



Asserting yourself

There are many reasons why you may find it difficult to be more assertive. The way you communicate with others is usually established when you are young. Parents, siblings, teachers and other significant relationships can all have an impact on your ability to be assertive. Culture and gender also play an important role.

Assertiveness is an alternative to passive, manipulative or aggressive behaviour. It is a type of communication that expresses needs, feelings and preferences in a way that respects both yourself and the other person. It involves stating clearly what you would like to happen, but not demanding that it does.

Types of communication

Aggressive

Aggressive behaviour involves expressing your feelings, needs and ideas at the expense of others, for example, by being sarcastic, blaming or dismissive of other people's opinions. This may provide a temporary sense of power or control, but in time this behaviour can distance you from others and lead to you feeling isolated.

Passive

Passive behaviour avoids expressing your feelings and needs openly. You may ignore your own rights and allow others to infringe on them. The benefit of behaving passively is that you avoid conflict but at great cost, because you rarely get what you want which over time can contribute to low self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Passive-aggressive

Passive-aggressive behaviour means you will usually be indirect or unclear about what you think or feel. This can leave the other person feeling confused. You may find yourself expressing feelings of victimhood or martyrdom to make the other person feel guilty. Passive-aggressive communication can avoid rejection and hurt but can leave you feeling emotionally low and isolated and resented by others for not being clear in your communication.

Assertive

Assertive behaviour aims to be honest, direct, clear, expressive, persistent and respectful. You achieve what you want some of the time but when you don't you can still feel good about yourself because you have expressed your needs and wants clearly and honestly. Assertiveness builds confidence, self-esteem and self-respect. One of the downsides of being assertive is that you may meet conflict or confrontation, so you may need to develop new ways of dealing with these.

Becoming more assertive

Start by considering where you are in relation to these four types of communication. Are you happy with this? If not, what changes would you like to make?

Remember that non-assertive behaviour may have usefully prevented you from being hurt in the past and may perhaps have been encouraged in your family of origin, or society at large. However, it is something you can change with practice. Learning to communicate assertively is a skill that you may choose to use some, but not all, of the time.

Here are some practical suggestions to help you make changes if you would like to be more assertive:

Express your feelings

- Own your feelings and practice “I” statements such as “I feel upset”, “I feel happy”.
- State your feelings in a clear and direct manner.
- If it seems appropriate reflect back the other person’s feelings. “It sounds like you feel disappointed about...”

Try ‘two track’ listening

- Focus on feelings - your own and the other person’s.
 - Stay with both tracks - the other’s feelings and your own, but try to distinguish whose feelings are whose.
 - Empathise with the other person, but not at the expense of losing touch with your own experience.
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- Avoid taking on the other's feelings without realising it - getting 'hooked in'.
 - See these 'hooks' as invitations which you can choose to refuse.

Describe behaviour

- Focus on the specific behaviour not the whole person.
- State clearly the behaviour that upsets you.
- Avoid labels or always-statements such as "You are always...."
- Describe the action and not the motive.

Be specific

- Be clear about what you would like.
- Request a small change, and only one or two at a time.
- Be specific with your request.
- Consider if the other person can realistically meet your request.
- Consider what behaviour you may need to change.

Example

You and your lab partner are under pressure to finish an experiment by 6.00 p.m. It is not going well. Your partner tells you that they are leaving because they have other work to do and asks you to finish the experiment alone. You are not happy about this.

An assertive response might include some of the following:

- “I’m unhappy about your decision to leave early.” (Express feelings)
- “I appreciate that you’re worried because you have other work to do.” (Two track listening)
- “I feel let down that you’re leaving now when we agreed to do this together.” (Express feelings, describe behaviour)
- “I’d like you to stay and work with me until the time we agreed to finish.” (Specify change desired)

Assertiveness and body language

It is not just the words you use, but also the way you say them, that makes your communication assertive. Tone of voice is crucial here. In the example above, “I feel let down that you’re leaving now” can be said:

Aggressively	Brusque and clipped or strident and loud
Passively	Smiling to pacify, indecisively
Manipulatively	Dramatic gestures, conspiratorial closeness
Assertively	Clear, direct, with appropriate warmth and a firm, even tone of voice

Practise speaking into a mirror until you find a pitch that is steady and firm. Try to make eye contact when you speak, holding your gaze calmly, but not for too long. Try to keep your body still.

Saying 'No'

Many people find saying 'no' difficult. It is useful to remember that when you are saying no you are refusing a request, not rejecting the person. You have the right to say no to unreasonable requests or to something you do not want to do.

The key to saying no is to keep the reply short. Simply say:

"No thank you."

"I've decided not to."

"I don't want to."

You do not need to apologise excessively or give a long, detailed justification. In some circumstances you may feel a brief apology is appropriate, but only say it once, you do not need to keep repeating it. If you want to explain your reasons for saying no that's fine, but keep them brief.

You should not feel pressurised into offering a compromise, but the ability to do so when appropriate is a useful skill.

Taking it further - taking some risks

This leaflet is designed to get you thinking about your preferred style(s) of communication and how you might begin to change to become more assertive. That requires taking some risks. You may feel uncomfortable as you start to change your communication style and it may take some time before the new ways of communicating feel normal and natural. You may want to experiment with different words and gestures. Assertiveness is culturally defined,

therefore what works for one person in one culture will not necessarily do so for another.

The University Counselling Service runs a course specifically for students on learning to be assertive. You will be able to share experiences and encourage each other as you learn new skills to help you become more assertive. You can find more details on our website:

www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/studentcouns/studentgroups

If you are interested in attending the course, please contact the Counselling Service Reception on 01223 332865, or email counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk

Useful resources

You'll find information on a range of resources to help address assertiveness, as well as other issues, on the University Counselling Service website: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp

University Counselling Service

Tel: 01223 332865

Fax: 01223 760990

Email: counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk

Web: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>