

Assertiveness

Be Assertive!

Assertiveness is based on the premise that we are all created equal and should treat each other as such. Assertive interaction allows us to stand up for our rights in a manner which ensures we do not violate the rights of others.

Most people are assertive in some situations. But how do we behave in others? There are three basic interpersonal styles. These are:

- **Aggressive:** This involves fighting, blaming, accusing, threatening and a general disregard for other people's feelings.
- **Passive:** Passive behaviour occurs when you permit other people to push you around, when you do not stand up for yourself and when you allow others to take advantage of you.
- **Assertive:** You behave assertively when you do not let other people control you, when you stand up for yourself and when you express your true feelings.

In order to become more assertive, you first need to identify the situations where you are behaving non-assertively and would like to change - for example saying "no" to a demanding friend. Think of what you want and how you have been unable to achieve this with non-assertive communication. In the beginning, choose situations in which you find it easier to change your behaviour.

Some guidelines to help you...

These guidelines aim to help you deal with problem situations more assertively:

1. Decide what you want and what you do not want. Notice how you feel. Be clear about exactly what it is you want to say.
2. Arrange a right time and place to discuss the issue that is convenient for everyone involved.
3. Define the problem situation. Be specific. Describe the facts and share your opinions and beliefs - for example "I won't pass my exams if I go out with you every night". Avoid judgments or interpretations.
4. Acknowledge your own feelings. This means saying, for example, "I feel hurt" rather than "You hurt me". "I" messages connect the feeling statement with specific actions of the other person. For example, "I feel worried when I don't know you are going to be late". Talking about how you feel about the other person's actions can be valuable feedback for that person.

5. Express what you would like to happen, making your requests specific, particularly in relation to the behaviours involved. Describe the positive consequences that will be brought about by the change. State what you intend to do in order to take care of yourself if your wishes are not accommodated.

Assertive behaviour involves non-verbal aspects also. This includes body language, the ability to listen and be receptive to another's point of view. It is important to make good use of gestures and facial expressions for emphasis. Maintain firm eye contact, without staring. Use a clear and firm voice. These are essential aspects of communicating an assertive attitude.

When listening to another person's point of view, it is important not to pretend to understand what they are saying if you don't. Ask for clarification whilst acknowledging the other person's feelings and position.

Remember that when there is a dire conflict between your needs and wishes and those of the other party, finding a solution that totally satisfies both parties will be difficult. Look instead for a workable compromise - a solution that you can both live with.

It is important to prepare yourself against certain responses that will be used to attack and derail your assertive requests. Inevitably, you will encounter attempts to manipulate you by those who seek to ignore your assertive attempts. Here are some of the most troublesome responses with some techniques to help you handle manipulation:

- Laughing it off: when your assertion is met with a joke "Only two hours late, I've got to work on being less punctual!" Response: Use the broken record technique: choose a concise sentence and say it over and over again, calmly and clearly. Briefly acknowledge that you have heard the other person's point and then repeat your statement "Yes, but I was saying..."
- Accusations and threats: your assertion is responded to with blaming and personal attack / threats. Response: In those situations where someone is being verbally aggressive you can use the following strategies: **Fogging** acknowledges something in the criticism with which you can agree and ignore the rest, "That may be so, but I will still need to talk to you." Fogging is acknowledging someone's right to their position and understanding their objection without giving in to it "I can see you're upset and angry and I can understand why." **Defusing** ignores the content of someone's anger and puts off a further response until the other person has calmed down " I realise you're angry right now. Let's talk about it later this afternoon." If you get further negative feedback at this intervention, return to the other techniques given above.

Illustrating the differences between aggressive, passive and assertive behaviour - some role plays:

A's tone is accusing and blaming. **B** is immediately put on the defensive.

A: You didn't spend any time with me at the party...I really felt abandoned.

B: You didn't make an effort to have a good time.

A: I didn't know anybody - at least you could have introduced me to some of your friends.

B: Listen, you can take care of yourself. I'm sick of your complaining to be taken care of all of the time.

A: And I'm sick of your lack of consideration.

B: Okay, you're going to need another girlfriend next time.

However, if **A** behaves assertively, expresses feelings with "I" statements and accepts responsibility, his request is specific, non-hostile and successful.

A: I felt abandoned when you ignored me last night at the party. I'd like you to include me in your circle of friends.

B: I think what you are saying is true. I didn't spend much time with you and it sounds to me like you were feeling pretty neglected.

A: I can see now that I didn't make an effort to have a good time. I could have asked you to introduce me to your friends and not wait for you to make the first move instead.

B: Okay, and I'll be more considerate of you next time.

If **A** behaves passively, the timid opening line is followed by complete withdrawal. The bill problem must be dealt with alone then.

A: Would you mind helping me for a moment in figuring out this bill?

B: I'm busy with this essay. Come back later.

A: Well, I really hate to interrupt you but it's important.

B: Look I need to have it in by tomorrow.

A: Okay, I understand I know it's hard to be distracted.

If **A** behaves assertively however, she expresses her wish clearly and does not surrender to **B's** negativity.

A: I need your help with figuring out this bill.

B: I'm busy with this essay. Come back later.

A: I've waited a week and I feel annoyed when you keep putting the matter off.

B: Look I need to have it in by tomorrow morning.

A: I understand that you are under pressure, but I need to get this done. Can we do it during your break?

B: Okay, let me finish this paragraph first.

Some more help?

The following reading might be helpful:

Alberti, R.E. and Emmons, M.E. (1996) *Your perfect right: a guide to assertive living* (6th ed.) San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers

Davis, M., Eshelman, R.E. and McKay, M. (1995) *The relaxation and stress reduction workbook* California: New Harbinger Publications

Smith, M.J. (1975) *When I say no, I feel guilty* New York: Bantam Books.

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