

ASSERTIVENESS

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS ... WITHOUT STOMPING ON OTHERS

What is assertiveness? What is the difference between being assertive and being aggressive? Here are some pointers to help clarify what assertiveness is really all about.

Assertiveness is ... expressing our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct, honest, and appropriate way. It means that we have respect both for ourselves and for others. Being assertive is not about being pushy or superior. It's about communicating what you want in a clear, level-headed manner. An assertive person effectively influences, listens, and negotiates so that others choose to cooperate willingly.

Assertiveness is not ... aggressiveness. Aggressiveness involves expressing our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a way that is inappropriate and violates the rights of others. It can be either active or passive, but no matter which, it communicates an impression of disrespect. By being aggressive, we put our wants, needs, and rights above those of others. We attempt to get our way by not allowing others a choice.

USE "I" MESSAGES

An "I" message is a good way to let people know what you are thinking. It is made up of 3 parts.

- Behaviour ... what it is, exactly, that the other person has done or is doing
- **Effect** ... what is happening, because of their behaviors
- Feelings ... what effect does their behavior have on your feelings.

By using this kind of message, you are giving another person complete information, leaving no room for second guessing or doubt. **An example:** *"When you com late to the meeting (behavior) I feel angry (feelings) because we have to repeat information the rest of us have already heard (effect)."* This is much more productive and assertive than simply ignoring the problem or just expressing your anger or frustration.

CHECK-UP

The following questions will help you to assess your assertiveness: *

- When you differ with someone you respect, are you able to speak up and share your own viewpoints?
- Are you able to refuse unreasonable requests made by friends or co-workers?
- Do you readily accept positive criticism and suggestion?
- Do you ask for assistance when you need it?
- Do you usually have confidence in your own judgment?
- If someone else has a better solution, do you accept it easily?
- Do you express your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct and honest way?
- Do you try to work for a solution that, to the degree possible, benefits all parties?

* A **yes** response indicates an assertive approach.

CHOOSE ASSERTIVE WORDS CAREFULLY

Use factual descriptions instead of judgments

- "This is sloppy work." (aggressive)
- "I believe the pages in this report are out of order." (assertive)

Avoid exaggerations

- "You are never on time!" (aggressive)
- "You were 15 minutes late today. That's the third time this week." (assertive)

Use "I" not "You"

- "You always interrupt my stories!" (aggressive)
- "I would like to tell my story without being interrupted." (assertive)

Express thoughts, feelings, and opinions reflecting ownership

- "He makes me angry." (denies ownership of feelings)
- "I get angry when he breaks his promises." (assertive and owns feelings)

ACTION PLAN

Here are some communication techniques that can help you convey a positive assertive attitude.

- Use suitable facial expression, always maintaining good eye contact.
- Keep your voice firm but pleasant.
- Pay careful attention to your posture and gestures
- Listen ... and let people know you have heard what they said.
- Ask questions for clarification.
- Look for a win-win approach to problem solving.

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Assertiveness, Non-Assertiveness, and Assertive Techniques

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Many with depression don't stand up for themselves. Are you having difficulty with being assertive? Here's how to be more assertive, deal with aggressiveness and improve the communication process.

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Introduction

Difficulty with being assertive has stereotypically been a challenge ascribed to women. However, research on violence and men's roles demonstrated that many physical altercations result from poor communication which then escalates into larger conflicts.

Many men feel powerless in the face of aggressive communication from men or women in their lives; conversely, passivity in some situations can arouse frustration and anger for many men. As such, assertiveness can be an effective tool for men who are seeking to proactively alleviate violence in their lives, as well as a tool for fostering healthier, more satisfying lives.

Sociologists and mental health professionals are finding that assertiveness is usually displayed in certain circumstances. That is, assertiveness is not a personality trait which persists consistently across all situations. Different individuals exhibit varying degrees of assertive behavior depending on whether they are in a work, social, academic, recreational or relationship context. Therefore, a goal for assertiveness training is to maximize the number of context in which an individual is able to communicate assertively.

Non-Assertiveness

A non-assertive person is one who is often taken advantage of, feels helpless, takes on everyone's problems, says yes to inappropriate demands and thoughtless requests, and allows others to choose for him or her. The basic message he/she sends is "I'm not OK."

The non-assertive person is emotionally dishonest, indirect, self-denying, and inhibited. He/she feels hurt, anxious, and possibly angry about his/her actions.

Non-Assertive Body Language:

- Lack of eye contact; looking down or away.
- Swaying and shifting of weight from one foot to the other.
- Whining and hesitancy when speaking.

Assertiveness

An assertive person is one who acts in his/her own best interests, stands up for self, expresses feelings honestly, is in charge of self in interpersonal relations, and chooses for self. The basic message sent from an assertive person is "I'm OK and you're OK."

An assertive person is emotionally honest, direct, self-enhancing, and expressive. He/she feels confident, self-respecting at the time of his/her actions as well as later.

Assertive Body Language:

- Stand straight, steady, and directly face the people to whom you are speaking while maintaining eye contact.

- Speak in a clear, steady voice - loud enough for the people to whom you are speaking to hear you.
- Speak fluently, without hesitation, and with assurance and confidence.

Aggressiveness

An aggressive person is one who wins by using power, hurts others, is intimidating, controls the environment to suit his/her needs, and chooses for others. An aggressive says, "You're not OK."

He/she is inappropriately expressive, emotionally honest, direct, and self-enhancing at the expense of another. An aggressive person feels righteous, superior, deprecatory at the time of action and possibly guilty later.

Aggressive Body Language:

- Leaning forward with glaring eyes.
- Pointing a finger at the person to whom you are speaking.
- Shouting.
- Clenching the fists.
- Putting hands on hips and wagging the head.

Remember: ASSERTIVENESS IS NOT ONLY A MATTER OF WHAT YOU SAY, BUT ALSO A FUNCTION OF HOW YOU SAY IT!

How To Improve the Communication Process

- Active listening: reflecting back (paraphrasing) to the other person both words and feelings expressed by that person.
- Identifying your position: stating your thoughts and feelings about the situation.
- Exploring alternative solution: brainstorming other possibilities; rating the pros and cons; ranking the possible solutions.

Making Simple Requests:

- You have a right to make your wants known to others.
- You deny your own importance when you do not ask for what you want.
- The best way to get exactly what you want is to ask for it directly.
- Indirect ways of asking for what you want may not be understood.
- Your request is more likely to be understood when you use assertive body language.
- Asking for what you want is a skill that can be learned.
- Directly asking for what you want can become a habit with many pleasant rewards.

Refusing requests:

- You have a right to say NO!
- You deny your own importance when you say yes and you really mean no.
- Saying no does not imply that you reject another person; you are simply refusing a request.
- When saying no, it is important to be direct, concise, and to the point.
- If you really mean to say no, do not be swayed by pleading, begging, cajoling, compliments, or other forms of manipulation.
- You may offer reasons for your refusal, but don't get carried away with numerous excuses.
- A simple apology is adequate; excessive apologies can be offensive.
- Demonstrate assertive body language.
- Saying no is a skill that can be learned.
- Saying no and not feeling guilty about it can become a habit that can be very growth enhancing.

Assertive Ways of Saying "No":

- Basic principles to follow in answers: brevity, clarity, firmness, and honesty.
- Begin your answer with the word "NO" so it is not ambiguous.
- Make your answer short and to the point.
- Don't give a long explanation.
- Be honest, direct and firm.
- Don't say, "I'm sorry, but..."

Steps in Learning to Say 'No'

- Ask yourself, "Is the request reasonable?" Hedging, hesitating, feeling cornered, and nervousness or tightness in your body are all clues that you want to say NO or that you need more information before deciding to answer.
- Assert your right to ask for more information and for clarification before you answer.
- Once you understand the request and decide you do not want to do it, say NO firmly and calmly.
- Learn to say NO without saying, "I'm sorry, but..."

Evaluate Your Assertions

- Active listening: reflecting back (paraphrasing) to the other person both words and feelings expressed by that person.
- Identifying your position: stating your thoughts and feelings about the situation.
- Exploring alternative solution: brainstorming other possibilities; rating the pros and cons; ranking the possible solutions.

Assertive Techniques

1. **Broken Record** - Be persistent and keep saying what you want over and over again without getting angry, irritated, or loud. Stick to your point.
 2. **Free Information** - Learn to listen to the other person and follow-up on free information people offer about themselves. This free information gives you something to talk about.
 3. **Self-Disclosure** - Assertively disclose information about yourself - how you think, feel, and react to the other person's information. This gives the other person information about you.
 4. **Fogging** - An assertive coping skill is dealing with criticism. Do not deny any criticism and do not counter-attack with criticism of your own.
- **Agree with the truth** - Find a statement in the criticism that is truthful and agree with that statement.
 - **Agree with the odds** - Agree with any possible truth in the critical statement.
 - **Agree in principle** - Agree with the general truth in a logical statement such as, "That makes sense."
 - **Negative Assertion** - Assertively accepting those things that are negative about yourself. Coping with your errors.
 - **Workable Compromise** - When your self-respect is not in question offer a workable compromise.

Method of Conflict Resolution

- Both parties describe the facts of the situation.
- Both parties express their feelings about the situation, and show empathy for the other person.
- Both parties specify what behavior change they would like or can live with.
- Consider the consequences. What will happen as a result of the behavior change? Compromise may be necessary, but compromise may not be possible.
- Follow up with counseling if you need further assistance.

Every Person's Bill of Rights

1. The right to be treated with respect.
2. The right to have and express your own feelings and opinions.
3. The right to be listened to and taken seriously.
4. The right to set your own priorities.
5. The right to say NO without feeling guilty.
6. The right to get what you pay for.
7. The right to make mistakes.
8. The right to choose not to assert yourself.

Source: *This page complements of Louisiana State University Student Health Center*

Assertive Communication

"I was raised to be 'nice.' Which is fine, I guess, except that 'nice' meant never saying what you wanted, never saying 'no,' and never having an opinion different from anyone else. I thought the only way to be assertive was to shout and get red in the face. It took a while to learn that I could be honest, be myself, and still be considered 'nice.'"

Assertiveness means more than just being able to voice your complaints. It is a set of communication skills that allow you to express respect and care for yourself and others. It means being able to say what you want to say when it is time to say it, and feeling fine doing so. Whether you want to express affection or annoyance, assertiveness skills are useful.

What does it mean to be assertive? The table below compares assertiveness with passivity and aggressiveness. As you read over each row, place a check-mark in the box that describes you best. When you are done, see which column has the most check marks.

	PASSIVE	AGGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
BEHAVIOUR	Keep quiet. Don't say what you feel, need or want. Put yourself down frequently. Apologize when you express yourself. Deny that you disagree with others or feel differently.	Express your feelings and wants as though any other view is unreasonable or stupid. Dismiss, ignore, or insult the needs, wants and opinions of others.	Express your needs, wants, and feelings directly and honestly. Don't assume you are correct or that everyone will feel the same way. Allow others to hold other views without dismissing or insulting them.
POSTURE	Make yourself small. Look down, hunch your shoulders, and avoid eye contact.	Make yourself large and threatening. Eye contact is fixed and penetrating.	Body is relaxed, movements are casual. Eye contact is frequent but not glaring.
ATTITUDE	Other's needs are more important than yours. They have rights, you don't. Their contributions are valuable. Yours are worthless.	Your needs are more important and more justified than theirs. You have rights, they don't. Your contributions are valuable. Theirs are silly, wrong or worthless.	Your needs and theirs are equally important. You have equal rights to express yourselves. You both have something valuable to contribute.
FEELINGS	Fear of being rejected. Helpless, frustrated, and angry. Resentful toward others who 'use' you. Your self-respect may suffer.	Angry or powerful at the time and victorious when you win. Afterwards, remorse, guilt or self-hatred for hurting others.	You feel positive about yourself and the way you treat others. Self-esteem rises.
GOAL	Avoid conflict. Please others at any expense to yourself. Give others control over you.	Win at any expense to others. Get control over them.	Both you and others keep your self-respect. Express yourself without having to 'win' all the time. No one controls anyone else.

Key Points about Assertiveness

Assertiveness is what you do, not who you are. Some people feel that they can't be assertive because they don't have the personality for it. But assertiveness is a skill, not a personality trait. Like any new skill it feels awkward

for the first while. Gradually it becomes more comfortable as you get better at it.

Start Easy. Perhaps there is one person in your life who is especially difficult to be assertive with. If so, don't start practicing assertiveness with them. Start with people who are a bit less threatening. As you get better at assertiveness, you can take on more and more difficult situations. Save the hardest person for last.

It's not necessary to be assertive all the time. Some situations call for more assertiveness than others. When you are at a kindly relative's home you might accept a poured cup of tea even after you have said you don't wish one. And when you are alone with someone you know to be violent it may not be safe for you to be assertive. But when you are safe and when the issue is important to you, assertiveness generally leads to better results than the alternatives.

Strengthen gradually. Sometimes it can be hard to decide how assertive to be. Do you politely decline an obnoxious request, or do you should "NO"? The best strategy is often to start by calmly but firmly stating your position ("Well thank you for asking, but I don't really have time for more committee work just now"). If the person continues to push, your response can get firmer, shorter, and more to the point ("No, I won't be taking on anything new"). If that doesn't work, get firmer still ("No"). A clear and direct tone of voice, without hostility, usually works best.

Ask for time. Some people think of the right thing to say after the discussion is over. They get talked into things and then kick themselves later. You have the right to delay your answers. If you realize during a discussion that you would like to be more assertive but can't think of what to say, ask for time. Use phrases like "I can't answer that right now," or "I'll let you know next Tuesday." This will give you the time you need to think the situation through. As assertiveness becomes a habit, you will get faster at coming up with the responses you want.

Assertiveness equals openness. Assertiveness is not just for conflict situations. Being assertive means being more open and genuine, and being willing and able to share and express your inner feelings and ideas. The more you feel free to be yourself, the less tension there will be in your ongoing relationships. Being assertive in close or intimate relationships opens communication channels.

Assertiveness Skills in Practice

Here are some of the most important things to remember when you are in a situation that calls for assertiveness. Rate the difficulty of each strategy in the space beside it.

E = Easy

M = Moderately difficult

D = Difficult

___ **Use body language effectively.** Your message depends on how you say it as much as what you say. Make eye contact. Relax your hands and face. Use a firm, warm voice and speak up clearly.

___ **Find out what's really going on.** Many disagreements are based on misunderstandings. In order to get to a resolution, you have to be talking about the same thing. Describe the situation as you see it, and ask others to describe it as they see it.

___ **Be honest about your opinion.** Use the word "I" to make sure people understand this is your opinion, but state it clearly. "I think..."

___ **Express how you feel.** Your feelings are an important consideration in many decisions. Be clear about your feelings and take responsibility for them. "When I don't get consulted before travel plans are made, I feel frustrated and ignored." Avoid assigning blame ("You make me feel...").

___ **Be clear about what you want.** What you want may seem perfectly clear and reasonable to you, but may be very unclear to others. State your preferences as precisely as you can. Where possible, focus on observable behaviour rather than attitudes. For example, "I'd like you to respect me" is unclear and likely to get you into an argument that will go nowhere. "When I say I don't want to do something, I'd like you to stop asking" is clearer and more specific.

___ **Find out what others want from you.** Just as they won't know what you want until you tell them, you often won't know exactly what they want. Actively seek this information. Don't assume anything. Maybe it's not as much as you think.

___ **Don't try to win.** Winning every battle is not the goal of assertiveness. Don't try to crush your opponent with your logic or gloat over their failings. You may win the battle but lose the relationship! Remember that you have the right to decide what you will and will not do. They have the right to decide what they will and will not do. Try to work together to come up with a solution that both of you can live with.

The Assertiveness Pitfall

After reading about assertiveness, you may decide that you would like to become more assertive and less passive or aggressive. This is an appropriate goal. But keep this in mind:



When you start being assertive with someone, things usually get worse before they get better.

Consider an example. Imagine that you have a coworker who constantly gives you some of his own work to do. One day you tell him that your own workload is more than enough and that from now on you will be unwilling to do his work. What happens? He will probably try to push his work onto you even harder than he did before. Giving in under this pressure is a bad idea. You would be saying, “Look, if I ever tell you what I will or won’t do, get really pushy and I’ll give in.” Bad message. If instead you stick to your new rule, he will eventually give up and stop pushing.

Another example. You have a child who insists on staying up watching television after her bedtime. You become assertive and tell her “If you are not in bed by your bedtime, I will turn the television off and you will not be able to watch TV the next night.” At first your daughter may not believe you, and may respond with outrage if you follow through. If you are able to keep to this new plan, however, she will likely adapt to the new rule and abide by it.

So, some guidelines:

Only set barriers that you are willing and able to defend. If you make threats that you cannot keep (I’ll quit this job, ground you for a year, never speak to you again, etc.) people will not take your attempts to be assertive seriously.

Don’t start getting assertive when you are strained to the limit. Remember that the relationship will get even tougher for a while. Pick a time when you have the strength to handle the pressure.

Don’t back down. When you set the barrier and the other person begins pushing against it, be prepared to keep to the rule. Otherwise, they will push harder the next time.

Don’t get assertive with everyone in your life at once. You probably won’t be able to stand having all of your relationships becoming more difficult at once. Pick one person at a time.



Checkpoint: Assertiveness in Action

Think back over your dealings with others this past week. Complete the following exercise for two of the interactions that you found difficult. Briefly describe this situation, then your reaction. Consult the descriptions of passive, aggressive, and assertive behaviour to see which best describes your response. For each passive or aggressive response, write down an assertive response that might have been better.

Situation: _____
What did you do? _____
Was this passive, aggressive, or assertive? _____
Alternative assertive response? _____

Situation: _____
What did you do? _____
Was this passive, aggressive, or assertive? _____
Alternative assertive response? _____

Are there any situations coming up this week that will require your assertiveness skills? In the space below describe the situation, the people involved, the outcome you would like, and the assertive strategy that you would like to use:



Further Reading on Assertiveness

Alberti, Robert, and Emmons, Michael (1995) Your perfect right: A guide to assertive living. San Luis Obispo: Impact Publishers. One of the most successful self-help books ever written, now in its seventh edition.

Bower, Sharon Anthony, and Bower, Gordon H (1991) Asserting yourself. Reading Massachusetts. Addison-Wesley Publishing. A well-written book on assertiveness that emphasizes how to make your point in an assertive way.