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Asserting Yourself

Assertiveness is an attitude and a way of acting in any situation where you need to

- Express your feelings
- Ask for what you want, or
- Say no to something you don't want

Becoming assertive involves self-awareness and knowing what you want. Behind this knowledge is the belief that you have the right to ask for what you want. When you are assertive, you are conscious of your basic rights as a human being. You give yourself and your particular needs the same respect and dignity you'd give anyone else's. Acting assertively is a way of developing self-respect and self-worth.

If you are phobic or anxiety-prone, you may act assertively in some situations but have difficulty making requests or saying no to family members or close friends. Having perhaps grown up in a family where you felt the need to be perfect and please your parents, you've remained a "people pleaser" as an adult. With your spouse or others you often end up doing many things you don't really want to do. This creates resentment, which in turn produces tension and sometimes open conflict in your relationships. By learning to be assertive, you can begin to express your true feelings and needs more easily. You may be surprised when you begin to get more of what you want as a result of your assertiveness. You may also be surprised to learn that assertive behavior brings you increased respect from others.

Alternative Behavior Styles

Assertiveness is a way of acting that strikes a balance between two extremes: aggressiveness and submissiveness.

Nonassertive or *submissive* behavior involves yielding to someone else's preferences while discounting your own rights and needs. You don't express your feelings or let others know what you want. The result is that they remain ignorant of your feelings or wants (and thus can't be blamed for not responding to them). Submissive behavior also includes feeling guilty—or as if you are imposing—when you do attempt to ask for what you want. If you give others the message that you're *not sure* you have the right to express your needs, they will tend to discount them. Phobic and anxiety-prone persons

From: The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook, by: Edmund J. Bourne, Ph.D.
New Harbinger Publications, Inc., Oakland, CA, 1990.

are often submissive because, as previously mentioned, they are overly invested in being "nice" or "pleasing" to everybody. Or they may be afraid that the open expression of their needs will alienate a spouse or partner on whom they feel dependent.

Aggressive behavior, on the other hand, may involve communicating in a demanding, abrasive, or even hostile way with others. Aggressive people typically are insensitive to others' rights and feelings and will attempt to obtain what they want through coercion or intimidation. Aggressiveness succeeds by sheer force, creating enemies and conflict along the way. It often puts others on the defensive, leading them to withdraw or fight back rather than cooperate. For example, an aggressive way of telling someone you want a particular assignment at work would be to say: "That assignment has my name written on it. If you so much as look at the boss when she brings it up during the staff meeting, you're going to regret it."

As an alternative to being openly aggressive, many people are *passive-aggressive*. If this is your style, instead of openly confronting an issue, you express angry, aggressive feelings in a covert fashion through passive resistance. You're angry at your boss, so you're perpetually late to work. You don't want to comply with your spouse's request, so you procrastinate or "forget" about the request altogether. Instead of asking for or doing something about what you really want, you perpetually complain or moan about what is lacking. Passive-aggressive people seldom get what they want because they never get it across. Their behavior tends to leave other people angry, confused, and resentful. A passive-aggressive way of asking for a particular assignment at work might be to point out how inappropriate someone *else* is for the job, or to say to a co-worker, "If I got more interesting assignments, I might be able to get somewhere in this organization."

A final nonassertive behavior style is being *manipulative*. Manipulative people attempt to get what they want by making others feel sorry for or guilty toward them. Instead of taking responsibility for meeting their own needs, they play the role of victim or martyr in an effort to get others to take care of them. When this doesn't work, they may become openly angry or feign indifference. Manipulation only works as long as those at whom it is targeted fail to recognize what is happening. The person being manipulated may feel confused or "crazy" up to this point; afterward they become angry and resentful toward the manipulator. A manipulative way of asking for a particular assignment at work would be to tell your boss, "Gee, if I get that assignment, I think my boyfriend will finally have some respect for me"; or to tell a co-worker, "Don't breathe a word about this—but if I don't get that assignment, I'm going to finally use those sleeping pills I've been saving up."

Assertive behavior, in contrast to the above-described styles, involves asking for what you want (or saying no) in a simple, direct fashion that does not negate, attack, or manipulate anyone else. You communicate your feelings and needs honestly and directly while maintaining respect and consideration for others. You stand up for yourself and your rights without apologizing or feeling guilty. In essence, assertiveness involves taking responsibility for getting your own needs met in a way that preserves the dignity of other people. Others feel comfortable when you're assertive because they know where you stand. They respect you for your honesty and forthrightness. Instead of demanding or commanding, an assertive statement makes a simple, direct request, such as, "I would really like that assignment," or "I hope the boss decides to give that particular assignment to me."

Which of the above five descriptions fits you most closely? Perhaps more than one behavior style applies, depending on the situation. The following exercise will assist you in identifying your preferred behavior mode when you want something.

What's Your Style?

Think about each of the following situations one at a time. How would you typically handle it? Would your approach be nonassertive (in other words, you wouldn't do anything about it), aggressive, passive-aggressive, manipulative—or would you respond assertively? Note the style you'd use after each situation. If you have fewer than 25 out of 30 "assertive" responses, it would be useful for you to work on your assertiveness.*

1. You're being kept on the phone by a salesperson who is trying to sell you something you don't want.
2. You would like to break off a relationship that is no longer working for you.
3. You're sitting in a movie and the people behind you are talking.
4. Your doctor keeps you waiting more than 20 minutes.
5. Your teenager has the stereo on too loud.
6. Your neighbor next door has the stereo on too loud.
7. You would like to return something to the store and get a refund.
8. You're standing in line and someone moves in front of you.
9. Your friend has owed you money for a long time—money you could use.
10. You receive a bill that seems unusually high for the service you received.
11. Your home repair person is demanding payment but has done unsatisfactory work.
12. You receive food at a restaurant that is over- or undercooked.
13. You would like to ask a major favor of your partner or spouse.
14. You would like to ask a major favor of your friend.
15. Your friend asks you a favor which you don't feel like doing.
16. Your son/daughter/spouse/roommate is not doing their fair share of the work around the house.
17. You would like to ask a question, but are concerned that someone else might think it's silly.
18. You're in a group and would like to speak up, but you don't know how your opinion will be received.
19. You would like to strike up a conversation at a gathering, but you don't know anyone.

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* The idea for this questionnaire was adapted from Shirley J. Mangini, *Secrets of Self-Esteem*. Canoga Park, California: N.O.V.A. Corp., 1986.

20. You're sitting/standing next to someone smoking, and the smoke is beginning to bother you.
21. You find your partner/spouse's behavior unacceptable.
22. You find your friend's behavior unacceptable.
23. Your friend drops by unexpectedly just before you were about to leave to run some errands.
24. You're talking to someone about something important, but they don't seem to be listening.
25. Your friend stands you up for a lunch meeting.
26. You return an item you don't want to the department store and request a refund. The clerk diverts your request and offers to exchange the item for another.
27. You're speaking and someone interrupts you.
28. Your phone rings but you don't feel like getting it.
29. Your partner or spouse "talks down" to you as if you were a child.
30. You receive an unjust criticism from someone.

The Assertiveness Questionnaire

To further clarify those situations in which you could be more assertive, complete the following questionnaire, developed by Sharon and Gordon Bower in their book, *Asserting Yourself*. Check those items that apply in Column A, and then rate the comfort level of those situations for you in Column B.

1 = comfortable
2 = mildly uncomfortable
3 = moderately uncomfortable
4 = very uncomfortable
5 = unbearably threatening

(Note that the varying degrees of discomfort can be expressed whether your feelings are angry, fearful, or passive.)

A Check here if the item applies to you	B Rate from 1-5 for comfort level	**When** do you behave nonassertively?
_____	_____	Asking for help
_____	_____	Stating a difference of opinion
_____	_____	Hearing or expressing negative feelings
_____	_____	Hearing or expressing positive feelings

_____	_____	Dealing with someone who refuses to cooperate
_____	_____	Speaking up about something that annoys you
_____	_____	Talking when all eyes are on you
_____	_____	Protesting a "rip-off"
_____	_____	Saying no
_____	_____	Responding to undeserved criticism
_____	_____	Making requests of authority figures
_____	_____	Negotiating for something you want
_____	_____	Having to take charge
_____	_____	Asking for cooperation
_____	_____	Proposing an idea
_____	_____	Asking questions
_____	_____	Dealing with attempts to make you feel guilty
_____	_____	Asking for service
_____	_____	Asking for a date or appointment
_____	_____	Asking for favors
_____	_____	Other _____

Who are the people with whom you are nonassertive?

_____	_____	Parents
_____	_____	Fellow workers, classmates
_____	_____	Strangers
_____	_____	Old friends
_____	_____	Spouse or significant other
_____	_____	Employer
_____	_____	Relatives
_____	_____	Children
_____	_____	Acquaintances
_____	_____	Salespeople, clerks, hired help
_____	_____	More than two or three people in a group
_____	_____	Other _____

		What do you want that you have been unable to achieve with nonassertive styles?
_____	_____	Approval for things you've done well
_____	_____	To get help with certain tasks
_____	_____	More attention from, or time with, your partner
_____	_____	To be listened to and understood
_____	_____	To make boring or frustrating situations more satisfying
_____	_____	To not have to be nice all the time
_____	_____	Confidence in speaking up when something is important to you
_____	_____	Greater comfort with strangers, store clerks, mechanics, and so on
_____	_____	Confidence in asking for contact with people you find attractive
_____	_____	To get a new job, ask for interviews, raises, and so on
_____	_____	Comfort with people who supervise you, or work under you
_____	_____	To not feel angry and bitter a lot of the time
_____	_____	To overcome a feeling of helplessness and the sense that nothing ever really changes
_____	_____	To initiate satisfying sexual experiences
_____	_____	To do something totally different and novel
_____	_____	To have time by yourself
_____	_____	To do things that are fun or relaxing for you
_____	_____	Other _____

Evaluating Your Responses. What do your answers tell you about areas in which you need to develop more assertiveness? How does nonassertive behavior contribute to the specific items you checked on the What list? In developing your own assertiveness program, you might initially want to focus on items you rated as falling in the 2-3 range. These situations are likely to be the easiest to change. Items you rated as very uncomfortable or threatening can be handled later.

Learning to Be Assertive

Learning to be assertive involves working on yourself in six distinct areas:

1. Developing *nonverbal* assertive behaviors
2. Recognizing and being willing to exercise your basic rights as a human being
3. Becoming aware of your own unique feelings, needs, and wants
4. Practicing assertive responses—first through writing and role-playing and then in real life
5. Learning to say no
6. Learning to avoid manipulation

Each of these areas is considered in the remainder of this chapter.

Developing Nonverbal Assertive Behavior

Some of the nonverbal aspects of assertiveness include

- *Looking directly at* another person when addressing them. Looking down or away conveys the message that you're not quite sure about asking for what you want. The opposite extreme, staring, is also unhelpful because it may put the other person on the defensive.
- Maintaining an *open* rather than closed *posture*. If you're sitting, don't cross your legs or arms. If standing, stand erect and on both feet. Face the person you're addressing directly rather than standing off to the side.
- While communicating assertively, do not back off or move away from the other person. The expression "standing your ground" applies quite literally here.
- *Stay calm*—avoid getting overly emotional or excited. If you're feeling angry, discharge your angry feelings *somewhere else* before you attempt to be assertive. A calm but assertive request carries much more weight with most people than an angry outburst.

Try practicing the above nonverbal skills with a friend by using role-playing in situations that call for an assertive response. A list of such situations can be found at the end of the section "Assertiveness on the Spot."

Recognizing and Exercising Your Basic Rights

As adult human beings we all have certain basic rights. Often, though, we have either forgotten them or else as children we were never taught to believe in them. Developing assertiveness involves recognizing that you, just as much as anyone else, have a right

to all of the things listed under the *Personal Bill of Rights* below. Assertiveness also involves taking responsibility to *exercise* these rights in situations where they are threatened or infringed upon. Read through the *Personal Bill of Rights*, reflecting on your willingness to believe in and exercise each one.

Personal Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to ask for what I want.
2. I have the right to say no to requests or demands I can't meet.
3. I have the right to express all of my feelings, positive or negative.
4. I have the right to change my mind.
5. I have the right to make mistakes and not have to be perfect.
6. I have the right to follow my own values and standards.
7. I have the right to say no to anything when I feel I am not ready, it is unsafe, or it violates my values.
8. I have the right to determine my own priorities.
9. I have the right *not* to be responsible for others' behavior, actions, feelings, or problems.
10. I have the right to expect honesty from others.
11. I have the right to be angry at someone I love.
12. I have the right to be uniquely myself.
13. I have the right to feel scared and say "I'm afraid."
14. I have the right to say "I don't know."
15. I have the right not to give excuses or reasons for my behavior.
16. I have the right to make decisions based on my feelings.
17. I have the right to my own needs for personal space and time.
18. I have the right to be playful and frivolous.
19. I have the right to be healthier than those around me.
20. I have the right to be in a nonabusive environment.
21. I have the right to make friends and be comfortable around people.
22. I have the right to change and grow.
23. I have the right to have my needs and wants respected by others.
24. I have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.
25. I have the right to be happy.

Photocopy the above list and post it in a conspicuous place. By taking time to carefully read through the list every day, you will eventually learn to accept that you are entitled to each one of the rights enumerated.

Becoming Aware of Your Own Unique Feelings, Needs, and Wants

Developing an awareness and ability to express your feelings was discussed in Chapter 12. Being in touch with your feelings is an important prerequisite for becoming assertive. Learning to recognize and take care of your needs and wants will be considered in some detail in the following chapter on self-esteem.

It's difficult to act assertively unless you're clear about 1) what it is you're feeling and 2) what it is you want or don't want.

Assertiveness involves saying how you feel inside *and* saying directly what changes you would like—such as, "I'm feeling upset right now *and* I would like you to listen to me." If you're feeling confused or ambivalent about your wants or needs, take time to clarify them first by writing them out or talking them out with a supportive friend or counselor. You might also use role-playing with a friend to ask for what you want in advance. Be sure not to *assume* that other people already know what you want: you have to make your needs known. Other people aren't mind-readers.

Practicing Assertive Responses

In learning to be more assertive it is often very helpful to play out your responses first on paper. Write out a problem situation that calls for an assertive response on your part. Then formulate in detail how you'll handle it. A trial run in writing can allow you to feel more prepared and confident when you actually confront the situation in real life.

Describing Your Problem Situation

In their book *Asserting Yourself,* Sharon and Gordon Bower suggest that you first select a problem situation from the *Assertiveness Questionnaire.* Write out a description of that situation, including the person involved *(who),* time and setting *(when), what* bothers you about the situation, *how* you would normally tend to deal with it, what *fears* you have about consequences that would follow if you were to be assertive, and finally, your behavior *goal.*

It's most important to be specific in these descriptions. For instance, the following description of a problem situation is too vague:

> I have a lot of trouble persuading some of my friends to listen to *me* for a change. They never stop talking, and I never get a word in edgewise. It would

> be nice for me if I could participate more in the conversation. I feel that I'm just letting them run over me.

Notice that the description doesn't specify *who* the particular friend is, *when* this problem is most likely to occur, *how* the nonassertive person acts, what *fears* are involved in being assertive, and a specific *goal* for increased involvement in the conversation. A more well-defined problem situation might be as follows:

> My friend Joan (who), when we meet for coffee after work (when), often goes on nonstop about her marriage problems (what). I just sit there and try to be interested (how). If I interrupt her, I'm afraid she'll think I just don't care (fear). I'd like to be able to change the subject and talk sometimes about my own life (goal).

Exercise: Specifiying Your Problem Situations

On a separate sheet of paper write up two or three of your own problem situations. Be sure to specify the "who," "when," "what," "how," the "fear," and the "goal," as described above. If possible, choose situations that are current for you right now. Begin with a situation that's not *very* uncomfortable or overwhelming.

Developing an Assertive Response

Now that you've defined your problem situations, the next step is to develop an assertive response for each one. For the purposes of learning assertiveness skills, such a response can be broken down into six steps (adapted from the Bowers' work):

1. Evaluate your rights within the situation at hand.
2. Designate a time for discussing what you want.
3. Addressing the main person involved, state the problem in terms of its consequences for you.
4. Express your feelings about the particular situation.
5. Make your request for changing the situation.
6. Tell this person the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) his or her cooperation.

Let's consider each of these points in greater detail:

1. **Evaluate your rights.** Refer back to the *Personal Bill of Rights*. What do you have a right to ask for in this situation?
2. **Designate a time.** Find a mutually convenient time to discuss the problem with the other person involved. This step, of course, would be omitted in situations where you need to be spontaneously assertive on the spot.

3. **State the problem situation in terms of its consequences for you.** Don't make the mistake of expecting other people to be mind-readers. Most people are wrapped up in their own thoughts and problems and will have very little idea about what's going on with you unless you state your case explicitly. Clearly outline your point of view, even if what you're describing seems obvious to you. This will allow the other person to get a better idea of your position. Describe the problem as objectively as you can without using language that blames or judges.

Examples

"I'm having a problem with your stereo. I need to study for an exam tomorrow and the stereo is so loud I can't concentrate."

"I don't have any way to get to the grocery store today. My support person is sick and I'm out of milk, vegetables, and meat."

"It seems to me that you do most of the talking when we're together. I'd like to have the chance to tell you some of my thoughts and feelings, too."

4. Express **your feelings.** By telling other people about your feelings, you let them know how greatly their behavior affects you and your reactions. Even if the person you're addressing completely disagrees with your position, he or she can at least appreciate your strong feelings on an issue.

   Each of us owns our personal feelings. Though it might at first seem hard to believe, nobody else *causes* you to have feelings of fear, anger, or sadness. Other people say and do all kinds of things but it is your *perception*—your interpretation—of their behavior that is ultimately responsible for what you feel. You don't necessarily choose how you react to people—yet your reaction is based on your perception of the meaning of what they say or do.

   In expressing feelings, always be sure to own your reactions rather than blaming them on someone else. You can still point out what the other person did to stimulate your feelings, but be willing to take ultimate responsibility for them.

   The best way to ensure this is by always remembering to begin statements about your feelings with *I* rather than *you*. I-statements acknowledge your responsibility for your feelings, while you-statements generally accuse or judge others, putting them on the defensive and obstructing communication.

Examples

Instead of saying, "You make me angry when you don't hear what I say," you can say, "I feel angry when you don't listen to me."

Instead of saying, "You show that you have no respect for me or this household when you leave things lying around," you can say, "I feel demeaned and devalued when you leave things lying around."

Instead of saying, "You don't care about me or my getting better—you don't ever help," you can say, "I feel very sad and unloved when you don't seem to be helping me in my attempt to get better."

5. **Make your request.** This is the *key* step to being assertive. You simply ask for what you want (or don't want) in a direct, straightforward manner. Observe the following guidelines for making assertive requests:

   - *Use assertive nonverbal behavior.* Stand squarely, establish eye contact, maintain an open posture, and work on staying calm and self-possessed.
   - *Keep your request simple.* One or two easy-to-understand sentences will usually suffice, "I would like you to take the dog out for a walk tonight," "I want us to go to a marriage counselor together."
   - Avoid asking for more than one thing at a time.
   - *Be specific.* Ask for exactly what you want—or the person you're addressing may misunderstand. Instead of saying, "I'd like you to help me with my practice sessions," specify what you want, "I'd like you to go with me when I practice driving on the freeway every Saturday morning." Or instead of, "I would like you to come home by a reasonable hour," specify "I would like you to come home by 12:00 midnight."
   - *Use I-statements of the form*
     "I would like..."
     "I want to ..."
     "I would appreciate it if..."
     It's very important to *avoid using you-statements at the point of actually making a request.* Statements that are threatening ("You'll do this or else") or coercive ("You have to...") will put the person you're addressing on the defensive and decrease the likelihood of your getting what you want.
   - *Object to behaviors—not personalities.* When objecting to what someone is doing, object to *specific behavior—not to an individual's personality.* Let the person know you're having a problem with something he or she is doing (or not doing), not with who he or she is as a person.
     It's preferable to say, "I have a problem when you don't call to let me know you're going to be late," rather than "I think you're inconsiderate for not calling me to let me know you'll be late."
     Referring to the problem *behavior* preserves respect for the other person. Judging others personally usually puts people on the defensive. When objecting to someone's behavior (for example, a lack of trustworthiness), always *follow up your complaint with a positive request,* such as, "I would like you to keep your agreements with me."
   - *Don't apologize* for your request. When you want to ask for something, do so directly. Say, "I would like you to..." instead of, "I know this might seem like an imposition, but I would like you to..." When you want to decline a request, do so directly but politely. Don't apologize or make excuses. Simply say, "No, thank you," "No, I'm not interested," or "No, I'm not able to do that." If the other person's response is one of enticement, criticism, an appeal to guilt, or sarcasm, just repeat your statement firmly until you've made your point.

- *Make requests, not demands or commands.* Assertive behavior always respects the humanity and rights of the other person. Thus an assertive response is always a request rather than a demand. Demanding and commanding are aggressive modes of behavior based on the false assumption that you are always right or always entitled to get everything your way.

6. **State the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) the other person's cooperation.** With close friends or intimate partners, stating positive consequences of their compliance with your request can be an honest offer of give-and-take rather than manipulation.

Examples

"If you take the dog out, I'll give you a back rub."

"If you give me the time to finish this project, then we'll have more time to do something special together."

In cases where you are dealing with someone with a history of being resistant and uncooperative, you may describe the *natural* consequences (usually negative) of a failure to cooperate. If at all possible, any negative consequences should naturally flow out of the objective reality of the situation rather than being something that you arbitrarily impose. The latter will likely be perceived as a threat and may increase the other person's resistance.

Examples

"If we can't leave on time, then I'll have to leave without you."

"If you keep talking to me like this, I'm going to leave. We'll talk again tomorrow."

Sample Scenarios

The six steps of an assertive response are illustrated below:

Jean would like a half hour of uninterrupted peace and quiet while she does her relaxation exercise. Her husband, Frank, has had the tendency to disrupt her quiet time with questions and other attention-getting maneuvers. Before confronting him she wrote out an assertive response as follows:

1. *Evaluate your rights.*
   I have a right to have some quiet time to myself.
   I have a right to take care of my need for relaxation.
   I have a right to have my husband respect my needs.

2. *Designate a time.*
   When Frank gets home from work tonight, I'll ask him if we can sit down and discuss this issue. If it's not convenient for him tonight, we'll schedule a time within the next couple of days.

3. *State the problem situation in terms of its consequences.*
   I've let you know several times that I need half an hour each day for relaxation

and I've even shut the door, but you still come in and ask me questions. This disturbs my concentration and interferes with an important part of my program for managing my anxiety.

4. *Express your feelings.*
   I feel frustrated when my attemtion is disrupted. I'm angry when you don't respect my right to have some time for relaxation.

5. *Make your request.*
   I would like to be uninterrupted during the time my door is closed, other than in cases of dire emergency. I'd like you to respect my right to have half an hour of quiet time each day.

6. *State consequences of gaining cooperation.*
   If you respect my need to have some quiet time, I'll be much better able to spend some time with you afterwards and to be a good companion.

Sharon would like her boyfriend, Jim, to assist her in regaining the ability to drive on the freeway. Specifically, she would like him to accompany her for a one-hour practice session every Saturday. She has been reluctant to ask him for several months because of heavy demands he has had from his job.

1. *Evaluate your rights.*
   I have a right to ask Jim to help me, even if he is very busy.

2. *Designate a time.*
   This Saturday morning I'll ask him whether he has time to discuss my need for getting his help. If that's not a good time, we'll arrange another time that's convenient for both of us.

3. *State the problem situation in terms of its consequences.*
   My progress in overcoming my fear of driving freeways has been slow. I've had difficulty finding someone who will go with me on Saturdays, which is the time I can most easily practice. In order to make progress at this stage, I need someone to accompany me, although later I'll be able to practice alone.

4. *Express your feelings.*
   I've been feeling very frustrated that I haven't had many opportunities to practice driving freeways. I feel very disappointed about my rate of progress.

5. *Make your request.*
   I'd like you to go with me to practice driving on freeways for one hour every Saturday. I would really sppreciate it if you would help me out with this.

6. *State consequences of gaining cooperation.*
   If you help me with my practice sessions, I'm sure that I'll be able to get over my phobia of freeways sooner. It'll be great for us if I don't have to ask you anymore to take me to all those places that are only accessible by freeway.

Exercise: Developing an Assertive Response

Now it's your turn.

Select one of the problem situations you previously described and write up an assertive response, following the six steps outlined above. You may want to make copies of this page before writing on it. (If you need more room, use a separate sheet of paper.)

1. *Evaluate your rights.*

2. *Designate a time.*

3. *State the problem situation in terms of its consequences.*

4. *Express your feelings.*

5. *Make your request.*

6. *State the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) the other person's cooperation.*

Once you've written out in detail your assertive response to a problem situation, you'll find that you feel more prepared and confident when you confront that situation in real life. This process of methodically writing out a preview of your assertive response is especially helpful during the time when you're learning to be assertive. Later on, when you have a fair degree of mastery, you may not need to write out your response in advance every time. It's never a bad idea, though, to prepare your response, especially when a lot is at stake. Attorneys do so as a way of life because they typically assert the rights of their clients in "high-stake" situations.

Finally, an important *intermediate step* between writing out an assertive response and confronting a problem in real life is to *role-play* your response with a friend or counselor. This can be an invaluable tool for developing the nonverbal aspects of assertiveness described earlier in this chapter. It will further increase your confidence and sense of being well-prepared when you come to deal with the actual situation. Assertiveness training, whether done in the context of psychotherapy or in a classroom situation, relies primarily on role-playing as a teaching tool.

Assertiveness on the Spot

Many situations arise in the course of everyday life that challenge you to be assertive spontaneously. Someone smokes right next to you, making you uncomfortable. Someone blasts loud music while you're trying to go to sleep. Someone cuts in front of you in line. (Many of the situations listed in the *What's Your Style* questionnaire at the beginning of this chapter fall into this category.) What do you do?

1. **Evaluate your rights.** Often you'll go through this step automatically, without the need to pause for reflection. The violation of your rights is obvious and perhaps flagrant. At other times you may need to pause and think about which of your rights is at stake.

2. **Make your request.** This is the *key* step in on-the-spot assertiveness. In many cases your assertive response will consist *only* of this step. Someone interferes with your rights and you simply ask them, in a straightforward manner, for what you want or don't want. As discussed previously, your statement can begin with such words as

   "I would like..."
   "I want..."
   "I would appreciate..."
   "Would you please..."

   Your statement needs to be

   - Firm
   - Simple and to the point
   - Without apology
   - Nonjudgmental, nonblaming
   - Always a request, not a demand

   If the person doesn't immediately cooperate or pretends not to notice, simply *repeat* your statement. Repeating your request in a monotonous fashion will work better in getting what you want than becoming angry or aggressive if the person you're dealing with is a stranger (see the "broken record technique," in the next section). Avoid monotonous repetition if you're dealing with family or close friends (with the exception of small children).

3. **State the problem in terms of its consequences.** This step is optional but can be helpful in on-the-spot assertiveness. If you feel that the person you're addressing might be puzzled by your request, you might want to explain why his or her behavior has an adverse effect on you. The other person may gain empathy for your position in this way, leading to a greater chance of cooperation.

   For example

   "Everyone here, including myself, has been waiting in line" (as a prelude to, "Would you go to the back of the line, please?").

   "I am allergic to cigarette smoke" (as a prelude to, "Would you please smoke somewhere else?").

4. **Express your feelings.** If you're dealing with a stranger with whom you don't wish to have any further relationship, it's usually O.K. to omit this step. The only occasion for using it with a stranger is if the person involved doesn't cooperate *after* you've made your assertive request (for example, "I've told you twice that I'm not interested in your product and you're still trying to sell it to me. I'm starting to feel really irritated"). On the other hand, it's often a good idea to express your feelings when you need to be assertive on the spot with your spouse, child, or close friend ("I'm really disappointed that you didn't call when you said you would," or "I'm feeling too tired to clean up the kitchen right now.").

5. **State the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) cooperation.** In situations with strangers, this step usually won't be necessary. On rare occasions, with someone resistant, you may choose to state negative consequences, although it will be difficult to keep this from coming across as a threat (for example, "If you continue smoking, I may have an asthma attack"). With family and friends a statement of positive consequences may be used to strengthen your request ("If you get in bed by 8:30, I'll read you a story").

The gist of being assertive on the spot is simply to *make your request* in as simple, specific, and straightforward a manner as possible. Whether you choose to mention your feelings or the consequences of the other person's behavior will largely depend on the situation. Mention consequences when you want the other person to better appreciate your position. Express your feelings when you want the other person to understand how strongly you feel about what they're doing (or not doing).

On-the-Spot Assertiveness Exercises

The exercises below* are designed to give you practice in responding assertively on the spot. The situations presented are common ones which you may have encountered before in your life. The task is to fill in the blank with an assertive response. Alternatively, you may wish to role-play these situations with a friend. This will give you direct practice with both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of assertive communication. As you practice, remember to stay calm.

1. You take your car to the garage for an oil change and receive a bill for that plus wheel alignment and new spark plugs. You say, _____
   _____
   _____

2. You arrange to take turns driving to work with a friend. Each day you drive she has an errand to run on the way home. When she drives, there are no stops made. You say, _____
   _____
   _____

* Reproduced from the *TERRAP Program Manual* by permission of Dr. Arthur B. Hardy.

3. When you entertain your co-workers, the conversation always turns to shop-talk. You are planning a party and prefer to avoid the usual topics. You say, _____
_____
_____
_____

4. You're in the bank. The teller asks, "Who's next?" It's your turn. A woman who came in after you says, "I am." You say, _____
_____
_____

5. You're in a taxi and you suspect that the driver is taking you by a roundabout route. You say, _____
_____
_____

6. You are in a restaurant in the no-smoking section. The person next to you lights up a cigarette. You say, _____
_____
_____

7. You have frequently had adverse reactions to medications in the past. Your doctor gives you a prescription without telling you what side-effects to expect. You say,
_____
_____
_____

8. You are buying some new clothes. The saleswoman is pressuring you into buying something that makes you look ten pounds heavier. You say, _____
_____
_____
_____

9. You're playing miniature golf with your spouse. You're not doing very well but are having a good time. Your spouse is continually telling you how to do it "right." You say,_____
_____
_____

10. You've settled in for a quiet Sunday at home, the first in a long time. Your parents call and invite you over for the day. You don't want to go. You say, _____
_____
_____
_____

11. You receive a notice informing you that your child has been placed in the classroom of a teacher whom you know to be notoriously incompetent. You call the principal and you say, _____
_____
_____

12. Someone rings your doorbell, wanting to convert you to their religion. You're not interested. You say, _____
_____
_____

13. A friend asks you to babysit for her you have other plans for the day. You say, _____
_____
_____

14. You're feeling lonely and "left out." Your spouse is in the living room, reading. You say to him or her,_____
_____
_____

15. You've been rushing about all day. It's very hot and you don't have air conditioning. You prepare a salad for dinner because you don't want to turn the oven on. Your spouse comes home hungry and wants a hot meal. You say, _____
_____
_____
_____

16. Friends drop by without an invitation at 5:00 PM. It is now 7:00 and you want to serve dinner to your family. You don't have enough to include the guests. You say, _____
_____
_____
_____

Learning to Say No

An important aspect of being assertive is your ability to say no to requests that you don't want to meet. Saying no means that you can *set limits* on other people's demands for your time and energy when such demands conflict with your own needs and desires. It also means that you can do this without feeling guilty.

In some cases, especially if you're dealing with someone with whom you don't want to promote a relationship, just saying, "No, thank you," or "No, I'm not interested" in a firm, polite manner should suffice. If the other person persists, just repeat your statement calmly without apologizing. If you need to make your statement stronger and more emphatic, you may want to 1) look the person directly in the eyes, 2) raise the level of your voice slightly, and 3) assert your position: "I said no thank you."

In many other instances—with acquaintances, friends, and family—you may want to give the other person some explanation for turning down a request. Here it's often useful to follow a three-step procedure:

1. Acknowledge the other person's request by repeating it.
2. Explain your reason for declining.
3. Say no.
4. (Optional) If appropriate, suggest an alternative proposal where both your and the other person's needs will be met.

Use step 4 only if you can easily see a way for both you and the other person to meet each other half way.

Examples

"I understand that you'd really like to get together tonight *(acknowledgement)*. It turns out I've had a really long day and feel exhausted *(explanation)*, so I need to pass on tonight *(saying no)*. Would there be another night later this week when we could get together?" *(alternative option)*

"I hear that you need some help with moving *(acknowledgment)*. I'd like to help out but I promised my boyfriend we would go away for the weekend *(explanation)*, so I'm not going to be available *(saying no)*. I hope you can find someone else."

Note that in this example the speaker not only acknowledges her friend's need, but indicates that she would have liked to help out if the circumstances had been different. Sometimes you may wish to let someone know that under different conditions you would have willingly responded to the request.

"I realize you would like to go out with me again *(acknowledgment)*. I think you're a fine person, but it seems to me that we don't have enough in common to pursue a relationship *(explanation)*, so I have to say no *(saying no)*."

"I know that you'd like me to take care of Johnny for the day *(acknowledgment)*, but I have some important errands I have to attend to *(explanation)*. So I can't babysit today *(saying no)*."

Are there any particular types of situations where you repeatedly have troubles saying no? Make a list of these situations in the space below:

Now take a sheet of paper and write a hypothetical assertive response for each of these situations, where you say no, following the three-step procedure outlined above.

The following suggestions may also be helpful in learning to say no (adapted from the book *When Anger Hurts*, Chapter 12):

1. *Take your time.* If you're the type of person who has difficulty saying no, give yourself some time to think and clarify what you want to say before responding to someone's request (for example, "I'll let you know by the end of the week," or "I'll call you back tomorrow morning after sleeping on it").

2. *Don't over-apologize.* When you apologize to people for saying no, you give them the message that you're "not sure" that your own needs are just as important as theirs. This opens the door for them to put more pressure on you to comply with what they want. In some cases they may even try to play upon your guilt to obtain other things or to get you to "make it up to them" for having said no in the first place.

3. *Be specific.* It's important to be very specific in stating what you will and won't do. For example, "I'm willing to help you move, but (because of my back) I can only carry lightweight items" or "I can take you to work, but only if you can meet me by 8:15."

4. *Use assertive body language.* Be sure to face the person you're talking to squarely and maintain good eye-contact. Work on speaking in a calm but firm tone of voice. Avoid becoming emotional.

5. *Watch out for guilt.* You may feel the impulse to do something *else* for someone after turning down their request. Take your time before offering to do so. Make sure that your offer comes out of genuine desire rather than guilt. You'll have fully mastered the skill of saying no to others when you reach the point where you can do so without feeling guilty.

Techniques for Avoiding Manipulation

Much of the time you'll find that people listen to you and cooperate when you act assertively. Sooner or later, however, you'll encounter occasions where someone puts off your request by any of several means, including

- Changing the subject
- Responding with a strong display of emotion (including anger)
- Joking or making fun of your request
- Trying to make you feel guilty about your request
- Criticizing or questioning the legitimacy of your request
- Asking you why you want what you asked for

These are just a few of the more common ploys other people can use if they simply want to ignore or avoid dealing with your request. The *true* test of assertiveness is not to back down in the face of such resistance, but to persist. The following techniques are proven ways of overcoming attempts to avoid or discount what you're asking for.

The Broken Record Technique

The broken record technique consists of stating repeatedly what you want in a calm, direct manner with the persistence of a broken record. You can use this technique in situations where you're unwilling to do what the other person suggests, but find yourself somewhat captive to the other person's persistance. Using the technique, you stay focused on what you want and don't give in to the others person's will. You simply state what you want as many times as you need to, without change or embellishment. Start with "I want..." or "I would like..."

Example: You wish to return a dress to the store and receive a refund.

Saleslady:	May I help you?
You:	Yes, thank you. I would like to return this dress and I would like my money back.
Saleslady:	We don't usually refund money. Why are you returning the dress?
You:	I would like to return this dress and I would like my money back.
Saleslady:	Didn't you try the dress on in the store?
You:	I would like to return this dress and I would like my money back.
Saleslady:	Well, if you're sure you don't want the dress, I'll give you a credit.
You:	I don't want a credit, thank you. I want my money back.
Saleslady:	Perhaps you would like to exchange the dress for another one. Let me show you some of the other dresses that would look nice on you.
You:	No, thank you. I would like to return this dress and I would like my money back.
Saleslady:	I've never done that before. I might get into trouble.
You:	I understand that this is a problem for you. However, I would like to return this dress and I would like my money back.
Saleslady:	I'll have to get some authorization from the manager.
You:	O.K.
Manager:	May I help you?
You:	Yes, thank you. I would like to return this dress and I would like my money back.
Manager:	Is there something wrong with the dress?

You: No. I would just like to return it and I would like my money back.

Manager: I'm sorry that you don't like the dress. Here is your refund, and I do hope you will find something else you like in the store.

You: Thank you very much.

Please note that the broken record technique is *not* designed to foster developing a relationship but rather to obtain what you want with a minimum of communication. It is generally *not* an appropriate technique in relationships with your spouse, partner, or close friends, although, on occasion, it can be useful with children.

Fogging

Fogging is best used with someone who is being critical of you. It involves agreeing in part with the criticism. You honestly agree with some part of the criticism even when you don't believe all of it. You need to do this in a calm, quiet tone of voice without being defensive or sarcastic. If you don't agree with the specific criticism, you can agree with the general principle behind the criticism and simply say, "You may be right." When you agree with people, they have little tendency to come back and criticize or argue with you further. When you respond defensively or argumentively to someone else's critical remarks, it gives him or her something to spar with. Fogging effectively stops communication before the other person can escalate a disagreement.

Example: Your mother criticizes the way you look.

Mother: Your skirt is awfully short. Don't you think you should wear them longer? The style is longer skirts now.

You: You're probably right—the style is longer skirts now.

Mother: I think that if you cut your hair short, it might be easier for you.

You: You could be right—shorter hair is easier.

Mother: You'd look much more feminine if you put on some makeup.

You: You could be right—I hadn't thought about it. I might look more feminine with makeup.

Mother: You really should set a good example for your daughter. She copies you.

You: Yes, she does copy me.

Mother: Let's go out to lunch.

You: I'm ready, let's go.

Like the broken record, fogging is useful in situations where you want to minimize communication—in other words, you don't want to listen to criticism and you don't want to argue. It's generally not a good idea to use fogging in situaitons with partners or friends where you wish to keep lines of communication open and give the other an opportunity to be heard or get their feelings out. In such instances, it's best to quietly listen to other people until they've spoken their mind. Then you can interject your own comments.

Content-to-Process Shift

The content-to-process shift changes the focus of your discussion with someone from the content to a description of what's going on between you. If someone responds to your asssertive request in almost any way *other* than hearing you and replying (for example, they get angry, laugh it off, or bring up something irrelevant) you can 1) point out what they're doing (content-to-process shift) and 2) bring the focus back to your request.

Example:

You:	I'd like you to call me when you know you'll be getting home late.
Your Husband:	Yes, Sarge.
You:	Humor is fine, but it's getting us off the point.
Your Husband:	What's the point?
You:	I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me know when you'll be getting home late.
Your Husband:	You know, I just thought of something. Those nights I get home late, why don't you just not worry about saving dinner for me— I'll pick up something on the way home.
You:	You're getting off the point—and I'm beginning to feel very frustrated that you're not really listening. (Note: Here the content-to-process shift is amplified by an expression of feelings.)
Your Husband:	So, you want me to call you if I'm going to be late.
You:	Yes—you've got it.

Defusing

Defusing is a delaying tactic best used when someone responds to your assertive request with intense anger or any other extreme display of emotion. In close relationships, it's important to allow other people to express their strong feelings. Yet at such

times they are unlikely to be open to hearing your assertive request. It's better to say, "I can see that you're very upset— let's discuss this later."

Example:

You:	I'd like to have mother come down for the holidays.
Your Spouse:	What!? Not again! You're going to do this to me again! I absolutely won't have it!
You:	I can see that you're upset and I can even understand. Let's talk about it another time.

Assertive Inquiry

When someone attacks you for making an assertive request, you can often defuse their attack by asking them why they are having such a problem with your request.

Example:

You:	Could you drive with me to the store now?
Your Spouse:	Why don't you get off my case!
You:	Why is it such a problem for you to take me to the store now?
Your Spouse:	I'm tired of having to take you so many places.

This last example illustrates that being assertive can sometimes bring up basic issues in a relationship. In this case, the husband of an agoraphobic is having a genuine problem with his wife's need for him to drive her places. This one instance is of course just the tip of the iceberg. It may be appropriate for the husband and wife at this point to have a frank discussion about the larger issues of the wife's need and the husband's compliance. Or, if getting to the store quickly has higher priority, the wife may need to acknowledge the larger issues, but reach an agreement with her husband to discuss them another time. Obviously, being assertive can require other important communication skills, such as your ability to listen well and negotiate a compromise with the person to whom you make your request.

Learning to be assertive doesn't mean that you'll always get what you ask for 100 percent of the time. Assertiveness can only guarantee that you'll improve your chances of getting what you want. You should also work on developing skills of listening, negotiation, and compromise to complement your assertiveness skills and increase your odds of having your needs met by other people.

A discussion of listening and negotiation skills is beyond the scope of this chapter. For further ideas, I suggest that you refer to the books listed under "Communication Skills" at the end of this chapter. You may also want to find a good class or group situation that focuses on communication skills.

Ways in Which Someone Might Evade Your Request

It's helpful to prepare yourself against a number of typical blocking gambits that can be used to attack and derail your assertive requests. Some of the more common evasions (adapted from *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*) include:

Laughing It Off. Your assertive request is responded to with a joke: "So what if my project is three weeks late? Healthy babies can be born a month late!" Use the content-to-process shift: "Humor is getting us off the point," and the broken record technique: "Yes, but your project is three weeks late."

Accusing Gambit. The other person blames you for the proble: "You're always so late cooking dinner that I'm too tired to do the dishes." Use the fogging technique: "That may be so, but you're still not honoring our agreement," or simply disagree: "Eight o'clock is not too late for the dishes."

The Beat-up. Your assertive request is responded to with a personal attack: "Who are you to protest being interrupted when you're the biggest loudmouth around here?" A good strategy is to respond with an ironic "Thank you" in conjunction with the broken record technique or defusing: "I can see that you're angry right now—let's talk about it after the meeting."

Delaying Gambit. Your assertive request is met with, "Not now, I'm too tired," or "Another time, maybe." Use the broken record technique, or insist on setting a specific time when the problem can be discussed.

Why Gambit. Your assertive request is blocked with a series of "why" questions ("Why do you feel that way?" "I still don't know why you don't want to go," "Why did you change your mind?"). The best response is to use the content-to-process shift: "Why isn't the point. The issue is that I'm not willing to go tonight," or the broken record technique.

Self-Pity Gambit. Your request is met with tears and an attempt to make you feel guilty. The best strategy is to acknowledge the other person is upset and then proceed with your request: "I know this is causing you pain, but I need to get this issue resolved." If the other person is really very upset, postpone the discussion until another time.

Quibbling. The other person wants to debate with you about the legitimacy of what you feel, the magnitude of the problem, or some such other distinction. Use the content-to-process shift: "We're quibbling now, and have strayed from the subject," along with an assertion of your right to feel the way you do.

Threats. You are threatened with such statements as, "If you keep harping at me like this, you're going to need another boyfriend." Use assertive inquiry: "What is it about my requests that bothers you?" as well as the content-to-process shift: "That sounds like a threat," or defusing.

Denial. You're told, "I didn't do that" or "You've really misinterpreted me." Assert what you've observed and experienced, and use fogging: "It may seem that way to you, but I've observed ..."

Summary of Things to Do

Learning to be assertive will enable you to obtain more of what you want, and will help minimize frustration and resentment in your relationships with partners, family, and friends. It will also help you to take more risks and to ask more of life, adding to your sense of autonomy and self-confidence.

Becoming assertive does, however, take *practice*. When you first attempt to act assertively with family and friends, be prepared to feel awkward. Also be prepared for them not to understand what you're doing and possibly even to take offense. If you explain as best you can and give them time to adjust to your new behavior, you may be pleasantly surprised that they come to respect you for your new-found directness and honesty.

To get the most out of this chapter, I suggest you do the following:

1. Determine your dominant behavior style (submissive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, manipulative, or assertive) by asking yourself how you'd respond to each of the 30 situations listed in the *What's Your Style?* questionairre.
2. Clarify those situations and people with whom you'd like to be more assertive by completing *The Assertiveness Questionnaire.*
3. Make a copy of the *Personal Bill of Rights* and post it in a conspicuous place. Read it over a number of times until you feel thoroughly familiar with all of the rights listed.
4. Identify two or three problem situations in which you would like to be more assertive. Write them up under the exercise, *Specifying Your Problem Situations.* Make your description of each situation specific, by indicating *who* it involves, *when* it occurs, *what* bothers you, *how* you'd normally deal with it, your *fears* about being assertive, and, finally, your particular *goal.*
5. Write out an assertive response to each of your problem situations. Your narrative for each assertive response should contain the six steps listed in the exercise *Developing an Assertive Response.*
6. Become thoroughly familiar with the guidelines for making an assertive request: using assertive nonverbal behaviors, keeping your request simple, being specific, using I-statements, objecting to behaviors (not personalities), not apologizing for being assertive, and making requests instead of demands.
7. Review the guidelines for being assertive on the spot, and complete the *On-the-Spot Assertiveness Exercises.*
8. Role-play with a friend or counselor your assertive responses to your problem situations and/or the on-the-spot assertiveness exercises.
9. Review the section "Learning to Say No" and role-play saying no to unreasonable requests with a friend or counselor.
10. Review the section "Techniques for Avoiding Manipulation" and try practicing several of them with a friend or counselor.

11. Consult the books listed below under "Assertiveness Skills" for more thorough coverage of the topic. If you feel the need to seek extra help beyond this workbook, you'll find that most adult education programs through local colleges or high schools offer workshops and classes in asssertiveness training.
12. Consult the books listed below under "Communications Skills" or take a class in communication to back up your assertiveness training with other important interpersonal skills such as listening, self-disclosure, negotiating, and so on.

Further Reading

Assertiveness Skills

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