

Become more assertive

"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 yell 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 allows 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.

What does it mean to be assertive? The table below, adapted from work by Dr. Lynn Alden, compares assertiveness with passivity and aggressiveness. For each row, place a check-mark in the box that describes you best.

| | 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, 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 | Others' 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. |

Did you rate yourself by putting a check-mark in one box for each row? If so, which column got the most check-marks?

This isn't a formal questionnaire, so don't make too much of the result. But if all of your checks were in the column titled "Passive", then perhaps you use this style a lot.

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. Just as it takes time to learn to ride a bicycle, it takes time to become more comfortable being assertive.
- **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 most difficult person for last.
- **It's not necessary to be assertive all the time.** Some situations call for more assertiveness than others. You might accept a cup of tea from Aunt May even after you have said you don't want one. And when you are alone with someone you know to be violent it may not be safe for you to be assertive. When you are safe and when the issue is important to you, however, assertiveness generally leads to better results than the alternatives.
- **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. 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, including your caring and appreciation for others. 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.

The Assertiveness Pitfall

After reading about assertiveness, you might 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 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, *"If I ever tell you what I will or won't do, get really pushy and I'll give in."* Bad message. If 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, leave you, ground you for a year, never speak to you again), 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 more difficult 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.

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 the 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.

For more ideas about assertiveness you could read *The Assertiveness Workbook* (Randy Paterson, New Harbinger Publications, 2000), available from online booksellers or through bookstores.