

Assertiveness

Some people confuse assertiveness with aggression and think that to assert yourself is to adopt a particular position in a disagreement, stand your ground and argue a point without compromise. In fact, being assertive means communicating your needs, wants, feelings, beliefs and opinions to others in a direct and honest manner, while at the same time being receptive to their needs and without intentionally hurting anyone's feelings.

It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity. The use of bully tactics is destructive to relationships and, ultimately, to your self-esteem. Remaining passive may help you to avoid conflict, but the price paid includes feelings of helplessness and lack of control. Direct communication can reduce conflict, build your self-confidence and enhance your personal and work relationships. By following a few simple suggestions, you can learn the skills to be more assertive in your relationships.

The advantages of assertive behaviour

The use of aggressive behaviours, such as verbal or physical threats, may get you what you want in the short term, but your relationships will suffer. On the other hand, passive behaviour can also ruin relationships, because your own needs, wants and feelings are ignored in favour of avoiding arguments.

The advantages of using assertive behaviour in all dealings with others include:

- Your needs, wants and feelings are more likely to be understood
- Nobody's feelings are hurt intentionally
- Both parties are more likely to feel respected and heard
- The relationship is strengthened by the exchange
- You experience fewer negative conflicts and arguments
- You feel in control of your own life
- Your confidence and self-esteem are enhanced
- You have a better chance of getting what you really want.

A learned skill

Like any other skill, assertiveness takes time to learn. Suggestions include:

- Decide that you want to be assertive rather than aggressive or passive. Commitment to change is a big step in the learning process.
- Think about a recent conflict where your needs, wants or feelings were not respected. Imagine how you could have handled it in a more assertive way.
- Practise talking in an assertive way, alone or with a friend. Pay attention to your body language and verbal cues as well as the words you say.
- Respect the wants, needs and feelings of others, and accept that their viewpoints may be different to yours.
- Take a problem-solving approach to conflict, seeking solutions that will meet both sets of needs. Try to see the other person as your collaborator rather than your opposition.
- Tell the other person honestly how you feel, without making accusations or trying to make them feel guilty.
- Use assertive language such as 'I feel...' and 'I think...', which takes responsibility for and explains exactly how you are feeling, rather than aggressive language such as 'You always...' and 'You never...', which blames the other and escalates conflict.
- Don't interrupt the other person when they are talking. Try hard to listen and understand their point of view. Ask the other person to show you the same respect and attention.
- Suggest to the other person that you brainstorm ways to solve the problem together.

- If the exchange doesn't go well, learn from the experience and plan how you will do things a little differently next time.

Body language

When asserting yourself, suggestions include:

- Look the person in the eye.
- Hold your body upright.
- Consciously relax your shoulders.
- Try to breathe normally and don't hold your breath.
- Keep your face relaxed.
- Speak at a normal conversational volume (don't yell or whisper).

Keeping your head

Despite your best efforts to be direct and calm, the other person will sometimes behave like you're having an argument and will want to yell, criticise and goad. Suggestions include:

- Tell the person you'll take up the subject again at another time, and leave.
- If you decide to stick it out – remain calm, steer the conversation back to the original point and try to understand the other person's point of view.
- Appreciate that there may be other issues motivating their behaviour.
- Don't take heat-of-the-moment criticisms to heart.
- Afterwards, learn from the experience and try to think up better ways to negotiate a similar scenario.

Teaching children to be assertive

An assertive child is more likely to stand up for their rights in an appropriate way and less likely to be bullied. Parents can teach their children how to act assertively. Suggestions include:

- Use assertive behaviour yourself so your child can learn from example.
- Explain the difference between assertiveness, aggression and passivity.
- Role-play typical scenarios with them so they can practise being assertive.
- Notice whenever they handle a situation assertively and compliment them.

Where to get help

- Your doctor – for referral to a suitable professional counsellor
- Your local community centre – for short courses or workshops
- Relationships Australia (Victoria) Tel. 1300 364 277

Things to remember

- Being assertive means communicating with others in a direct and honest manner without intentionally hurting anyone's feelings.
- Direct communication can reduce conflict, build self-confidence and enhance personal and work relationships.
- Assertiveness is a skill that anyone can learn.

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