

YOU CAN ASSERT YOURSELF

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How do you feel when someone takes advantage of you? Can you tell them to stop? Are you able to express how you are feeling about what is happening?

When people have difficulty asserting themselves, others tend to take advantage. If a person is to get their needs met, they will have to speak up from time to time when others are violating their rights. Assertiveness may be necessary because others are hurting their feelings or attempting to pressure them into doing something they don't want to do. Being assertive entails both letting people know what their needs are and being determined that other people will treat them appropriately.

Lack of assertiveness is a problem for many clients in counseling. It can cause a variety of interpersonal difficulties. It is also often found in certain types of disorders, such as depression. Assertiveness is a valuable coping tool in dealing with anger, marital friction, job and employment difficulties, and parenting.

The aim of assertiveness is to set limits and boundaries on the actions of people and/or to ask for your needs to be met. There is nothing inherently hostile or aggressive about this. Aggressiveness is different. It is aimed at in some way diminishing or tearing down the other person. It can be verbal, such as belittling people, calling them names, or embarrassing them in front of others. Or it can be physical--pushing, hitting, or assaulting in some way.

Learning to be assertive can actually be a way for persons to be less aggressive. When an individual gets their needs met in socially acceptable ways, tension is likely to decrease. They feel like they have done something about the situation, and they are not likely to feel the same need to be aggressive.

Why Don't People Assert Themselves?

One reason people don't assert themselves is that they think they don't have a right. They mistakenly believe that their feelings and wants don't count and that other people's needs are more important than their own. On the face of it, this does not appear to be logical. Why would one person's feelings and needs be more important than another's? However, a variety of factors may lead people to feel that their desires are insignificant. Perhaps their parents acted in neglectful or hurtful ways towards them which led them to conclude at an early age that they were not important. Or, perhaps their parents preferential treatment to a brother or sister which indicated to them that other people were more important than them.

A second reason that people are not assertive is a fear of hurting other's feelings. There may be a belief that one is responsible for how other people feel. Actually, if a person is assertive, they are simply setting appropriate boundaries and limits. Limit setting does not generally cause others to

feel badly. There is no need to be responsible for the feelings of others if one is only setting appropriate limits.

In some instances, it is not so much that people are afraid of hurting the feelings of others as it is that they are afraid of being rejected. There may be a fear of anger from another person or even abandonment.

Some people believe that being assertive is more trouble than it's worth. However, not being assertive only avoids short term hassles; it allows problems to stay in place in the long run. Since assertiveness is more likely than being passive to eliminate problems, it is not more trouble in the final analysis. When people are assertive and teach others to respect their boundaries, then over time the significant people with whom they interact with will begin to do just that, and future hassles will be alleviated. However, when persons allow others to trespass boundaries again and again, then every time an issue comes up, the same battle has to be fought all over.

Still another reason that stops people from being assertive is the belief that they will explode and lose control. When people are afraid of blowing up, this can sometimes become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why? Because when they are passive, they may begin to feel more and more resentful that others are taking advantage of them. Being appropriately assertive then decreases the chances of losing one's temper.

There may even be biological or genetic factors which make some persons more submissive and other persons more dominant. These biological factors are called temperament. But even if there are such biological factors related to assertiveness, the mind can be remarkably changeable and resilient. People can still change and learn to set boundaries.

Yes, But Is Setting Limits with People the “Right” Thing to Do?

One way of answering this question is to point out the many ways that nature sets limits. Without boundaries human beings could not live. The wall of the cell keeps certain substances in the cell and others outside of it. This is necessary for it to survive. The nucleus of the cell keeps some substances in and others out. The skin protects the interior of the human body and keeps harmful objects, organisms, and chemicals out. Mental health professionals sometimes talk about the “boundary” around a marital relationship. There are some things which are best kept inside marriage (sex, money, certain secrets) and others which are best kept out. Nations have borders which function as boundaries to keep some things in and others out. Assertiveness is just another form of boundary setting. It is a necessity of human life.

Finally, it is important to remember that being assertive can benefit others as well as oneself. It is a way of giving people feedback and letting them know about the effect their behavior is having on others. This is very valuable, important information which they need (whether they know it or not). People grow and mature partly by understanding how they affect others. If they do not get that feedback, they will tend to make the same mistakes over and over again.

Assertiveness is Not Manipulation

What's the difference? One dissimilarity is that in manipulation a person does whatever it takes to cause another person to do what they want. The manipulator is willing to be underhanded, say something untrue, intimidate, make the other person feel guilty, and so on. Assertiveness is a direct, honest approach. Secondly, in manipulation one does not accept the fact that the other person ultimately is separate and different and may not choose to go along. In assertiveness, it is kept in mind that even with our best, most skillful assertiveness, the other person may still choose something different from what we want.

Getting Personal

What do you think would happen if you were assertive and set boundaries with:
your partner?
your parents?
your in-laws?
your children?
your co-workers?
your boss?
your friends?

What might you lose if you are assertive?

What do you stand to lose if you are not assertive?

What are you afraid of if you assert yourself?

If I say "No," people will think _____

If I say "No," I'm scared that _____

If I say "No," people will react by _____

I have the most trouble saying "No" when _____

Think of two ways you can say "No," in your life. Are there things you need to say "No" to today?

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

I do want to be assertive, but I don't want to be mean or hurt peoples' feelings. What can I do?

Remember that asserting yourself does not necessarily mean being aggressive. It doesn't necessarily mean even showing anger. Assertiveness has nothing to do with putting people down or hurting their feelings. It is simply a way of setting limits. When persons have their feelings hurt by an appropriate setting of boundaries then that is their issue to

deal with, not yours. As long as you are not attacking the person in any way, then being assertive is a constructive activity which may even enhance relationships. It can benefit both you and the other person.

Some persons constantly attempt to be “nice.” They have the mistaken idea that by pleasing others and not asking for anything themselves, people will like them more and won’t reject them. If you fall into this pattern, then you need to consider that if you discount your own feelings, you invite other people to do the same. In addition, if you are frequently pushing down your own negative emotions in order to please others, the feelings will not simply go away. They are likely to go underground and build up. At a future time, they may emerge and create problems in some way.

Moreover, it is a mistake to always try to be “nice” to the exclusion of all other personal qualities. There are many other aspects of being a loving person, and being loving does not always being “nice.” There are many other guiding principles for relationships which are more important, including integrity, courage, compassion, and loyalty.



Points to Ponder

What would the world be like if everyone was assertive? What would it be like if no one was assertive? Would the world be a better place or a worse place?

How Can I Go About Being Assertive? Are There Guidelines?

Many persons find that they need some concrete advice in terms of how to go about being assertive. While each person may go about it in their own way, here are some suggestions.

First of all, body posture and body language are very important. Looking directly at the other person in the eye when talking to them conveys that you are serious about what you are saying. There is no need to make any threatening gesture. A direct, firm tone of voice is best. Avoid cursing or put downs. Treat the other person with respect. Approach them as a mature adult whom you expect will react as a mature adult.

The following formula is often recommended by counselors as a way of being assertive. It is not intended to be used literally. However, when the principles behind the formula are understood, then you will have a good beginning point.

“When you do _____, I feel _____. I would like you to _____.”

Part 1: “When you . . .”

First of all, this statement avoids criticizing and condemning the other person. It doesn't indicate that they are bad or evil. It focuses on what they are doing rather than labeling them as a particular type of person (“no good,” “lazy,” etc.). It points out that there are certain behaviors which are creating problems for you. If the other person normally tends to be defensive and/or to deny problems, it is harder for them to deny specific behaviors than to deny personality traits. For example, if you were to say, “I can't stand your laziness,” they might defensively reply, “I'm not lazy. I go to work every day, and I play golf on weekends.” By focusing on specific behavior it is more likely to be clear to the other person what you mean, and there is less likely to be disagreement over whether problem exists or not. On the other hand, the statement, “When you let the grass grow up to five inches and when you leave the garbage piled in the garage . . .” is crystal clear. The other person may be less defensive because even though you are pointing out a problem, you are not labeling them. This starts off your assertiveness on solid ground.

Oftentimes, when we are upset and need to assert ourselves it is because another person has deviated from an agreement they have made with us. It can be a relatively straightforward process to say to the other person, “You had promised that you would . . . You haven't done that. I expect that you will follow through with what you yourself agreed to.”

Part 2: “When you _____ I feel _____.”

The formula then moves on to your feelings. Again, you are on solid ground. You are the expert on your feelings; nobody knows more about them than you do. If you say that it upsets you for your spouse to come home late without calling, then who is to say that you are not upset? This lets the person know what kind of impact their behavior is having. The other person needs to understand how they affect other people and how they affect you. Letting people know about the negative feelings they create is one way of being assertive.

Part 3: “And I would like you to _____”

Finally, you let the person know clearly and specifically what you are wanting from them. :”When you come home late, I feel upset. I don't know where you are or if you are okay. I want you to call me if you have to be late.” This request follows reasonably from everything which has been said. It is a simple statement of what you want. You haven't told them what they should do. You have stated your wishes, and again no one knows what you want better than you. This does not mean that they will agree. They can refuse, but it will be harder for them to argue with your reasoning because you have

- a. been specific about particular behaviors (which are probably clear and undeniable)
- b. stated what you are feeling (which you are the expert on)
- c. stated what you want (which you are also the expert on)

Here are some thoughts which may stop you from asserting yourself. After each one an alternative thought is presented which may help you to be more assertive.

<i>Rationalization for Not Being Assertive</i>	<i>Assertive Reasoning</i>
People won't like me.	How do I know that they won't like me? People often respect those who stand up for themselves. I can't live my life trying to please everybody else. Moreover, if I always place my own needs below those of others, I am likely to feel more and more resentful.
They will retaliate. They might criticize me or leave me.	They may--and then again, they may not. People who care about me are not likely to try to get back at me. If someone I care about can't tolerate some straightforward feedback, then I need to reassess whether this is a healthy relationship for me.
I'll hurt other peoples' feelings.	That's not my intention. I am not out to hurt them or their feelings--only to set some boundaries and limits. Moreover, I'm not likely to hurt other people's feelings if I am straightforward about how I feel and what I want rather than just venting anger. If I am appropriate and they have their feelings hurt, that is their problem--not mine.
I'll lose control and explode.	Actually, I may be more likely to explode if I never speak up. I may just continue to feel more and more resentful until I lose my temper.
My needs and feelings don't count.	That's nonsense. My needs are just as important as everyone else's. Every human being has the right to state how they are feeling and to request that others respect their needs.

<p>I've done irritating things to other people, too, so I don't have a right to complain.</p>	<p>Of course I have. This does not take away my right to let others know what my needs are. When I have irritated others, it has been appropriate for them to be assertive and to let me know about it. Sometimes they have done just that. I have needed feedback at times about how my behavior affected others, and now this person needs some feedback about how I feel about what they are doing.</p>
<p>It will be too much trouble. I don't have the time or energy.</p>	<p>If I don't assert myself, I will only create more problems to deal with in the long run. These could take even more time and energy to straighten out later. Asserting myself doesn't mean I have to put out a great deal of energy. All I have to do is say what's on my mind and set some boundaries. There's no need for me to make more of this situation than that.</p>

These challenges to non-assertive thinking can be used when you find yourself hesitating to be assertive. In the following situation, there is an example of an individual having difficulty being assertive with a neighbor who had borrowed something and had not returned it. By challenging the negative thoughts behind their lack of assertiveness, they moved towards setting firmer boundaries with the neighbor. This uses the four column technique outlined in chapter/handout #3.

Objective Situation (The “Event”)	Automatic Negative Thoughts	Negative Consequences	Realistic, Logical Thoughts
<p>My neighbor borrows lawn tools but then doesn't bring them back. I have to go ask for them back each time he borrows something.</p>	<p>He'll be mad if I tell him that I can't lend them to him anymore. He won't be friendly towards me anymore.</p> <p>Besides, I once borrowed something of his and didn't give it back right away.</p>	<p>Anxiety Fearfulness Passivity Anger Feelings of inadequacy for not being able to take action</p>	<p>The tools are mine, and he is not respecting that boundary.</p> <p>There is nothing wrong with me insisting that he return the tools on time. I don't have to be belligerent about it--just firm.</p> <p>I've never really seen him get mad. He's more likely to be embarrassed than mad.</p> <p>I've got to live next door to him for a long time. If this behavior of his keeps up, I'm going to be really upset. I'll just become madder and madder if I don't speak up now.</p> <p>Just because I didn't return something of his once doesn't mean that I can't be assertive in this situation.</p>

Notice that in the above situation, the person who is unassertive is feeling both angry and anxious

at the same time. This is very typical of persons who have difficulties in this area. Their anxiety often delays them taking any action until their anger finally reaches a boiling point.

Getting Personal

Identify the situations where you are most likely to have difficulty speaking up for yourself:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Assess the negative thoughts you are having in these situations which keep you from being assertive. Use the four column sheet to challenge your thoughts.

Objective Situation (The "Event")	Automatic Negative Thoughts	Negative Consequences	Realistic, Logical Thoughts

Things to Do

For each problem area that you identified in which you are having difficulty being assertive, write down what you can do to set and enforce limits.

Here are some examples:

1. My kids leave their clothes lying on the living room floor.	1. I will go to their rooms and insist that they come pick up their clothes. I will not leave their room until they come with me to get them. If the child is not home, I will put his clothes in a pile waiting for him when he does get home.
2. My co-worker often butts in and answers questions that people are directing towards me.	2. I will look my co-worker in the eye and firmly but politely tell her that I haven't had a chance to respond yet.
3. My mother asks questions about my personal life with my husband that I don't want to answer.	3. I will tell mom that I appreciate her interest but that my husband and I have decided to keep some issues between ourselves.
4. My brother asks me to babysit his children and then doesn't pick them up on time.	4. I will tell my brother that I will not be able to keep his children anymore unless he picks them up on time. Then, if he doesn't, I will tell him that I'm not available for sitting them anymore.

Now list your issues and how you can handle them:

Areas where I am having problems setting boundaries	What I can do about the problem

Things to Do

Role play a situation calling for assertiveness with a friend. Find someone with whom you are comfortable. Explain to them that you need to practice handling a problem and that you need someone with whom you can role play it. If you are not sure what to say, you might ask your friend to play you in the role play. This will give you some ideas and help you to formulate a strategy. By playing the role of the other person, you may be able to see their point of view better and think of ways to state your case most effectively. Make sure, that you have plenty of time to role play being yourself. It is often helpful to role play a situation several times and practice several different types of responses.

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

What About Asserting Myself with My Boss? Won't He Fire Me?

Being assertive with a boss or supervisor is a somewhat different process from being assertive with anyone else. His or her openness to feedback has to be carefully considered. It is important with bosses that

- a. they don't feel threatened*

- b. they don't feel like you are demeaning them or their position*
- c. they don't feel like they are losing face in front of others.*

When these conditions are met, supervisors are more likely to be open to feedback. Keep your comments behaviorally specific. Be clear about how you feel about a situation and why you feel it needs to be changed. Offer specific solutions. Avoid anger, name calling, and anything which would make it look like you are out of control or being "disrespectful."

Here is an example of a person you might be assertive with a boss. First, it would be advisable to ask to talk to the boss in private. Remember, it is important for them not to feel like they are losing face in front of the people they supervise. Secondly, state your case. Take your time. Be rational and thoughtful. For example,

"I noticed that you are sending Mary on that trip to Dallas for computer training. I feel that is unfair. I was promised that when the next opportunity for further training came up, I would get it. Furthermore, this workshop would be more suited to my level of knowledge of computers. I was the one that taught Mary how to use the office computer, and I'm generally the one that people turn to when something goes wrong with it."

The boss may have a good explanation for why the other worker is going to the workshop. However, the assertive worker in the example has made a powerful case. In addition, the worker has said nothing disrespectful or out of line.

Further Reading for Clients

Alberti, R.E., & Emmons, M.L. (1986). Your perfect right: A guide to assertive living. Fifth edition. San Luis Obispo, California: Impact Publishers.

Further Reading for Therapists

Liberman, R.P, Derisi, W.J., & Mueser, K.T. (1992). Social skills training for psychiatric patients. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

O'Donohue, W.T. (Ed.) (1994). Handbook of psychological skills training: Clinical techniques and applications. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.