

## The “Okay” Zone

“Say, would you like to go out to dinner with me?”

(*I’m unsure. I hesitate. If I say no, what will happen? If I say yes, what will happen?*)

So I reply with “Okay.”

This simple interaction reveals a world of information.

Someone has asked you out to dinner. It could be a co-worker, a new friend, a partner, a boss. Your uncertainty is tinged with worry. Does a “no” carry consequences? Will someone be upset? Hurt? Angry? Will I lose the chance for that promotion at work?

And let’s think about the “yes”. Will you be giving up something *you* want? Will this person act appropriately? Is there any reason to wonder what your boss *really* wants? Does your co-worker want something more than just dinner? Does your partner need something you can’t give right now?

Your worry leads you to where we all often go: “Okay” you reply, but in your heart, there’s a little voice saying “I don’t really want to.” Welcome to the “Okay” zone.

Most of us live a large part of our social lives in the Okay zone. Too often, we aren’t really sure of *what* we want or don’t want. We’re fearful of negative consequences whether we reply with a yes or a no. “Okay” becomes our safe, default reply. We keep doing this, and it becomes a well-worn habit. We forget what choice is, and we forget how to say “no”.

To be sure, we often say okay with real ambivalence because sometimes it really doesn’t matter. “Would you like your change in ones or fives?” “Would you like to sit here or there?” “Would you like a glass of water?” This kind of daily interaction is nearly automatic and usually is of no consequence in our life. What it does do is subtly reinforce the ease with which we use “okay” as a default response. Therein lies a tale.

How do we know when it matters? Can we change this pattern?

We begin to know when it matters when we sense something is out-of-whack, when we feel some vague sense of unease that is just out of reach, and our body is reacting in subtle but noticeable ways. We know it’s not quite right when there’s this little voice in our head saying “but I would rather...” or “but I don’t really like...” or “but I’m not sure it’s safe..” and our inclination toward what we *do* want is washed away.

We can change this pattern. We can begin to get back in touch with what we want, what we choose, and what makes us uncomfortable. It takes time and practice, and a willingness, sometimes, to be a bit vulnerable. Let’s look at how we can do this.

To better understand the dynamic of the “Okay” zone, it’s helpful to see it as a kind of spectrum.

All the way over on the left, we have the “Hell Yes!”. This is the ideal: an affirmative answer to a request.

All the way over on the right, we have “No way!”. This is our ideal answer when we are sure that we do *not* want something and need to say a clear “no” to a request.

And the entire area in between “yes” and “no” – that’s the “Okay” zone. It looks like this:

“Yes” **the “O K A Y” Zone** “No”

The visual presentation offers a better perspective on what “okay” can mean in practice. Notice the sheer size of the “Okay” zone in relation to “yes” and “no”. This happens for many reasons: the number of different social contexts where we are given an opportunity or required to respond to a request, invitation or offer and the extent, and power of, our socialization and enculturation.

The first part – different social contexts – shows up as the entire mix of mundane (where our decision doesn’t really have major consequences) and significant (where we may want or need to make an active choice that *does* matter to someone – us, or the person making the request, or both).

The second part – socialization and enculturation – shows up as that subtle pervasive force that every single one of us experiences from the moment we are born to the moment we die. And it’s completely *involuntary*: we simply do not have a say in how this influences our life. Think for a moment of any of the larger institutional frameworks that are integral to our lives: family, school or work are perhaps most notable.

In our family, we may experience a sense of expectation about who we “should” be. Family is where many of us learn social protocols – eat nicely, don’t steal, play well with others and so forth. Family is often where we discover that others “expect” us to respond and behave in specific ways. We go along to get along.

When we go to school, all that we learned in our family is with us, but now there is a whole range of other “inputs” – students, teachers, administration – providing “input” to our lives and psyches. It’s understood that it’s simply part of being in school: do your homework, listen to the teacher, behave in the lunchroom and so forth. There’s more, of course, as anyone who has been bullied will attest to: subtle (and not so subtle) expectations about how to be, how to play, who to know, who to stay away from and so forth.

Then we leave school, we get a job, and discover yet another level of social interaction, with expectations, norms and more. Every single one of these actions and interactions can mean a response to a request, offer or invitation, and over the years, we become well practiced in the “right” response. For half the population – women – these expectations, these “right” responses – are too often tinged with sexuality.

Human beings are social creatures, and we do seek physical contact, much of that as a result of our sex drive. While it’s easy to say that “all men want is sex”, that’s not really fair and doesn’t present a full picture. Men *and* women desire sex and physical intimacy, and much of how we ask and respond comes not from some deep innate biological “icky spot” but the same overarching enculturation processes we grow up with. In short, we live what we learn (and *don’t* learn). We learn to ask for water or food or help, but most of us do not learn how to ask for sex or physical intimacy. Without role models, without any sort of practice, we “figure it out”. The results can sometimes be awful. And if we are among those unfortunate enough to have been mistreated as a child, the results can be horrifying.

And it too often happens that, because we don’t know what we want, and we’re afraid to say “no”, we settle. We say “okay” when we *really* meant to say “no”.

So, what can we do? Quite a lot, actually!

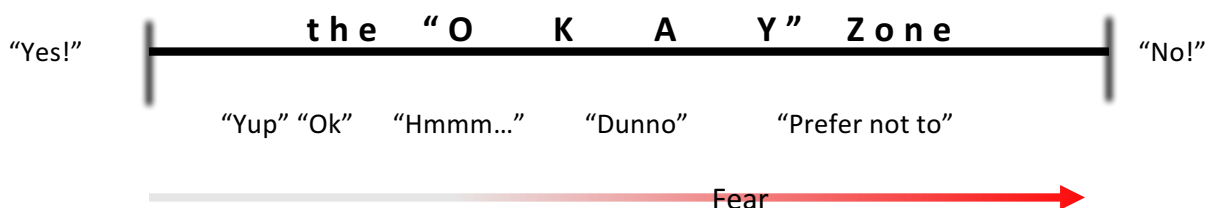
We can understand that unlearning the “okay” is a lifelong process. It’s not going to simply go away. We need to practice, a lot!

We can begin to understand how to think about what we really *do* want and need. Without this, our replies are often obscure and hidden from others and our own selves. How can we give a reply when we ourselves don’t know what it is we want or don’t want?

We can learn to say clearly and out loud the word “no” and eventually make it stick to our vocabulary. We’re not talking here about the mundane “no”, but the no that comes from a clear choice borne out of both clarity and self-interest. When we stop “going along to get along”, when we are able to get really clear in our own minds about just what it is that would be wonderful and what it is that would be uncomfortable, that “no” is a powerful thing indeed.

We can learn to get in touch with our needs and desires and when we honestly are a “hell yes!” Sometimes this involves getting (back) in touch with our body, gently and carefully unpacking the ways that we experience feelings and emotions. And this “yes” also needs practice. Discovering ways that we can be and thrive in situations that invite the “yes” is a powerful way to relearn choice and unlearn “okay” as our default response.

We can learn to *find our willing heart* in our responses and choices. Our willing heart is a way to think through a difficult decision, and we can understand it a bit better if we expand our diagram a bit. Here again is our lovely “Okay” zone, with some added elements that can help us understand how we feel about something and what we want.



Let’s look at an example. You’re invited to a social event. You’re interested in going, but are quite sure you would like not to stay long, but be independent in your arrival and departure. A friend asks if they can carpool with you. What to do? When we look at the spectrum of choices, we can “try them on” in our thinking. “Am I willing to carpool and give up my independence?” might be the question to ask yourself. Then, try on a few answers. Is it “Ok”? How does “Prefer not to” feel? If we imagine that the “tipping point” of our willing heart is about in the middle, then, ideally, we want to be on the side of more yes than no. Our willing heart needs to be in the right place to arrive at a choice that is about *what we want* in order to really consider the request. If we lean far into the “no”, then our willing heart is not there, in which case saying “yes” or “okay” is more about going along to get along or, worse, *enduring* a choice we do not want. If we lean into the “yes” side, then we’re more likely to enjoy the result and can feel fine about having made a choice that we own. Notice also the way that fear fits in here. As we get closer to the “no” side of the spectrum, the potential for fear to be part of how we decide increases.

This might seem overly complicated at first glance. As you look it over, think of the times in the past when you have responded to a request. Were you fine with your answer, even if it wasn’t exactly what you wanted? Did you feel uncomfortable with the outcome and spend time pushing back your discomfort? Did you justify your answer to avoid conflict or out of fear? Practice here makes perfect, and over time it gets easier. It is helpful in trying to figure out situations. It’s not something that you can or should try and apply to all situations – that’s more than most of us need. But with partners, friends and co-workers, it’s can be powerful.

A few more things are worth considering.

Often, in trying to figure out what we want or need and how to respond to a request or offer, it can be useful to ask ourselves a simple question: “who is it for?” When we ask this question, the underlying motivation of the request and our response can often come into sharp focus. Of course, not every request, offer or invitation is suspect, nor should we try and see them that way. Many times, the person *making* the request is not even aware that there *is* anything wrong with the request. To them, it may be “par for the course” and how they move through the world. It’s important, I think, to do our best to give the other person the benefit of any doubt, to presume good intentions. And even then, asking this question is a useful starting point to figuring out what we want and need and where our willing heart is.

It’s also helpful to add this to the “who is it for?” question: who is getting the gift? This might seem obvious in a lot of cases, but it’s often quite subtle. In considering who is getting the gift, we open the door to a common human characteristic (that shows up as a question): “what’s in it for me?” There’s nothing inherently wrong with this – it is part of human nature. But giving and receiving are complicated, and simply opening up this question of who is getting the gift may help us understand what we want or don’t want.