginary) apple in my hand, and you say, “No there isn’t!” then there is nothing more to add. The scene is dead. If I tell you there is an (imaginary) apple in my hand and you say, “Yes, that’s great; we ditched the apples when the boat sprung a leak, and now we need one to plug the hole!” then we have more to discover about each other and the story. The scene builds upward, and the characters go deeper.

On the personal stage, beginning any interaction with this “agreement” is a powerful way of avoiding judgment while expressing respect for the other person’s point of view. It helps you keep an open

and curious mind and build a real connection with the other person. (It doesn’t mean that you necessarily agree with their entire argument, just that you seek to respect and understand the other’s perspective from the start.)

### No Buts About It

It’s important to realize that just saying “yes” isn’t enough. Too often, we unthinkingly answer, “Yes, but ...” and think our message is getting through. It’s not.

When we hear, “Yes, but,” we hear disagreement and the opposite of validation. We lose trust in the other person’s ability to hear us.

If I say, “It’s a horrible day,” and you respond with, “Yes, but at least it’s better than yesterday,” your language acts as a subtle lever used to shift my perspective, instead of making me feel heard. I feel shut down, although the pressure is so subtle that I may not be aware of what made that happen. I might walk away feeling “off” but not sure why. Surprisingly, you may not be at all aware that you offended or hurt me.

Last week, my mom fell in her apartment. The doctor ordered an ambulance, and she was furious, insisting that she would not go. We spoke on the phone, and she kept repeating, “I hate this; I hate this.” I could have said, “Yes, but you have to let them take you to the hospital.” Instead, I said, “Yes, you hate this, and it’s no wonder. We all hate this, Mom. It’s horrible.”

I could tell she felt validated, and she began to calm down. Only then was I able to add the rest of the “and” — she hates this, it’s awful, *and* she needs to be evaluated at the hospital. She softened a little more, reluctantly agreed, and now she is rehabilitating a fractured hip. Mom needed to be understood and supported first before anyone was able to help solve her problem.

“Yes, and” are especially helpful when we are dealing with a challenge or new opportunity. “Yes, this is scary, and at the same time I am excited.” What a fresh contrast to, “Yes, I’d love to do this, but I’m scared.” Same feelings, different self-talk, more upside potential, and so much more opportunity for the scene to move forward. ♦

### Read more:

Fey, Tina. (2011). *Bossypants*. Reagan Arthur Books, a Little, Brown imprint. New York.