Say-no script card

Keep it by your desk. You do not have to answer on the spot. Ask yourself the four questions, pick the softest reply that is true, say it briefly, and write down what was agreed. Adapt the wording to your own tasks and dates.

BEFORE I ANSWER

- [ ] What would this push out of my week? If nothing, I can say yes.
- [ ] When is it really due? I can ask.
- [ ] Who decides what comes first? Usually my manager, so I bring them the choice.
- [ ] Is this a one-off, or the third time this month?

FIVE REPLIES, SOFTEST FIRST

- [ ] **1. Pause**
  Thanks for thinking of me. Let me check what I have on, and I will come back to you by [time].
- [ ] **2. Swap**
  I can take that on. To do it well, I would need to move [task] to [date], or hand it to someone else. Which would you prefer?
- [ ] **3. Delay**
  I cannot start it this week. I could pick it up on [date]. Would that work?
- [ ] **4. Shrink**
  I cannot do the full version by [date]. I can do [smaller piece] by then. Would that help?
- [ ] **5. Decline**
  I am not able to take this on at the moment. I am committed to [A] and [B], and I do not want to do any of them badly. If it helps, I can [small alternative].

IF THEY SAY EVERYTHING IS URGENT

I understand it matters. I cannot do it as well as [A] and [B] in the time. Which of them should I drop?

AFTERWARDS

The request, and the reply I chose

What was agreed, what moves, and the date I will check in again

Send a two-line message the same day so the agreement survives a busy week. Editorial advice, not legal or HR advice. Contracts and the law differ by country. If the pressure keeps growing, HSE suggests speaking to HR, a union or worker representative, or your GP.

Sources: HSE: Help for workers on stress at work Bolino et al. (2010): Citizenship under pressure. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 31(6)