

Assertiveness

Do you have trouble saying "No", even when you really should?

Do you feel people take advantage of you?

Do you have trouble controlling your temper?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might find it really helpful to learn about assertiveness by reading on.

1. What is assertiveness?

At some time in our lives we will all find it difficult to deal with certain situations. Some examples of these situations could be:

- Asking someone to return something they have borrowed.
- Reacting to difficult colleagues at work.
- Communicating your feelings to a partner, family or friends.
- Saying "No" to somebody, then feeling guilty afterwards.

Assertiveness is being able to express your opinions and feelings in a way that also respects the rights of others. It is a way of relating to others with a positive attitude, respecting oneself and others and believing 'I matter and so do you'.

Assertiveness isn't about being aggressive or always getting your own way. It is about standing up for yourself constructively.

Asserting yourself means:

- You can say 'Yes' when you mean 'Yes' and 'No' when you mean 'No'.
- You can communicate clearly to others what you are feeling in a calm way.
- You do not let fear of conflict stop you from speaking.
- You feel good about yourself.
- You feel entitled to be who you are and to express what you feel.

2. Why is assertiveness important?

If you don't know how to be assertive, you may experience:

- Depression: a sense of feeling helpless with no control over your life.

- Resentment: anger at others for taking advantage of you.
- Frustration: why did I let that happen?
- Temper: if you can't express anger appropriately it can build up to temper outbursts.
- Anxiety: you may avoid certain situations which make you feel uncomfortable and you may therefore miss out on activities, job opportunities etc.
- Relationship difficulties: it can be difficult in relationships when individuals can't tell each other what they want and need or how the other person affects them.
- Stress-related problems: stress can have a negative impact on the body, and assertiveness can be a good way of managing stress.

3. Where does non-assertive behaviour come from?

Non-assertive behaviour often comes from our experiences of growing up, relationships and life difficulties. When we were growing up we may have been taught that we should always try to please others and put other people's needs before our own. We may have learnt that if someone says or does something that we don't like, we should be quiet and try to avoid that person in the future.

Also, if while we were growing up our self-confidence was damaged, for example, being teased at school or criticised at home, then as adults we may be more likely to react passively or aggressively in our relationships and at work, rather than assertively.

Relationship difficulties and experience of loss can cause us to feel that we are unable to take control of our own life. Low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness may make us feel guilty about taking care of our own needs. Although a person may have learned to act in a non-assertive way, they can learn to become more assertive.

4. The difference between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour

Although a person may have learned to react passively or aggressively in life, they can change and learn to become more assertive. Let's look at the differences between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour.

Passive behaviour

- Passive behaviour is not expressing your rights, feelings, opinions and needs.
- You bottle up your own feelings, give in to others, and see yourself as having little to contribute.
- The aim of passive behaviour is to avoid conflict at all times and to please others.
- There may be immediate positive effects of being passive (e.g. reduction of anxiety, avoiding guilt etc.). However, the long-lasting effects may be negative (e.g. continuing loss of self-

esteem, stress and anger) and may cause others to become irritated by you and develop a lack of respect for you.

Aggressive behaviour

- Aggression is expressing your own rights, feelings, needs and opinions with no respect for the rights and feelings of others.
- You express your feelings in a demanding, angry way.
- You see your own needs as being more important than others.
- You see others as having little to contribute.
- The aim of aggression is to win, while ignoring the feelings of others.
- Although the short-term effects of aggression may seem rewarding (e.g. release of tension, sense of power) the longer lasting effects are less beneficial (e.g. feeling guilty, resentment from people around you) and may cause problems for you and for those around you.

Assertive behaviour

- In contrast to passive and aggressive behaviour, assertiveness is expressing your own rights, feelings, needs and opinions while maintaining respect for other people's rights, feelings, needs and opinions.
- You are able to express your feelings in a direct, honest and appropriate way.
- You recognise that you have needs that should be met otherwise you may feel undervalued, rejected, angry or sad.
- You have basic human rights and it is possible to stand up for your own rights in a way that does not violate other people's rights.
- You have something to contribute.
- Assertion is not about winning, but is about being able to walk away feeling that you put across what you wanted to say.

Summary of passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour:

Passive: I lose, you win

Aggressive: I win, you lose

Assertive: I win, you win

5. How will people react to me being assertive?

Assertion is an attitude towards yourself and others that is helpful and honest. The benefits of assertion are that you are able to ask for what you want:

- directly and openly;
- appropriately, respecting your own opinions and rights and expecting others
- to do the same;
- confidently.

You do not:

- violate people's rights;
- expect others to magically know what you want;
- feel anxious and avoid difficult situations.

Before you decide to change your behaviour, it is worth taking some time to think about the consequences. In the majority of cases, assertive behaviour will result in a positive response from others. The result is improved self-confidence in yourself and mutual respect from others.

If you are planning to try assertive behaviour, remember that people around you may be used to you behaving in a certain way and may feel confused when you change your behaviour. One way to manage this is to tell people that you have learnt about assertiveness and you have decided to try to start to act in a more assertive way.

There is a possibility that some people may even react negatively to your change in behaviour. For example, in some relationships loved ones may get angry if you express your true feelings, or an unreasonable manager at work may not respond well. If you feel this will be the case, you need to carefully consider whether you are prepared to deal with these difficulties. If you do not want to take the risk, you may decide that assertiveness may not be the best approach for you in these situations.

Source: Adapted from an original booklet by Dr Claire Alwan & Nesta Reeve, Clinical Psychologists, Norfolk and Waveney Mental Health Care NHS Trust.

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