

FEAT FACTSHEET

What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is an attitude of mind and a way of relating to others. It's an attitude that says, in short: 'Here I am, a person with unique gifts to give to the world. Who are you? What do you bring?' It is a positive, optimistic attitude, valuing yourself and others, seeking respectful communication with others, yet at the same time able to set boundaries, to protect yourself from exploitation, attack and hostility.

Asserting yourself means:

- You can say 'Yes' when you mean 'Yes', and 'No' when you mean 'No'. You don't agree to things you don't like, or give up things you do like, in order to please someone else.
- You can communicate clearly to others what you are feeling and what you want from them, in a calm way.
- You don't let a fear of conflict silence you. You are prepared to take the consequences of communicating your feelings and wants.
- You can do this because you feel good about yourself. You feel entitled to be here, to be who you are, and to express what you feel. And because you assert yourself, you feel good about yourself.
- You can give and receive both compliments and criticisms, learning from both.

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What's the difference between aggression and assertiveness? Aggression is the desire to invade another person's space and exercise power over them. Its mirror image is passivity, or victim behaviour: a willingness to allow others to control you, or to invade your space. Assertiveness is an entirely different attitude. Assertive people claim their own space, set their own boundaries to it, and are prepared to defend it. But they don't seek to invade anybody else's. They don't try to control others, nor allow others to control them. They claim the right to exercise their own inner authority.

I matter and so do you: Annie and Freda are sharing a flat. Annie has a busy, well-paid job and is hardly ever in. She doesn't do much housework or cooking, and never washes up. Freda spends more time at home, and is angry with Annie for always leaving the kitchen in a mess. She may well feel so fed up that one day she becomes directly aggressive, taking all the dirty crockery and dumping it on Annie's bed. If she were to be passively aggressive, instead, she might just sulk and stop doing any housework at all, to punish Annie. She might get crosser and crosser the longer it takes Annie to notice. Either way, Annie will eventually get cross, too, and may well retaliate. An explosive confrontation is likely.

If Freda does nothing, she is behaving like a victim. If she is aggressive, she is likely to provoke more aggression, in return. To be assertive is a third way. She could catch Annie at home one day, at a time when both are calm and neither is just rushing off, and suggest that they set a time to talk about it. She could let Annie know how strongly she feels about the housework issue, and make a space for talking about it, stating her point of view and being prepared to listen to Annie's. If Freda does this, the chances are that the two of them will be able to negotiate a good solution to the housework problem that will be more satisfactory for them. It might be to organise a rota, or hire a cleaner, but it will be a solution that suits them both.

Both passive and aggressive people relate to others as though only one person counts. A passive attitude says to the world, 'I don't matter, but you do'. An aggressive attitude says, 'I am the only one that matters'. But an assertive attitude says, 'I matter, and so do you. Everybody matters, and this starts but doesn't end with us'. It's a truly moral attitude, and the opposite of selfishness.

Trying it out: Find a time when you can be alone and uninterrupted for half an hour, in a room with a full-length mirror. Stand in front of it and observe your usual way of standing. What do you do with your feet, hands, and head? Now close your eyes, and imagine you are an aggressive person, saying to the world, without words, 'Here I am! I am big and important, and I'm going to invade your space and take you over!'

Let yourself really feel it in your body, then open your eyes, look in the mirror and notice how you are expressing this attitude. How are you standing? How are you holding your head? What sort of expression is on your face? What are your hands and feet doing? How do you feel about the person looking back at you from the mirror?

Now relax, close your eyes, and imagine you are a victim, saying to the world, 'I don't count - you can walk all over me'. Let yourself really get into it, then open your eyes and notice how you express this attitude with your body, as before. Relax, then try again, saying this time with your body, 'Hello! This is who I am and this is how much space I take up'. As before, notice how you express this attitude; in your stance, with your feet and your hands, and in the way you make eye contact.

You will probably find that in the aggressive position you make yourself quite big, clench your hands or put your hands on your hips, and generally look invasive. An assertive stance, however, will usually involve a relaxation of shoulders and neck, an upright, well-balanced body position, and open hands.

Will my relationships get better when I become more assertive?

Changing the way you behave in the world is a risky business, and the results are not guaranteed. When you assert yourself, it's quite possible that others will perceive you as aggressive. This is especially likely if you belong to a group that has, traditionally, not been allowed to claim power, if you are a woman, Black, homosexual, working class, disabled or a patient in a hospital. But people who persist in asserting themselves bring about change. The Church now has women as priests, and the pressure is still on to allow them further power. In South Africa, the once-illegal ANC became part of the Government under the leadership of Nelson Mandela.

How can I become more assertive?

The most obvious way is to join a group or class. Ask at your local library about courses. Most adult education institutions offer them, as do some colleges. Classes vary enormously, but do be careful to check these out thoroughly before committing yourself.

It's also important to be aware that the work may bring up painful memories. In particular, the emphasis on personal boundaries may remind you of an experience you may have had of assault or rape. Assertiveness teachers vary in their skill at dealing with the feelings stimulated by this kind of memory. If this might be relevant to you, it's particularly important to go to a class run by a trained, experienced counsellor or therapist.

Speaking up for yourself

Listen to the way you express yourself. People often generalise their feelings by saying 'you' in conversation when they mean 'I', as in: 'Sometimes, you feel you want to have a break, but you can't'. Try switching it to, 'I feel I want...' and add, 'and I will arrange it'. You may be surprised by the difference such a small change can make to the way you see yourself. Remember you have choices, too: avoid 'I must' or 'I should' in favour of 'I could' and 'I might'.

Anything which improves your self-esteem will help you to be more assertive. This may be something quite simple, like wearing a special item of clothing that makes you feel good; or a symbol of your religious or cultural identity. Self-esteem can be improved by validation from the outside, through other people's approval, earning more money, a promotion at work or a new love affair.

Talking treatments

Considering these questions may bring about the realisation that you have low self-esteem, and that you often find yourself adopting a passive or victim attitude to others. In this case, you could benefit from having someone to talk to, in depth, about your life and relationships, to help you understand how you have learned these attitudes and how to build more positive ones. This may mean facing up to painful and difficult memories from your past, especially old losses that haven't been properly grieved over.

Talking to a trained and experienced psychotherapist or counsellor can help you to identify and understand these problems, and to change the way you think and feel.

Cognitive-behaviour therapy is increasingly popular as a way of helping people to change long-standing, but unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaving.

Treating yourself well

If you can boost your self-esteem, this should automatically make you more assertive. Part of victim consciousness is a sense that 'I don't deserve to have anything good'. But giving yourself a treat every day can do wonders for your self-esteem. It doesn't have to be expensive, but it does have to be something that gives you pleasure.

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