

# How to be more assertive



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## **What is Assertiveness?**

Assertiveness is a way of communicating your feelings and opinions openly, directly and honestly while also remaining respectful of the needs and rights of others.

Assertiveness is an attitude of mind, a way of thinking, backed up by skills that can be learned. Some people may think that being assertive is about being selfish, but it is in fact the opposite. Assertiveness is not about us acting in a superior way to others, but accepting that we are all equal in worth. This means that we are all just as deserving as one another in having our preferences met.

The purpose of assertion involves standing up for your own wishes, wants and desires, but taking into account that those of others may be of equal importance. The purpose of assertion is not to win arguments but to agree on a workable compromise. When we are both being truly assertive, it is with the purpose of ideally satisfying the preferences of both parties involved in a situation.

It is often the case that we can be very assertive in some settings but aggressive or withdrawn in others. We may be totally in charge at work, but feel unable to communicate in close relationships. We may be able to take faulty goods back to shops, but unable to ask for affection or accept compliments. Being assertive is not necessarily about becoming a totally assertive person, but about communicating more clearly in daily situations, which, if left unaddressed, can build up resentment or misunderstandings.

Learning to develop assertiveness can be particularly useful for people who become passive or unhelpfully aggressive when faced with difficult, hurtful, abusive or manipulative situations.

Three common situations where assertiveness skills can be very useful:

### **Being Passive**

Being passive can be a response to feeling that we must be 'nice,' and we can sometimes be too 'nice' to people because we fear rejection, criticism or confrontation.

Passivity can be defined as lack of initiative or force, or continually being submissive. Passivity means avoiding standing up for oneself, and giving too much regard to the opinions and preferences of others.

One of the main purposes of passivity is to avoid the discomfort of conflict, and to continue to please others at your own expense. Acting passively means that you get an immediate reduction in anxiety, because the threat of standing up for yourself has been temporarily avoided.

Apart from the temporary reduction in anxiety, passivity also allows you to avoid feeling guilty when you sense that by being assertive you might upset someone. When acting passively you assume that it is you who would be completely responsible for hurting someone's feelings, and do not consider that other people largely have control of their own emotions.

Acting passively reinforces the irrational belief that others are more worthy, more intelligent or superior to you.

Repeatedly allowing others to walk all over you can lead to increasing loss of self-confidence and self worth. This low opinion of self can also lead to a belief that you do not have the capacity to stand up for yourself.

The immediate pay-off for passivity seems very appealing. To begin with, you avoid any discomfort and seem to be pleasing others and making life easier for all concerned. The costs are that in the long run it is usually to your detriment.

### **Being Aggressive**

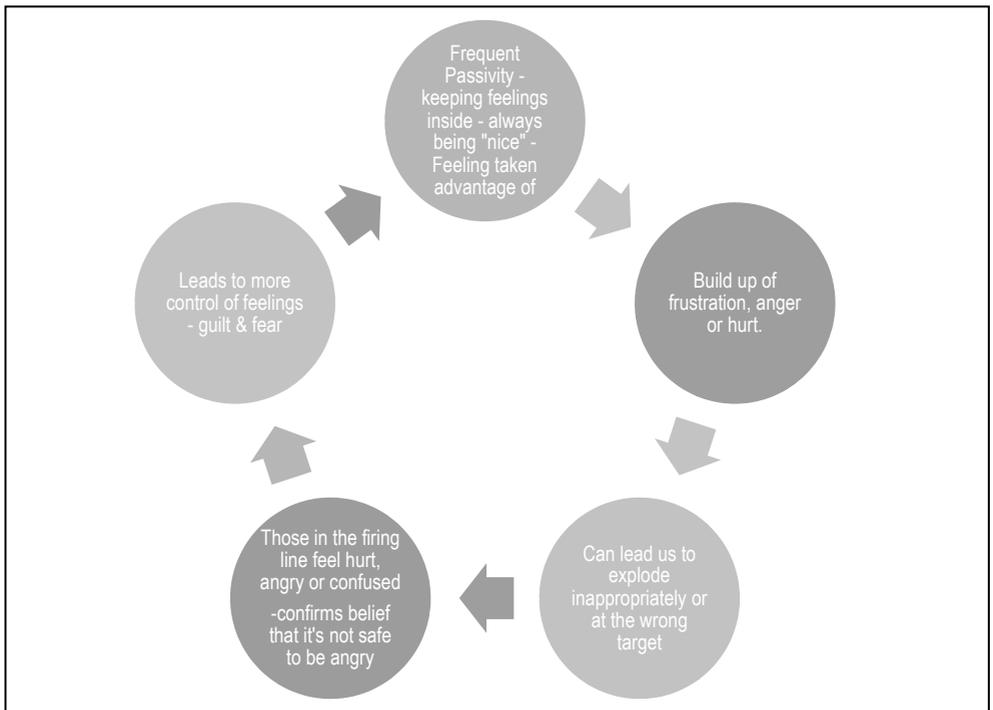
One of the myths about assertive behaviour is that it involves being aggressive. This isn't true. Assertiveness involves clear, calm thinking and respectful negotiation with the recognition that each person is equally entitled to express their opinion. Aggressive feelings and behaviour may arise from frustration or a sense of powerlessness, or from the mistaken belief that we must dominate or control others to get our needs met.

Aggression may be defined as an approach to communication which is mainly hostile, forceful or bullying. Aggression does mean standing up for oneself, but with little if any regard for others. Someone who is aggressive instead of being assertive would be dismissive of the preferences or emotions of others and certainly not willing to work on a balanced compromise. Aggression only allows for an expression of one's own preferences, seeing others contributions as of less importance or inferior.

## Being both Passive and Aggressive:

Keeping feelings inside can lead to a build up of frustration, resentment, hurt or anger. Always being 'nice' can lead to our feeling taken advantage of. When the build up becomes too much, we may get to the point where we explode inappropriately or at the wrong target. This is perceived as aggression by those in the firing line, who in turn get angry, hurt or confused. This can confirm a belief, sometimes learned in our childhood, that it is not safe to be angry. This may lead to more control and repression of feelings through guilt and fear and to passive behaviour, and so the cycle starts again. Often repressed emotion can be conveyed through sarcasm, pettiness, or becoming a martyr.

### Being Passive & Aggressive



## **Assertive Communication: ‘Don’ t say yes when you mean no!’**

**Learning how to express yourself assertively can seem daunting at first, but here are some tips and techniques that can help:**

- In a discussion, try to be clear about what you feel and what you need
- Think about how that can be achieved
- Learn how to negotiate and suggest alternatives if two people want different outcomes
- Try to communicate calmly without attacking another person
- Do say ‘yes’ when you want to, but also learn to say ‘no’ firmly when you mean ‘no’ (rather than agreeing to do something just to please someone else and then feeling resentful or hurt later)
- Prepare for those sticky, predictable situations. Rehearse with a friend or in front of a mirror, “I know I’ ve helped you out in the past, but this time I’ m saying no as it isn’ t possible for me to... (meet a demand)”
- Remember though, you don’ t have to make excuses for saying no, it is ok just to say no
- If someone will not accept your decision it can be useful to keep repeating your message, calmly and reasonably like a stuck record, “I don’ t think you can have heard me properly, I said I can’ t help you out this time....”

- Take responsibility for how you think or feel about something. It can be useful to avoid blaming statements. Rather than, "Now you've made me feel really guilty!" try, "When you say that, I feel pressured and uncomfortable and I'd like to talk about this calmly."
- Be prepared to listen to others
- Develop confident body language, it will have an impact on the other person
- Try, if you can, to maintain a positive, optimistic outlook in a discussion, let the other person know that you are not looking for winners and losers, but a realistic outcome in a dispute
- Learning to be assertive does not happen overnight and others may react strongly to changes in your behaviour, trying even harder to make you comply, so be prepared to stand your ground.

In some circumstances, for example if you are the victim of bullying, abuse or violence, it is both assertive and appropriate to seek professional help to assist you in keeping safe.

When we truly value ourselves we have no need to use power games or manipulative behaviour to get what we want; neither are we at the mercy of those who use these ploys to influence us. We can relate to others honestly, stating our needs clearly and respecting theirs, while not feeling compelled to fulfil them.

Below is a charter of your Assertion Rights, applicable for both women and men.

1. I have the right to state my own needs and to set my own priorities as a person, independent of any roles that I may assume in my life
2. I have the right to be treated with respect as an intelligent, capable and equal human being
3. I have the right to express my feelings
4. I have the right to express my opinions and values
5. I have the right to say 'yes' or 'no' for myself
6. I have the right to make mistakes
7. I have the right to change my mind
8. I have the right to say that I don't understand
9. I have the right to ask for what I want
10. I have the right to decline responsibility for other people's problems
11. I have the right to deal with others without being dependent on them for approval
12. Other people have the right to all of the above

Dickson, Anne *A woman in your own right*.

London: Quartet Books.

## Suggested Reading on Assertiveness

- Dickson, A. (1982) *A Woman in Your Own Right*. London: Quartet Books
- Constantinou, D. and Dryden, W. (2004) *Assertiveness Step by Step*. London: Sheldon Press
- Jeffers, S. (1997) *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. Virginia: Century
- Lindenfield, G. (2001) *Assert Yourself*. London: Thorsons
- Markham, U. (2002) *How to Deal with Difficult People*. Shaftesbury: Element
- Rees, S and Graham, R.S. (1991) *Assertion Training: How to be Who You Really Are*. Oxford: Routledge

## Websites

Further sources of self-help leaflets on a variety of topics can be found on the web at:

<http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation.aspx>

<http://www.student.counselling.co.uk/guide.html>

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