



# ASSERTIVENESS

## Toolkit

## The Benefits of Being More Assertive

There are many benefits to learning to become more assertive:

1. Increased self-esteem. As you step into and reclaim your inner power, you automatically start to feel better about yourself.
2. You reduce your anxiety because you are now taking responsibility for your own life.
3. A greater respect for, and sensitivity to, other people's boundaries.

## Negative Beliefs That May Prevent You From Being More Assertive

You may however, have negative beliefs that are standing in your way and preventing you from being assertive:

### **The first may believing that you don't have the right to be assertive.**

Even though you may have been taught otherwise, everyone has the right to stand up for themselves.

Assertiveness does not mean taking advantage of other people or getting your own way all the time.

What assertiveness means is that you have a right to stand up for yourself, just as everyone else does.

### **Believing that being assertive will turn people off.**

You may be afraid to be assertive because you're afraid that people will perceive you as obnoxious, pushy, or overbearing. But keep in mind that if you continue to live your life to please everyone else, you will continue to feel frustrated and powerless.

That's because what others want may not always be in our best interests.

You are not being mean or unkind when you say no to unreasonable demands or when you express your ideas, feelings, and opinions, even if they differ from others.

Asserting yourself won't upset people as much as you think it will, and even if it does, they'll get over it sooner than you think. You'll be pleasantly surprised to see just how quickly they'll adjust to your newfound voice and confidence. In fact, you may find that some people prefer the new you.

## Step One: Uncover The Root Of Your Fear

The first step to standing up for yourself is to uncover the root or origin of your fear.

Was it caused by childhood or societal programming, painful or negative experiences when you tried to stand up for yourself or abusive / neglectful experiences as a child or an adult?

The questions below are meant to help you spend some time evaluating your past and making connections between your past experiences and your current behaviour.

- *What messages do you remember receiving as a child from your parents, authority figures and society about being assertive and outspoken?*
- *If you were raised by controlling, dominating or abusive parents or caretakers, how has that fear you felt as a child affected you now as an adult? Do you tend to placate those you are afraid of?*
- *What has been your experience when you've stood up for yourself in the past?*
- *In your attempt to never become like your domineering parents/caregivers, have you gone to the other extreme and suppressed all desire to stand up for yourself, to the point where you allow others to control you?*

## Step Two: Truly Understand The Heavy Price Of Silence

Make a list of all the ways it is costing you to remain silent and not speak up about what's important to you:

- What is it costing you in terms of what you want?
- What is it costing you physically?
- What is it costing you emotionally?

\*Special Note for those who are afraid to stand up because of childhood abuse:

If you were abused as a child, it may be especially difficult for you to stand up for yourself. You may have the belief that no matter what you say, you cannot change anything. This is called *learned helplessness*.

But it is still important for you to stand up for yourself and confront inappropriate behavior.... not to change the other person but to be able to step into your own inherent strength and power.

Once you start standing up for yourself and reclaiming your strength and power, you'll start seeing yourself as a strong person. This will do wonders for your self-esteem.

And, sometimes, your assertive behaviour can bring about a positive change in the other person. They may realise that their behaviour was inappropriate and try to change it.

And some abusers will back down when you start standing up for yourself.

If you are in a physically abusive relationship however, it's safer to get out of the relationship to a place of safety, than to attempt to stand up to the abuser on your own.

## Step Three: Learn To Be Assertive In The Face Of Fear

Fear is often at the core of an inability to stand up for yourself. Fear signals danger and it's the mind's way of letting you know that you need to pay attention to something.

Unfortunately, if you were abused as a child, you may have grown accustomed to living in fear, even when there is no imminent danger.

If the mere thought of standing up for yourself fills you with fear or anxiety, ask yourself if there is anything going on in your life that you need to be afraid of or concerned about. If you cannot find anything in the present, assume that it's your fear and anxiety from the past.

1. Allow yourself to feel the fear without letting it paralyze you. Sometimes by simply acknowledging that the fear is there, allowing yourself to feel it, breathing into it and allowing yourself to stay present with it, the fear will diminish very quickly, sometimes in a matter of minutes. This is true for any emotion by the way.
2. Ask yourself if it's appropriate for you to feel fear. Sometimes what you're feeling is not fear from the present, but fear from the past. By making the connection that this fear is not from a current situation but a past one, you will be able to put things into perspective and reduce the fear.

## Step Four: Learn How To Be More Assertive

What you say and the way you say it makes all the difference between being heard and being ignored or dismissed. It is not necessary to put the other person down and become aggressive yourself in order to express your feelings or get your point across.

Assertiveness is about taking responsibility for your feelings (instead of blaming the other person for your feelings) and then communicating that clearly to them, letting them know what they did that led you to feel this way.

An assertive statement to communicate your feelings and needs has two parts to it:

- The emotion you're feeling and the reason for it
- What you want the other person to do about it

Here's a simple formula you can memorise and use: **“I feel [insert the emotion you're feeling] because [tell them what they did to make you feel this way]. I would like you to [tell them what you would like them to do next time instead]”**

Example: *I feel hurt and devalued when you made fun of me in front of our friends. I would appreciate it if you didn't do that again.*

When someone gives you an excuse for why they did something that made you angry, hurt your feelings or disappointed you, then remember that you can accept their excuse and still acknowledge your feelings about the offense, oversight, or omission as very real to you.

And you can let the person know how you feel. You can say something like *“I understand that you feel you have a good reason for [being late, forgetting to meet or whatever they did to offend you], but I want you to know that what you did [hurt my feelings/made me angry].*

Then you can let the person know that you expect him or her to avoid making the same mistake in the future. You can say something like *“I'll let you off the hook this time, but please don't do this again” or “I forgive you this time, but I don't want it to ever happen again. If it does, I won't be so understanding.”*

You can be fair and listen to someone else's side of the story. But that doesn't mean that you have to put yourself in the position of being disappointed in those individuals time and again. Giving people the benefit of the doubt doesn't mean that you let them walk all over you.

## 5 Steps To Going From Passive or Aggressive To Confident & Assertive

1. **Start out on a positive note.** When you have a complaint about a person's behaviour, it's generally a good idea to start by giving the person some acknowledgment for the positive things that they have done or the positive aspects of the relationship. For example, "I want you to know that I really appreciate the fact that you're helping me more around the house."
2. **Then give an "I" statement that expresses your feelings and describes the problem very specifically.** Example: "*I don't like it when you make fun of me in front of your family like you did last night.*" or use the formula that you learned earlier.
3. **Clearly explain why you're upset and what effects the person's behavior has had on you without blaming or complaining.** Example: "*It really embarrasses me when you make fun of me like that.*"
4. **Tell them, clearly and specifically, what you want from them.** You can also state what you will do if they behave this way again. (Remember, you cannot control the other person's behaviour. You can only control your own.) Example: "*Please don't do that again. If you do, I will call you on it in front of everyone.*"
5. **Thank them for listening and asking them for their input.** Once you've made your point, you can ask the other person for their take on the situation and for any suggestions they may have for resolving the situation. You might say something like "*Thank-you for listening to me. I'd really like to hear your point of view as well as any suggestions you may have for solving the problem.*"

## Step Five: Role Play Assertiveness Skills With Your Coach

Now think of common situations that arise in your life where people offend you or cross your boundaries and role-play your newly acquired skills with your therapist. Pretend your therapist is the person who has offended you. What would you say? Practice at least 5 different scenarios with them.

## Tips To Stay Assertive and Not Lapse Into Aggression or Passive Behavior

Every situation is unique, but here are some simple rules to follow that will help you to stay assertive without becoming passive or aggressive.

- Start practicing your newly found skills in safe situations first, gradually moving up to the situations you are most afraid to confront. Remind yourself that if you don't speak up, the other person will never know how you feel.
- Keep the statement focused on yourself. Don't say "You made me feel..." instead say "I feel..... because..." - "You" statements have an energy of blame attached to them whereas "I feel" statements show that you are taking personal responsibility for your feelings, which then makes it a bit easier for the other person to take responsibility for their actions.
- Avoid provocative, judgmental statements such as "What's wrong with you?" or "Don't you realise it made you look stupid?" This will only lead to an argument and cut off all attempts at healthy communication.
- Avoid blanket generalisations such as "always" and "never" - This automatically puts the other person on the defensive, makes them feel misunderstood and makes them feel that there is no opportunity to get things right.
- For obvious reasons, avoid name-calling, insults, or sarcasm. Your aim is to be assertive, not aggressive.



- Stay strong. If you confront someone about their inappropriate behavior, don't back down. If you end up giving in, the next time the person behaves in the same inappropriate way, your words will be meaningless and not taken seriously. Say what you need to say and then stick to your guns. Don't back down and don't apologise for bringing up the issue, even if the other person disagrees, gets angry or feels that you're making a big deal out of nothing.
- Don't get pulled into an argument. If the other person defends themselves, you can listen carefully and then say something like "I understand you don't agree with me and you have a right to your point of view but I would appreciate it if you'd give some thought to what I've said."
- Be prepared to follow through on any consequences. If you told your friend that if she's not at the restaurant within 15 minutes of the planned meeting time that you will leave and not wait for her, then be prepared to do that, and don't threaten to end a relationship unless you are willing to stand by your words and actually end it, otherwise you'll lose credibility with the other person and they won't take what you say seriously.
- Maintain eye contact when speaking. Maintaining eye-contact as you speak helps to communicate your sincerity and improves the directness of your message. If you look down or away most of the time, you project a lack of confidence in yourself and a lack of conviction in your message.
- Pay attention to your facial expression and body posture. They both need to be congruent with the message your words are trying to convey. Directly facing the other person with an erect posture and straight, unsmiling facial expression will go a long way toward letting the other person know that you mean business.
- Avoid communicating aggression through your gestures. Things like pointing fingers, pounding on the table or even making a fist can come across as aggressive to the other person and should be avoided.
- Standing or sitting close to your partner, placing a hand on his or her thigh or even holding their hands whilst communicating your message can put them at ease, assuring them that even though your words may be confrontational, your intention is resolution and not conflict.

- Pay attention to the tone, inflection, and volume of your voice. You may want to practice this with your therapist or record yourself until you're confident that your voice sounds clear and confident without being overly aggressive, loud, or timid.
- Try to address the issue with the person as soon as you can after the offence. The longer you leave it, the more difficult it becomes to bring it up later.

