

Why negotiating gives you anxiety — and why it shouldn't

The author of "Influence Is Your Superpower" on the the joy of persuasion, and why negotiating isn't that bad

By **MARY ELIZABETH WILLIAMS** PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 6, 2022 7:30PM (EST)



Team Leader Showing The Way (Getty Images/runer)

 view in app

 save

Does the word "influence" make you clench a little? Does the concept of "negotiation" give you anxiety? It shouldn't. As author and assistant professor at Yale **Zoe Chance** explains it, we've been influencing and negotiating all our lives. Negotiation in everyday life isn't like a tense Hollywood drama, with clocks running down and people pounding their fists on

desks. It's just... communication. And better communication makes life better for everybody, whether we're trying to change the world or just change our jobs.

In "**Influence Is Your Superpower: The Science of Winning Hearts, Sparking Change, and Making Good Things Happen**," Chance explores her research on persuasion, showing why our "gator brain" is a powerful decision maker, what saying no can teach us about getting to yes, and how charisma can — and should — be learned. Salon talked to Chance recently about the superpower of influence, and why it "isn't just for do-gooders." *This conversation has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*

Tell me what we get wrong about negotiation. As you say in this book, we've been doing it from the moment we opened up our mouths and let out our first cry.

Advertisement:

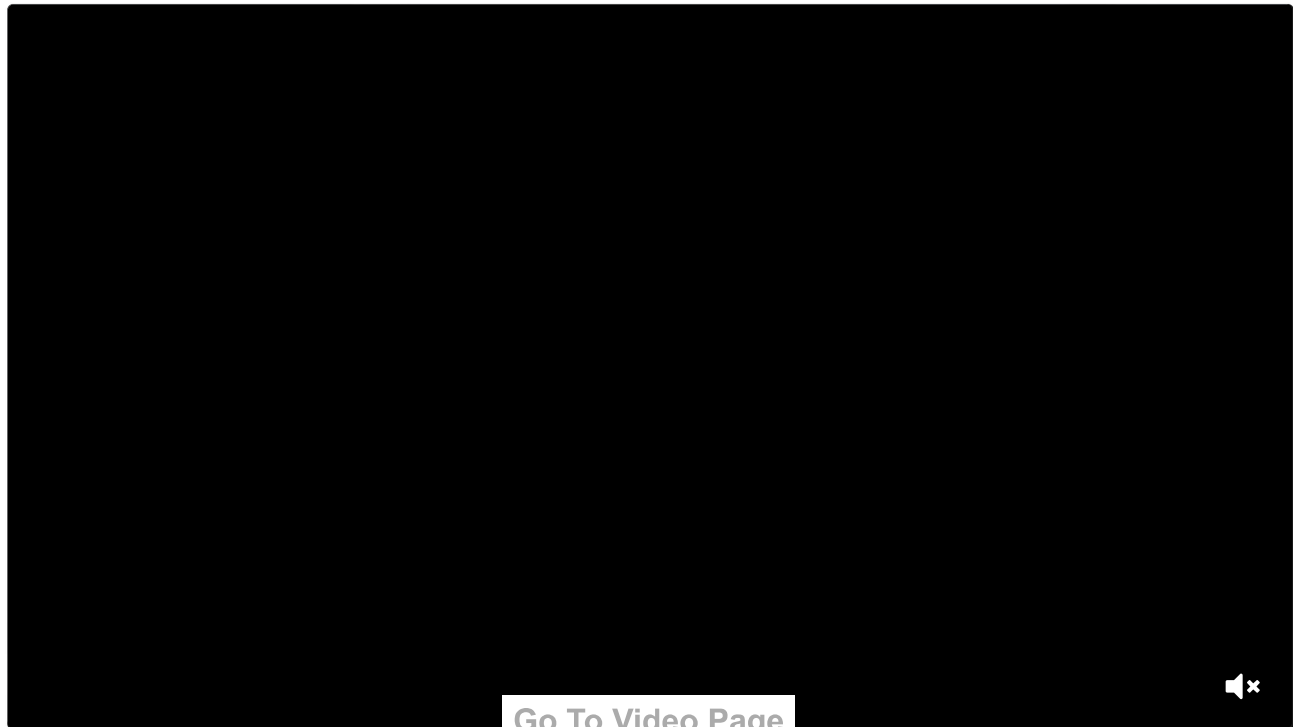
A negotiation is nothing more complicated than, we have a conversation before it gets to yes or no. That's really all it is. Somebody makes a request and then there's a conversation. That conversation is a negotiation. Most of the time, negotiations are perfectly fine and normal and comfortable.

Want more health and science stories in your inbox? Subscribe to Salon's weekly newsletter **The Vulgar Scientist.**

Something that surprised me as I was doing research for this book was when I did a survey to ask people, how do you feel about negotiating? I already knew from teaching and reading and other people's research that most people don't like negotiating, especially women. **Lots and lots of women hate negotiating.** I think only 43% of men like or love negotiating and only 17% of women, according to my research, like or love negotiating. I ask them to use words to describe it, and all the words that they use are painful and about power struggles.

But then I ask them to describe the most recent negotiation that they had and how they felt about their most recent negotiation, and then everything shifts. They start telling me a story of, "I asked my boss to work on this new project that I was interested in," or, "I'm in grad school, and I negotiated with my professor for this." And how did it go? "It went great. How do you feel about it? I felt great."

Advertisement:



Most of our negotiations go really well and we feel good about them. We just hate the idea of negotiating. I believe that comes from not our direct experiences — some of which are bad — but more the negotiations that we have observed, which tend to be Hollywood negotiations. Hollywood

loves drama. You see these negotiators on the big screen trying to bully each other. That's just not how life usually goes.

A zero sum game is not what most people want. You're really looking at relationships.

Most people aren't looking for to be the bully, or certainly not to be bullied. Most people's goal in a negotiation is just, don't be a sucker. Once you let them know, I'm not going to try to bully you, you're not going to be a sucker, let's figure this out together, the majority of people are thrilled. Some people are scared, some people are bullied, but those are a minority and they're hard to deal with. They're difficult people in the negotiation. The biggest thing is getting to the negotiation at all.

This is where we fail infinitely more often than failing in the actual negotiation — just not even having it occur to us that we should negotiate this in our lives. Let's just take a hospital patient who doesn't want to take a bath, and how easy it is if somebody's coming in and trying to give you a bath. You feel so powerless in a medical environment, especially if you're naked and wearing a robe. When we're at a disadvantage, it's especially easy to just go along with whatever is the status quo.

Advertisement:

There's the example in your book of you starting a class saying, "I'll give \$20 to somebody who can persuade me to do it." Talk about that, because I love what the secret is.

It's so funny because it's so simple. First of all, you ask, "Who wants to persuade me to give the \$20? It's real life, it's real money." Then I just stand there and I wait, because everyone's like, "What's happening?" Finally, somebody says okay, and they start trying to persuade me and giving me some rational argument. Maybe it's something silly. Lots of times it's an offer — they will give it to some charity that I care about or they will buy me flowers or lunch or do something nice for their classmates. Whatever it is that they're telling me they're going to do with the money, I just say, "Okay," and I'm standing there and I'm holding the \$20. They keep talking and they keep waiting.

Then I ask the room, "What is it that this person hasn't done yet?" The people who are watching in the room, they'll say, "She hasn't asked. He hasn't asked."

RELATED: [Elon Musk doesn't need to get inside your brain. Big Tech is already there](#)

Advertisement:

We don't tend to actually get to the direct ask. Often we think we're just letting people know what we want. This is especially true for women. We're super guilty of wanting people to read our minds. I'll ask the person who didn't ask, "Did it feel like you were asking?" And they say yes. By saying, "Here's the thing that I would do with the money," they think that they're asking me. But I forced them to actually close the deal. They get to have a do over. They ask and then I give them the money. We often have to be more direct than we think that we should be.

We want to save face, and we fear, what if we ask for something and it gets turned down? You start very early in the book by teaching us to say no. It's hard to get to yes unless you know how to say no. Why is that so significant?

Not saying no is one of the biggest barriers for anyone who is nice to being influential, because we're people pleasers and we don't want people to dislike us or think that we're greedy or arrogant or entitled. Our default reaction, especially with people we like and know, is to say yes. Anything they ask us for, if we can do it, we'll just look in our calendar. Especially at work, somebody else's emergency becomes my emergency just because they walked into my office and they had a problem. We practice saying no so that we can experience, first of all, that the other people are not going to hate us. It actually goes okay, because they weren't assuming that we're definitely going to say yes. They're hoping that we're going to say yes and they're going to survive if we say no.

Advertisement:

The only way they're not going to like us is if we're a jerk when we say no. We don't have to explain anything complicated. **We can just say, "No thank you"** or "Sorry, not able to." They're going to be fine. Then we also start realizing how our default reaction is yes, but we didn't even know. We get a lot more time back and we start to realize we can take control of our lives and our attention, which is really the most valuable thing that we have.

Further beneath all of this, once we start to get comfortable saying no, is we get more comfortable hearing no. So when we're making a request, our requests don't have that edge of neediness that

gets repulsive on the other side. I'm going to ask you for a favor, share an idea, and you get to say yes or no because you have your own life and you have your own priorities. When I just ask you, it's totally fine. On the other side, when you're asking someone to make it comfortable for them to say no, they're more inclined to say yes. It's like an Aikido sort of move.

Also very often, there is a lot of space between yes and no.

Advertisement:

That's the negotiation.

And coming in prepared with that understanding can make a difference in how we conduct our conversations with each other.

Coming in prepared is another place that we miss out so often by just jumping into the discussion, "Do I want a yes, no?" What are all of the possibilities here that could be even better for me, maybe possibilities that could be even better for them, maybe possibilities for other people that aren't even part of this at the moment? That's where we get to open up the negotiation to something creative instead of just a binary win, lose, yes, no or let's scramble over the pie kind of situation.

You talk about the "gator brain." Talk a little bit about what that metaphor is and how we apply that.

This is my name for what a lot of readers will know as **System 1 and System 2**. The gator is System 1; this is the unconscious system in our brain that is in control of the vast majority of all of our decisions and all of our behavior. It's unconscious, intuitive, vast, automatic, emotional. It controls all of our habitual mindless behavior, but we don't realize it's happening because it's unconscious.

Advertisement:

System 2, for which I use the analogy of the judge, is slow, conscious, effortful. It's seemingly objective, it's seemingly rational, but it's actually being influenced by the gator. This system, because it's conscious, is how we think our mind works. Usually when we're trying to influence someone, especially if we're a smart, nice person, we just want to give them a good argument and give them the facts. If you think about vaccines or masks, we've expected that we just give people accurate health information, and then they're going to take the obviously correct course of action. But what we haven't done is gotten past this System 1, gator brain type resistance to the messenger.

You're definitely not going to get people to wear a mask or be vaccinated by showing them data. We see that now. You look at it from a variety of angles, including the charisma one, and how we cultivate charisma. What does charisma really mean? And what does it mean to cultivate it?

People tend to think that if I don't have charisma, then I don't and it sucks for me for the rest of my life. But it really is something that you do much more than something that you are. There are a small

number of people who've been gifted to be able to do this thing really well since they were tiny. The vast majority of people who seem charismatic to us, weren't born that way. I share in the book, [the story of Prince](#) and getting to go to our first Prince concert.

Advertisement:

It was an incredible, incredible experience. I was so excited. We're waiting there in this tiny little Las Vegas club and he comes out on stage. He looks, I'm sure, directly right into my eyes. He starts to sing, I turn to my friend, and I say, "I think I'm going to faint." Then beside me, the stranger on the other side just falls to the ground in a dead faint. He's so freaking charismatic that people lose consciousness in his presence.

The paramedics come in and I say, "Oh my God, has that ever happened before?" They say, "Yeah, it's not the first time," which is crazy. I've heard the same thing about [Bill Clinton](#), apparently women fainted. [The Beatles too](#). When I got to meet Jimmy Carter, he was already in his eighties, but he was a hero for me because of work that he was doing in The Carter Center. I took a picture with him and he put his arm around my waist, and my vision clouded over. It was the same thing, even though I don't think of Jimmy Carter as being this particularly super charismatic person. What all we need to do to be charismatic is some very, very simple things.

This is what Prince found out when he was young. He was very shy, very nervous, signed to Warner Brothers. They wouldn't let him go on tour even when he had a number one hit album on the Billboard chart, ["I Wanna Be Your Lover."](#) They said, "Absolutely no way, because we saw you in

concert and you turned and played with your face to the wall and you couldn't even speak to us above a whisper. There's no way you're going to get to do a concert." But Rick James asks Prince, "Hey, do you want to come and be my opening act on my Super Freak tour?" Prince starts picking up Rick James' moves and his attitude and his way of interacting with the audience. So it starts out and Prince sucks, and by the end of the tour, Prince is getting the audience excited.

Advertisement:

Let's talk about the dark side of that, because that's also **the secrets of pickup artists. That's also **Bernie Madoff**. You can manipulate your charisma in a dark way.**

I want to question whether it's in a dark way, or toward dark ends. It's not just charisma, but every single thing you could possibly do as an influencer. You could use it for dark ends. Influence is power, and it's like electricity. You could turn on lights or you could power an electric chair. There are a lot of books out there for the power hungry people. However, even those power hungry people can pick up this book and use tools that I'm sharing and they could make use of them. It's not that some tools work for like nice people and don't work for people who are not nice.

What's happening in the situations you're talking about with people who are so charismatic that they're able to manipulate people very well, is they put people into a state of ether. It's this state where the system two, the judge, all of your faculties of reason are out the of the window and you only have your pure emotional instinctive gator brain responses but you don't realize it. It's like a

drunk person reaching for the car keys having no idea that they shouldn't be driving. Any kind of emotional overload can do that for you, and that charismatic connection can do that for people.

Advertisement:

The word "influence," there are so many negative connotations . We're really talking about so much more than just. You're talking about real connection and empathy and real common ground and real and real sustainable change.

When I say that influence is your superpower, I really do mean that literally. I absolutely deeply believe this and know it to be true, that understanding and practicing the skills and the science of interpersonal influence is not just the way to make the things happen, that you to happen in the world, but it's the only way to make those things happen. These are things for yourself, for other people together.

This isn't just influence for do-gooders and change makers, I absolutely believe that we need to take care of ourselves as well. I don't believe we need to be always just looking for, "How can I do more good for more people? How can I do something for you?" We need to take care of ourselves, fill up our cup and not get depleted and exhausted. In the health domain, thinking of caregivers in particular. They need to do a lot more negotiating to take care of themselves and set their own boundaries as well as they can.

Advertisement:

I think that real negotiation and true influence has to come from a place of hard work. It means deep listening, deep empathy.

Sometimes. But so often, negotiations don't feel like negotiations at all, because it's just a collaborative conversation between willing people who want to do something together. When we're negotiating with our teammates at work, if we have a healthy team and we have psychological safety and we like each other, it doesn't feel like a negotiation. We're just figuring out how to get things done. It doesn't have to be a big deal. So, many of our negotiations, we just don't notice that they're negotiations because they're so simple and easy.

We can have these conversations are very friendly and coming from the same perspective for the most part. You talk about that near the end of the book — so how do we frame that conversation?

The framing is, you're bringing that person into your in group. We have a very different way that we treat people in our in group from people in our out group. So a big part of the underlying, big picture strategy of influence in this way is that you are bringing the whole entire world into your in group where we're friends, we're family, we do favors for each other. We don't do bean counting and we want each other to succeed. I'm happy if you're happy, you're happy if I'm happy, this is great. There is a subtlety in just bringing people and assuming that we're on the same team. It goes really long way.

Advertisement:

More brain science stories:

- [Why serial killers are drawn to politics](#)
- [Why our emotions are so powerful](#)
- [What makes some people hold transphobic views?](#)

MARY ELIZABETH WILLIAMS

Mary Elizabeth Williams is a senior writer for Salon and author of "[A Series of Catastrophes & Miracles](#)."

MORE FROM MARY ELIZABETH WILLIAMS

Related Topics _____

[Books](#)

[Influence](#)

[Negotiating](#)

[Neuroscience](#)

[Psychology Interview](#)

[Zoe Chance](#)

Related Articles

[Home](#) [About](#) [Staff](#) [Contact](#) [Privacy](#) [Terms of Service](#) [Archive](#) [Go Ad Free](#)

Copyright © 2022 Salon.com, LLC. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON ® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office as a trademark of Salon.com, LLC. Associated Press articles: Copyright © 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

[DMCA Policy](#)