

Assertiveness

Contents

What is assertiveness?	3
The passive style	3
The aggressive style	3
The assertive style	3
Examples of different styles	4
How assertive are you?	4
Assertiveness Questionnaire	5
Setting goals for assertive behaviour	6
Your bill of assertive rights	7
Identifying your personal rights	7
How to be assertive	9
Strategies for saying no	9
Making requests	10
Skills for providing corrective feedback	11
Skills for coping with criticism	12
Strategies for dealing with anger	13
Dealing with your own anger	13
Dealing with other people's anger	14
Assertiveness exercises	15
The assertiveness pitfall	18
Practicing what you have learned	18

What is assertiveness?

“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 is the ability to communicate opinions, thoughts, needs, and feelings in a direct, honest, and appropriate manner. Assertiveness involves standing up for your rights in a manner that does not offend others or deny the rights of others. When you are assertive you have more control over your life. You also make it less likely that other people will take advantage of you.

It is important to understand your own style of relating to others. Read the following descriptions and examples about different ways of relating to others. Which description sounds most like you?

The passive style

People with a passive style tend to put the needs of others before their own. This may be because they do not believe they have the right to assert themselves. They may believe that they are inferior and that their needs are not important enough to make a fuss about.

Alternatively, passive people could feel that it is too difficult to be assertive or that it is much easier to let others make all the decisions. These people tend to believe that they are incompetent, or weak, and thus have difficulty looking after themselves or making their own decisions.

Although passive people may not always be happy with the decisions made by others, it usually seems easier to go along with the decisions and ‘keep the peace’ rather than make a fuss. However, given time, passive people may start to resent the fact that their needs are always overlooked. The result may be low self-esteem, depression, anger, and many other emotional or physical complaints. Also, people who are very passive often lose the respect of others if they fail to stand up for their rights.

The aggressive style

Aggression involves standing up for your rights in a way that is pushy and inappropriate. Aggression offends the rights or feelings of other people. Therefore, people who have an aggressive style believe firmly in their own rights but may not believe that others have equal rights. These people usually have a strong need to compete or prove themselves. They sometimes feel they deserve more respect and attention than other people. Alternatively, although people with an aggressive style may agree that other people have rights, but lose sight of this when they feel their own rights have been infringed upon.

People who have an aggressive style tend to have poor communication skills. They usually get their own way by treading on others and by being rude, pushy, and insulting. This behaviour may not be intentional but can be very hurtful. They are likely to have trouble developing or keeping close and affectionate relationships.

The assertive style

People who are assertive know they have rights but also remember that other people have rights as well. Assertive people care about other people's feelings and therefore phrase their requests or complaints in a polite but firm manner. These people have a sense of ‘give and take’ and are co-operative at times of conflict.

Assertive people assess each situation and decide which action is most appropriate. They can bend and give in if necessary (for example, if the other person is being difficult because he or she is unwell) or they can stand up for their rights and be strong at other times. Assertive people try to choose the most appropriate behaviour for the situation. These people have control over their behaviour and have respect for themselves and others.

Examples of different styles

Each of the following examples shows three types of responses (passive, aggressive, and assertive) to various situations. You can see from these examples that in an assertive encounter no-one should feel put down. If people choose to react badly to your assertiveness then you can regard this as their problem and not some fault of your own.

Example 1: Mary goes to work each day and enjoys the time to herself when she gets home. Nearly every afternoon her neighbour, who stays home all day, pops in for a cup of tea. Mary does not want this to continue. How can she tell her neighbour?

Passive: I'll put the kettle on.

Aggressive: Look you've got to stop coming over every afternoon. I've got to have some time to myself.

Assertive: I often enjoy having tea in the afternoon but I need a bit of time to myself these days when I get home from work. How about making Wednesday afternoon the time when we get together?

In this case you may want to compromise (e.g., suggesting tea on Wednesdays) because you think your neighbour is lonely. You do not have to make this compromise - it is your choice.

Example 2: Waiting at the counter at Telecom, Janice is about to be served when someone starts to speak and says "It's only a quick question." There are many people waiting, for various reasons. What would you do?

Passive: OK go ahead.

Aggressive: Don't you think I've got better things to do than wait here and listen to your problem?

Assertive: I've been waiting a fair while and it's my turn now. I don't expect to be very long either.

How assertive are you?

How do you think you would have responded in these situations? To get a better idea of how comfortable you are being assertive in a variety of situations, have a go at the questionnaire on the next page. If you get a score of above 60 you probably have pretty good assertiveness skills, but beware, you may be being aggressive without realising. If you score below 60 you will probably benefit from practicing your assertiveness skills.

Assertiveness Questionnaire

Indicate how comfortable you feel in each of the following situations.

Score 1 if you feel very uncomfortable

2 if you feel slightly uncomfortable

3 if you feel reasonably comfortable

4 if you feel very comfortable

	Enter 1, 2, 3 or 4
Asking for the service you expect when you haven't received it in a shop or restaurant	
Expressing anger when you are angry	
Receiving a compliment and saying something to acknowledge that you agree	
Discussing another person's criticism of you openly with them	
Speaking up in front of a group	
Telling a friend that they are doing something that bothers you	
Requesting the return of a borrowed item without apology	
Initiating a conversation with a stranger	
Telling an acquaintance that you like him or her	
Returning a defective item to a shop or restaurant	
Asking a favour of someone	
Turning down a request for a meeting or date	
Admitting to either fear or ignorance	
Asking for and accepting constructive criticism	
Saying 'no' to someone without being apologetic	
Telling a friend exactly how you feel	
Arguing with another person	
Touching a colleague or friend affectionately	
Treating yourself or doing something just for you	
Refusing a friend a favour when you don't want to do it	
TOTAL SCORE	

Setting goals for assertive behaviour

Now that you have decided it is important for you to learn to be more assertive you will need to identify the areas in which you would like to be more assertive. Think about situations that you currently find difficult. In what kinds of situations would you like to be more assertive? Phrase these goals in a positive way. For example, instead of saying "I don't want to give in to my boyfriend and stay home every Friday night" you could rephrase this goal as, "I would like to go out with my boyfriend every (say) second Friday night but will go out without him if he refuses".

It is always best to start with the easiest goals first. Therefore, write your goals on a piece of paper, order them from easiest to hardest, then write them into the spaces below.

Goals	
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

Your bill of assertive rights

The following list of personal rights is relevant to you and to everyone else. Being assertive means asserting these rights for yourself but also acknowledging that others also have these rights. Practise repeating your personal rights, especially those rights that seem hardest to accept. Remember this list is not exhaustive, it is just designed to give you an idea of your rights.

- I have the right to be the judge of what I do and what I think.
- I have the right to offer no reasons and excuses for my behaviour.
- I have the right to refuse to be responsible for finding solutions to other people's problems.
- I have the right to change my mind.
- I have the right to make mistakes.
- I have the right to say "I don't know".
- I have the right to make my own decisions.
- I have the right to say "I don't understand".
- I have the right to say "I don't care".
- I have the right to say "no" - without feeling guilty.
- I have the right to be miserable or cheerful.
- I have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
- I have the right to set my own priorities.
- I have the right to be myself without having to act for other peoples benefit.

Identifying your personal rights

Now try writing a statement, which expresses the rights, which you find it most difficult to assert. Use the list of rights to help you.

Using the Bill of Assertive Rights to help you, try to identify which rights are applicable to your goals. Ask yourself the following questions:

Goal 1: _____
What are my rights in this situation?

Are my rights being violated? If so, how?

Goal 2: _____
What are my rights in this situation?

Are my rights being violated? If so, how?

Goal 3: _____
What are my rights in this situation?

Are my rights being violated? If so, how?

Goal 4: _____
What are my rights in this situation?

Are my rights being violated? If so, how?

How to be assertive

In the next section you will find tips on how to be assertive in a variety of different situations. Many of the tips will overlap. Remember that the key to being assertive is to be clear about what you want whilst also being flexible enough to compromise when necessary.

If you have difficulties putting these tips into practice in real life situations try role playing scenarios with a friend before you go into the situations for real. This will help you to feel more confident.

Strategies for saying no

There's nothing wrong with saying 'yes', doing favours, or taking on responsibilities. Problems arise, though if you do these things because you can't say no or don't know how to do so. Here are some things to keep in mind for those times when you wish to say 'no'.

- **Use assertive body posture.** Use direct eye contact, keep your head up, shoulders back, hands relaxed or gesturing normally, and voice calm and loud enough to be heard.
- **Decide on your position before you speak.** If you're not sure what your answer is don't answer yet. Decide on exactly what you would and would not be willing to do.
- **Wait for the question.** Some people agree before they have even been asked! This is convenient for the other person, because they don't have to feel obliged to you – after all, they didn't ask you for the favour. You volunteered.
- **Decide on your wording.** Think through not only what you want to say but how you want to say it. Be clear about your answer; don't leave your questioner wondering what you really mean.
- **Don't apologise when it isn't necessary.** Apologies put you in the debt of the person asking you to do something. They suggest that the other person is entitled to expect you to grant the favour.
- **Don't defend yourself or make excuses when it isn't necessary.** Offering excuses about why you can't fulfil the request is usually dishonest. It's not that you can't do it, it's that you choose not to do it. Saying you can't also invites the person to help you find a way around the barrier.
- **Don't ask permission to say 'no'.** Remember, you have the right to say no. If you ask permission, it tells the other person that they are in charge.
- **Strengthen your position.** Don't expect that the other person will accept your refusal the first time that you turn them down – especially if you've been saying yes for years. Be ready for them to push again, and respond with a refusal that is just as strong or stronger.
- **The broken record technique.** Don't feel you have to rephrase your response every time. If you keep repeating the same message, eventually the other person will hear it. This may start sounding odd, but it will be the other person provoking it.
- **Don't wait for acceptance.** You don't have to convince the other person to accept your refusal or agree with it. If you keep explaining your self every time they repeat the request, then you are saying that they have the ultimate power.
- **Accept the consequences.** You have the right to say no, but the other person has the right not to like it. When you say no there may be unpleasant consequences in the way that others react. Recognize and accept this.

Practice session

Carry a pen and paper with you for the week. Write down any requests that you don't feel completely comfortable about. Make a note of what you did in the situation.

Once you are out of the situation and have some time to think, decide whether you are happy with your response. If not, write down a response that you think would have been better.

After you've practiced this for a while, try using these skills to say no to some requests you have decided you don't want to do.

Making requests

Many people are quite passive when it comes to making requests. They may feel they don't have the right to ask. Or they may fear the consequences of the request. The result: they avoid asking for help even when it is perfectly reasonable to do so. Consider these tips and observations about making requests.

- **What would you like to happen?** Begin by asking yourself what you would like to happen in this situation. If you are used to taking a passive stance, you may find that it is hard to know what you want, let alone to ask for it.
- **What would be reasonable?** Before making your request, decide for yourself what you think would be reasonable, given the circumstances. Use your list of assertive rights if you have difficulty with this.
- **Don't apologise for asking.** You have the right to ask for just about anything – as long as you recognise that the other person has the right to refuse.
- **Avoid putting yourself down as part of the request.** Instead, try to ask in as straightforward way as possible.
- **Before making your request define the situation.** Be as clear as you can without making a long speech. *"It's been a long time since we went out together"*.
- **Express how you are feeling in this situation.** Focus a bit more on the positive emotions you wish you were feeling than on the negative emotions you are currently feeling. *"In situations like this I don't feel as close to you as I would like"*.
- **Use "I" statements.** Take responsibility for your emotions. You should not be trying to blame how you feel on the other person. This will only make them defensive. "I" statements make your request more personal, they communicate that you take responsibility for your own feelings, and they avoid implicit insults.
- **Be clear but brief.** In most situations your request should take no more than one or two sentences. Be specific.
- **Frame the request positively.** Say what you want, not what you don't want.
- **Focus on behaviour.** What do you want the person to do? Don't ask for changes in how the person thinks or feels. Also avoid being too general.
- **Describe the outcome** that you think will follow if the other person does go along with what you suggest. Perhaps you will feel better. Perhaps you will do

something for the other person in return. Sometimes the outcome will be a concrete effect in the outside world.

- **Perhaps if the person doesn't do what you request, you will do something they won't like.** Remember that negative consequences often cause resentment. The research shows that punishments are less effective at changing behaviour than are rewards.

Practice session

Think of at least one situation in which your needs, desires, or expectations are not being met. Think about the situation and how you might use the tips above to help you to sort out this situation. You should start off with a situation that is mildly challenging such as asking your neighbour to keep an eye on your house whilst you are away. Write out how you will go about making this request. Once you are happy with what you have written, put your request into action.

Skills for providing corrective feedback.

Many people find giving corrective feedback even more difficult than getting it. But all of us need to give corrective feedback now and then. In fact some negative feedback (as bad as that term may sound) is important in almost all relationships. Read the tips below to give you an idea of how you can give constructive criticism.

- **Watch the ratio.** Remember that positive feedback is more powerful than negative and tends to cement relationships. Ask yourself which type you give more often. If you overdo it on the negative side, then try to increase the amount of positive feedback.
- **Think before talking.** It's easy to get off track when giving corrective feedback. Before you get started, think through exactly what you want to say and how you will say it.
- **Talk one to one.** Avoid giving corrective feedback when there is more than one person present. Most people find it humiliating to be criticized in front of others. They will focus more on their own embarrassment than on your message.
- **Choose your timing.** Don't start giving your feedback when the other person is stressed, distracted or too rushed to pay close attention to what you have to say. The only reason to give corrective feedback is to help the other person, and it will be of no help if they can't focus on your message.
- **Be precise.** For feedback to be useful the person has to know exactly what you're talking about. Be specific and give details.
- **Include the positive in the message.** Consider starting your feedback with what you did like, so that the person does not feel that you are attacking them.
- **Cement the relationship.** If what you say is likely to seem threatening to the person, start out with a clear statement about the value that the relationship has for you.

- **Give information not advice.** Direct advice is often resisted, and rightly so. People have the right to decide for themselves what they will do. When giving negative feedback, focus on giving information about the problem. Let the other person decide what to do about it.
- **Focus on the behaviour, not on the person.** If corrective feedback is to have a purpose, the person will have to be able to change something. If they can't change it the feedback is pointless. Our feedback should focus on the behaviour we don't like – not our guess about the reason for the behaviour.

Skills for coping with criticism

There are a variety of strategies for dealing with negative feedback from others. Here are some tips.

- **Relax.** Criticism may cause you to tense up. This will put you into a defensive or aggressive body posture, change the emotional tone of your voice, and make it harder to think of an effective response.
- **Avoid retaliation.** Don't immediately turn the focus onto the other person.
- **Hold back.** The intention of some indirect criticisms is to "get a rise out of you". In other words, the person wants you to get upset about the remark so that they can deny any negative intentions.
- **Consider your safety.** Some critical people get physically violent. This is especially a concern when you know the person has been violent in the past.
- **Don't demand perfection.** Most people aren't all that great at providing negative feedback. Even if some feedback is not expressed all that well, consider whether there may be some value in it.
- **Validate their perception.** If you can see why they might think the way they do, say so. This defuses some of the frustration and makes a reasonable exchange more likely.
- **Validate their emotions.** If the person is upset, acknowledge this. The person will usually feel that they have been heard, and will relax.
- **Agree.** In some cases you can defuse a criticism by agreeing with all or part of it. Your critic often wants to "win" the exchange with you. By handing them the victory right at the start you calm them down and defuse the criticism.
- **Listen and wait.** Before you respond allow critics to get their points out. Listen. They will eventually slow down and be more prepared for an open exchange. Listening to criticism does not mean that you have to buy it or believe it.
- **Admit failings.** If the other person is right, admit it. This opens the exchange to an honest discussion.
- **Narrow and specify.** People are often vague when they provide criticism. Ask what the criticism is really about – without jabbing them too hard for being imprecise.
- **Ask for clarification.** When you are given indirect or nonverbal criticism, it's fair to ask the person about it. This forces the person to take responsibility for what they are saying. You have communicated that you will not respond to communication for which the person will not take responsibility.
- **Explain without offering excuses.** If appropriate you may wish to offer your version of events with a brief explanation.
- **Don't try to change their mind.** They have a right to their opinions – even if they are mistaken. If you try to force them to change you hand them power.
- **Respond to the style.** React to the manner in which the criticism is given. If the person is kind and obviously well meaning, thank them for their openness.

If the criticism was given in an intentionally hurtful way, consider pointing this out to them and suggest an alternative way of communicating.

- **Ask for time.** You may want time to ponder the possible truthfulness of the feedback. And it may take you a while to figure out how to respond. If so consider asking to meet at a later date to clarify what has been said.
- **Recognise the difference between fair criticism and excessive or unreasonable criticism.** Fair criticism is not demeaning or rejecting and is usually given with information that will show you how to get things back on track. Excessive or unreasonable criticism makes you feel put down and undermines your confidence to assert yourself. If in spite of being given every opportunity the other person persists in excessive or unreasonable criticism, you may want to consider ending the relationship.

Practice session

Sometimes it's hard to come up with the right response on the spot. There isn't much time to think and you may be feeling strong emotions. It's good practice to go back and think about these exchanges later on when you have some time.

- For one week, monitor all of the criticisms that you get from other people.
- Write down each criticism and who it is from.
- Write down your response at the time.
- Evaluate your response. Was it assertive? Was it negative or defensive? What did you do right?
- If you were unhappy with your initial response, try writing down a more assertive response.

Strategies for dealing with anger

Confrontations can be profoundly difficult. They often go wrong. People yell. Wave their arms, and threaten. The exchange often makes things worse rather than better. Have a look below for tips on how best to deal with your own and other people's anger.

Dealing with your own anger

- **Deal with something that is making you feel angry as soon as possible.** Don't let your anger fester.
- **Recognise your anger.** Ask yourself the following questions: How angry am I? What is the reason for my anger? Is my anger justified? Some minor issues can act as "hooks" for your emotions. Unimportant issues can drive you crazy if you let them. The task in these situations may be to communicate your preferences but then to let go.
- **Tell the other person.** Be clear and specific. Include positive statements: "I like you/love you/value your friendship, but I feel angry with you because..."

- **Say what you want to happen in the future.** Remember not to state your goal in terms of personality change. If anything changes it will be behaviour.
- **Offer a solution** to the current problem or suggest a way to prevent it happening again.

Dealing with other people's anger

- **Recognise and acknowledge the anger:** *"I can see you're angry..."*
- **Make moves to deal with the problem:** *"Tell me exactly what the problem is. Let's work out a solution together."*
- **Remain calm and unthreatening.** Sit down and encourage the other person to join you. Adopt an open relaxed posture. Keep a vocal tone that communicates assertiveness rather than aggressiveness or passivity.
- **Listen to what is actually being said.** When you think you understand what they are saying, say it back to them in your own words. If the other person doesn't agree that you have it right, then you don't.
- During confrontations you may feel reluctant to acknowledge the good points made by the other person. But if we don't give them credit for these points, they will feel we aren't listening to what they have to say. Is there some justification in the anger? If so, admit it.
- **Don't be afraid to say sorry if you feel sorry:** *"I'm sorry you feel like that about what I said/did."*
- **Work at solving the problem constructively.** Few confrontations are resolved by having one person give in completely and acknowledge that the other person was absolutely right. Instead effective confrontation usually involves mutual problem solving and compromise.
- **Recognise that everybody gets angry sometimes – including you.** Try not to let a situation where you have had to deal with someone's anger put you off approaching them in a friendly and open manner in the future.

Assertiveness exercises

Look at the following situations. Think about how you might respond. When thinking of assertive responses it is important to consider both what you say and what you do. Would it be most effective if you were to respond immediately, or to wait, perhaps until you can speak in private? Do you have all the facts or will you have to find out more before you can decide what you would like to happen?

Your boss comes to you at 4 pm and asks if you would stay late that night to complete an important piece of work for them. You have plans to go out that evening.

You have just put your children to bed and sat down for the first time that day. Your partner says to you "You seem very distant lately, I feel like we never spend any time together. You just don't put the effort into our relationship anymore."

Your best friend has asked you to help her to fill in a job application. She shows you what she has written so far. It is scruffy, with lots of spelling mistakes.

You have an arrangement with your son that he will wash up every other night. However, he very rarely does this and when you ask him if he is going to do it tonight he becomes aggressive and accuses you of “nagging”.

You know that some of the people in your department are getting paid more than you. You have recently taken on some new responsibilities and so have decided to ask your boss for a pay rise.

You have bought a microwave in a shop, but when you got it home it wouldn't work. You are trying to return it to the shop but the sales assistant does not want to give you a refund.

Now look back at your goals for assertive behaviour. You have already identified your rights in each of these situations. You are now ready to decide on an appropriate assertive response. Write your planned response in each of the boxes below.

Goal 1

Goal 2

Goal 3

Goal 4

The assertiveness pitfall

Now that you are ready to begin being assertive there is something, which it is important that you keep 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 co-worker 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 on to you even harder than he did before. Giving in under this pressure is a bad idea. You would be saying, "Look, if ever I 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 this new rule and abide by it.

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, 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 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 to push 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.

Practising what you have learned

You cannot expect to become assertive overnight. It will take time and practise to learn these new skills and to apply them consistently. It will also take time for your family and friends to adjust to your new behaviour. If you are usually aggressive people will probably be pleased with your new behaviour. On the other hand, if you are normally quite passive some people may feel threatened when you start to assert yourself. Remember though that this fear is their problem, not yours. You are simply reclaiming your assertive rights. Give yourself time and make any changes gradually. As your assertive behaviour starts to feel more natural you should begin to feel more confident and happy with yourself.