
Assertiveness

BE
GOOD
TO
YOURSELF.



A self-help guide

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 this booklet.

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.

6. The rules of assertion

All people have basic human rights. By protecting your rights and not letting others violate them you are not being selfish but you are maintaining self-respect. As well as being aware of your own rights, if you respect other people's rights you have the basis for assertive communication.

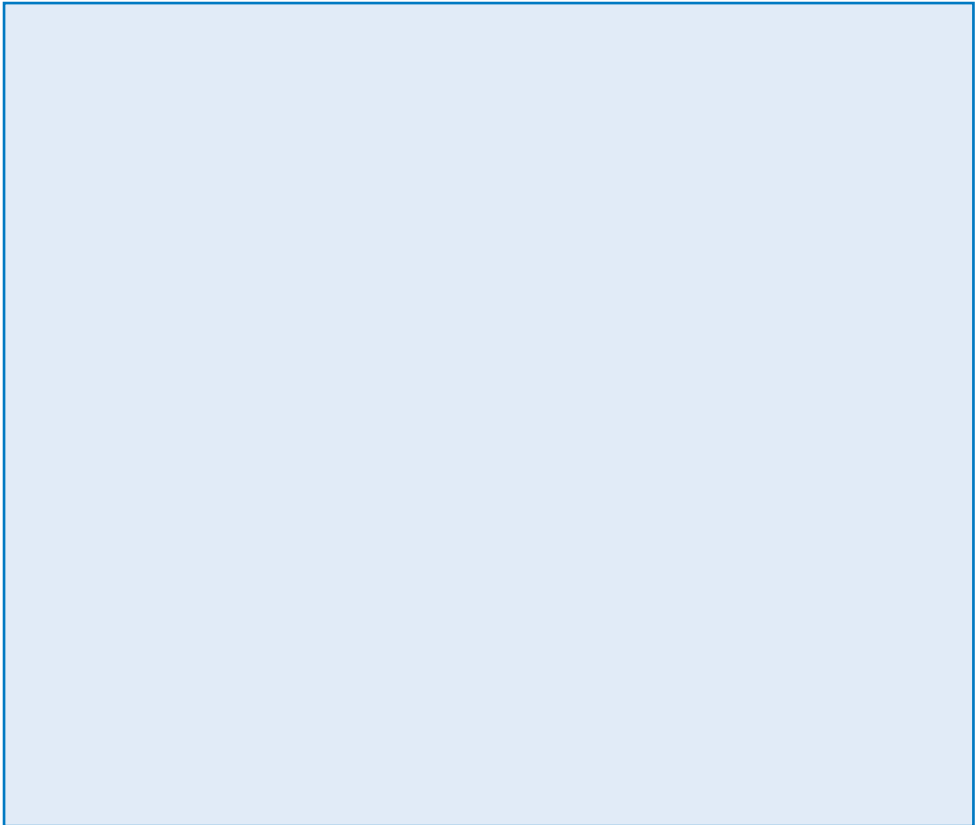
The rules of assertion

I have the right to:

1. **Respect myself:** who I am and what I do.
2. **Recognise my own needs as an individual:** separate from what is expected of me in roles such as 'wife', 'husband', 'partner', 'parent', 'son', 'daughter'.
3. **Make clear 'I' statements about how I feel and what I think:** for example, 'I feel very uncomfortable with your decision.'
4. **Allow myself to make mistakes:** recognise that it is normal to make mistakes.
5. **Change my mind:** if I choose.
6. **Ask for 'thinking time':** for example, when people ask you to do something, you have the right to say: 'I would like to think about it and I will let you know my decision'.
7. **Allow myself to enjoy my successes:** feel pleased about what I have done and share it with others.
8. **Ask for what I want:** rather than hoping someone will notice what I want.
9. **Recognise that I am not responsible for the behaviour of other adults:** you are only responsible for your own actions.
10. **Respect other people:** and their right to be assertive in return.

(Adapted from 'Being Assertive': Workbook 3 of Overcoming Depression: A Five Areas Approach by Dr C Williams, 2000.)

Exercise: Read through the rules of assertion, one by one. How much do you believe any of these rules? How much do you currently put these rules into practice? Write down your thoughts in the box below:



7. Assertiveness techniques

We will now look at some techniques that will help you put the rules of assertion into practice.

Technique 1: Assertive body language

Body language is a powerful way of communicating to people how we would like to be treated. Sometimes we are unaware of our body language and the impact it has on others. When you are trying to use the following assertiveness techniques, try to also use assertive body language. Adopting assertive body language will help to reinforce the assertive techniques below and help to show the other person that you respect them but you also respect yourself.

Assertive body language includes the following:

- Face the other person, standing or sitting straight.
- Listen carefully to what they say.
- Have a pleasant facial expression.
- Keep your voice calm and pleasant.
- Make sure that your body language supports what you are saying (e.g. some people make the mistake of nodding their head when they are trying to say "No"!).

Technique 2: 'Broken record' technique

The broken record technique is very effective and can work in a variety of situations.

This approach is particularly useful in:

- Situations where you feel your rights are being ignored.
- Coping with clever, articulate people.
- Situations where you may lose self-confidence if you give in.

How to use the broken record technique:

- Work out beforehand what you want to say and rehearse it.
- Repeat your reply, using exactly the same words, over and over again and stick to what you have decided.
- Keep repeating your point, using a calm, pleasant voice.
- Don't be put off by clever arguments or by what the other person says.
- Don't be pulled into an argument or having to explain your decision.
- There is nothing that can defeat this tactic.

Example 1: being asked to lend money

Sarah: "Jane, can you lend me £10?"

Jasmine: "**I can't lend you any money. I've run out.**"

Sarah: "I really need it, I'll pay you back."

Jasmine: "**I can't lend you any money. I've run out.**"

Sarah: "I thought you were my friend."

Jasmine: "I am your friend, but **I can't lend you any money. I've run out.**"

Example 2: returning faulty goods

Shop assistant: "Good morning. How can I help you?"

Maya: "Good morning. **These trousers are faulty and I would like a refund.**"

Shop assistant: "Do you want to change them for another pair?"

Maya: "No thank you. **I would like a refund.**"

Shop assistant: "I can give you a credit note, is that O.K.?"

Maya: "No thank you. **These trousers are faulty and I would like a refund.**"

Example 3: an unreasonable demand at work

Manager: "Can you get all these reports finished by the end of today?"

Jon: "**I won't be able to finish them all today, but I will finish them tomorrow.**"

Manager: "But I wanted them all done today."

Jon: "**I won't be able to finish them all today.**"

Manager: "Can't you just work really late tonight until they are all finished?"

Jon: "**I won't be able to finish them all today. But I will finish them tomorrow.**"

Technique 3: Using 'I' statements

'I' statements help to keep the focus on the problem, rather than accusing or blaming the other person. They also help to express ownership of your thoughts and feelings, rather than attacking the other person. Again, remember try to keep a calm, pleasant voice.

A good technique is to use this sequence of phrases:

"I feel/felt.....when.....because....."

Example 1:

Say: 'I **feel** upset when **you** interrupt me **because** I can't finish what I am saying.'

Instead of: 'You're always interrupting me!'

Example 2:

Say: 'I **feel** angry **when he** breaks his promises because I don't feel I can rely on him.'

Instead of: 'He makes me so angry!'

Example 3.

Say: 'I **felt** disappointed **when I** heard that you had told Sam about my problem **because** I spoke to you in confidence.'

Instead of: 'Why are you telling everyone my business!'

Technique 4: Saying "No" to unfair/unreasonable requests/demands

Many people find saying "No" difficult. Sometimes by avoiding saying "No" you can be drawn into situations that you don't want to be in. You may not want to say "No" because you may have fears about how other people may see or react to you. You may feel scared that you will be seen as mean or selfish, or that you may be rejected by others. Remember, you are not responsible for the reactions of other adults, but you can be responsible for your own actions. Saying "No" can be important and helpful, both in how you feel about yourself and also how others perceive you.

Try to practice saying "No" by using the following suggestions:

- Be straightforward and honest so that you can make your point effectively.
- Don't feel you have to say 'sorry' or give elaborate reasons for saying "No". It is your right to say "No" if you don't want to do something.
- If you do not want to agree to the person's original request but still want to help him/her, offer a compromise such as: "I won't be able to babysit for the whole afternoon but I can babysit for two hours."
- Acknowledge the person's feelings about your refusal, for example: "I know that you will be disappointed, but I won't be able to".
- Remember that it is better in the long run to be honest rather than feel resentment for not being able to say "No".

Technique 5: Being direct and clear

One of the most common problems in communication is caused by trying to read other people's minds or expecting them to read yours. If you want people to respond to your ideas and needs you have to be able to say what you want clearly and in a way that will make others want to respond.

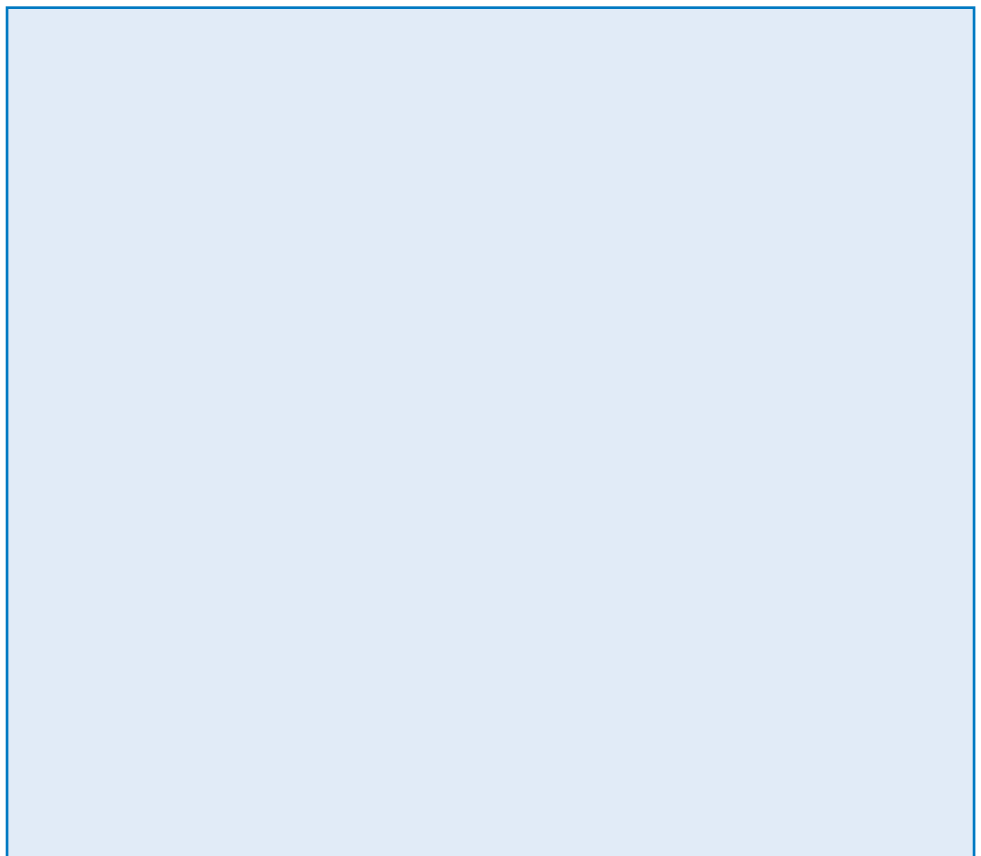
Example 1. Say: **"Will you please . . . ?"** Instead of "Would you mind . . . ?"

Example 2. Say: **"I won't be able to . . ."** instead of "I'm not sure if I can . . ."

Example 3. Say: **"I've decided not to . . ."** instead of "I don't think I can . . ."

8. Putting what you have learned into practice

Now that you have read about assertiveness, take some time to think about any areas where you can be more assertive in your own life. Write your ideas in the box below:



During the coming weeks try to:

- Remind yourself about the differences between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour.
- Remind yourself about the rules of assertion and put them into practice.
- Practice some of the assertiveness techniques with a friend for fun.
- Aim to try to use one of the assertiveness techniques each week.

When you are first practising assertiveness, you may decide to start to try to be assertive in certain situations where you feel safe to try the techniques, such as with people you don't know. Then as you become more confident you can begin to be assertive in more situations. One way of getting extra support while you are trying to be assertive is to join an assertiveness class. These classes are popular and most local adult education centres offer them. To find local assertiveness classes, ask at your local library or adult education centre.

As you practice assertiveness, you will begin to feel your sense of self-respect starting to grow. When you respect yourself and others, people can sense this and they will begin to treat you with respect in return. This is the ultimate goal of assertive communication.

9. Where can I get further help?

We hope that you will use the exercises suggested in this booklet. If you feel that you are making little progress or the problem is getting worse then seek further help.

Your GP is the best person to talk to in the first place. Your GP may suggest some further help or may suggest that you see a mental health worker who can offer you help with your problems.

If you feel so distressed that you have thoughts of harming yourself then visit your GP as soon as possible and explain to him or her how you are feeling.

Some useful books/tapes that you may like to borrow from your local library:

Bishop, Sue (2000)

Develop your assertiveness

Kogan Page. ISBN: 0749432578

Dryden, W & Constantinou, D (2004)

Assertiveness step by step

Sheldon Press. ISBN:0859699250

Fennell, M (1999)

Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques

Constable and Ribinson. ISBN: 185487259

Gutmann, J. (1993)

The assertiveness workbook: a plan for busy women

Sheldon Press. ISBN: 0859696774

Gutmann, J (2001)

Stress at work

Sheldon Press. ISBN: 0859698580

Tyrer, P. (2003)

How to cope with stress

Sheldon Press. ISBN: 0859698807

Coping with stress at work (audiotape)

Talking Life Productions

Tel: 0151 632 0662

Relaxation kit (audiotape)

Talking Life Productions

Tel: 0151 632 0662



Other titles in the Self-Help Guide series:

- Bereavement
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- Obsessions and compulsions
- Panic
- Post traumatic stress
- Shyness and social anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Stress
- Stress and anxiety

Information leaflet

- Depression

This booklet and other booklets in the **Self Help Guide** series can be downloaded from the **Patient Information** section on the **HERON** website at **www.heron.nhs.uk**

If you would like this leaflet in large print, audio, Braille, alternative format or in a different language please contact the Health Information Team on 01603 307416 who will do their best to help.



Local & national support/information:

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Provides local details of all accredited counsellors/psychotherapists.

Tel: 0870 443 5252

Citizens Advice Bureaux

Advice re: legal, debt, benefits, employment, consumer issues etc.

See the Counselling and Advice section of the Yellow Pages for your local office.

Cruse Bereavement Care

Counselling/advice following bereavement.

Great Yarmouth 01502 722234

Norwich 01603 219977

Domestic Violence - Norfolk Constabulary

Great Yarmouth 01493 333060

King's Lynn 01553 665035

North Walsham 01692 401018

Norwich 01603 276676

Thetford 01842 222581

Mind

Supports people with mental ill health.

Great Yarmouth & Waveney 01493 842129

Norwich & District 01603 629432

Off the Record Counselling Service

Tel: 01603 626650

Relate

Relationship counselling and sex therapy.

Relate Line 0845 130 4010

Central/East Norfolk 01603 625333

North/West Norfolk 01553 773813

Samaritans

Offers emotional support 24hrs a day.

Great Yarmouth 01493 842800

King's Lynn 01553 761616

Norwich 01603 611311

For health information and contact details of local support groups and services visit the HERON website at www.heron.nhs.uk