



## Asserting yourself: ideas to help you stand up to others and get your needs met

How do you feel you are treated by people? Do you ever feel used and abused? Do you find that others don't respect you, or take advantage of you? Do people make plans without asking you, assuming that you will just go along with them? Perhaps you find it difficult to say no to friends or colleagues when they ask for help. If you recognise yourself in the above, you may find it helpful to consider how you could become more assertive and increase control over your life.

No one gets what they want if they are always putting other people first, being unclear about their needs or by being afraid to stand up to others. It may be worth thinking about the potential cost of being unassertive. This can include a lack of confidence, a lack of choices, and a lack of respect from others. You might not be getting what you want out of your family life, or your job. It may feel like others don't realise how hard you work to please them. These sorts of frustrations can cause resentment to build, resentment that may come out as aggression. Feeling frustrated and aggressive can be detrimental to your health and relationships. By working to become more assertive, you begin to take responsibility for your own life. So how can you become more assertive?

### Recognise that you have rights

The first step to becoming assertive is to recognise that you have rights. This is not the same as being selfish or aggressive, or continually demanding to have things your own way. Being assertive means standing up for yourself while also considering the interests and feelings of other people. Unless it interferes with the rights and choices of others, you have the right to live as you choose. Make positive self-statements. For example, 'I have the right to ...'

### Be explicit about your needs and communicate them clearly to others

It is helpful to remember that other people may not be clear about what we want, rather than not wanting to give it to us. Often, we are not clear ourselves about this. For example, if you are hungry and would like to eat early, you could be direct and say, "I am hungry, do you mind if we eat early?" Or you could be indirect: "Are you hungry? Do you want to eat early?" In either scenario, the person may disagree, but by being direct, at least the person will know what you want. If you are indirect and not clear about your thoughts and feelings, you are setting the other



person a difficult task. You may be misunderstood. You may not wish to be direct all the time, but the important point to understand is that you have a choice.

## Don't lose sight of your original goal

Losing sight of your original goal is often a reason for not getting it. For example, if you request a refund in a store and are not treated politely, don't get side-tracked into complaining about how badly customers are treated. Stick to your original goal of requesting a refund.

## How to say 'no'

Requests for help are often made in a vague or indirect manner. For example, someone says to you, "I hear you're good at..." You need to ask others to clarify their requests, for example, "What are you asking me to do here?" You then need to decide if you want to help. If not, you need to stay firm and not get side-tracked. One simple way of doing this is to adopt the 'broken record technique.' For example, if you are asked to stay late at work, you might say, "I'm sorry, but I won't be able to stay." If this is ignored, you can repeat again, "I'm sorry about this, but I can't work late" and subsequently, "Tonight, I just can't stay." You repeat simple variations on this theme until the other person gets the message. You don't need to qualify your refusal by making excuses. You may feel worried that saying 'no' will mean that others will stop liking you, or you will hurt other peoples' feelings. However, if you say 'no' with a smile and express some understanding of the other person's problem, there is less chance of offending them. For example, "I know you're under pressure and have a lot of work on, but I'm unable to work late tonight."

## If I assert myself, will other people think I don't care about them?

If you assert yourself by turning down a request from friends or colleagues, they might try and make you feel guilty that you're letting them down, by saying, for example, "If you really cared about me you would say yes." Inevitably, there will be times when others become annoyed when you don't fit in with their needs and plans. While it is OK to reassure them that you still want to be their friend/colleague, you need to remember that they are expressing their feelings and problems, and you cannot take responsibility for other people's feelings. Remember not to let guilt get in the way of your own needs.



## Recap: to assert yourself more effectively –

- Make a distinction between assertiveness and aggression or selfishness.
- Recognise that exerting influence demands a clear idea of what you want to achieve.
- State clearly what you want.
- Recognise when others are trying to influence you and clarify what is being asked of you.
- Know how much you are willing to give or do.
- Don't allow yourself to be side-tracked into granting requests when you really want to refuse.
- Remembering that say 'no' and meaning 'no' will reduce pressure from others in the future.
- Accept that everyone has the right to say 'no.' Saying 'no' is not a crime.

## A role for therapy

By practicing the techniques outlined above, you increase the likelihood of getting your own needs met. In addition, having sessions with a therapist could help you achieve this goal. For example, a therapist may help you to practice more effective communication styles. Therapy could also be helpful if you want to explore in more depth why, throughout your life, you have experienced difficulty in trying to assert yourself.

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