

How to be assertive

In this handout you will find tips on how to be assertive in a variety of different situations. Many of the tips will overlap. Remember that the key to being assertive is to be clear about what you want whilst also being flexible enough to compromise when necessary.

If you have difficulties putting these tips into practice in real life situations try role playing scenarios with a friend before you go into the situations for real. This will help you to feel more confident.

Strategies for saying no

There's nothing wrong with saying 'yes', doing favours, or taking on responsibilities. Problems arise, though if you do these things because you can't say no or don't know how to do so. Here are some things to keep in mind for those times when you wish to say 'no'.

- **Use assertive body posture.** Use direct eye contact, keep your head up, shoulders back, hands relaxed or gesturing normally, and voice calm and loud enough to be heard.
- **Decide on your position before you speak.** If you're not sure what your answer is don't answer yet. Decide on exactly what you would and would not be willing to do.
- **Wait for the question.** Some people agree before they have even been asked! This is convenient for the other person, because they don't have to feel obliged to you – after all, they didn't ask you for the favour. You volunteered.
- **Decide on your wording.** Think through not only what you want to say but how you want to say it. Be clear about your answer; don't leave your questioner wondering what you really mean.
- **Don't apologise when it isn't necessary.** Apologies put you in the debt of the person asking you to do something. They suggest that the other person is entitled to expect you to grant the favour.
- **Don't defend yourself or make excuses when it isn't necessary.** Offering excuses about why you can't fulfil the request is usually dishonest. It's not that you can't do it, it's that you choose not to do it. Saying you can't also invites the person to help you find a way around the barrier.
- **Don't ask permission to say 'no'.** Remember, you have the right to say no. If you ask permission, it tells the other person that they are in charge.
- **Strengthen your position.** Don't expect that the other person will accept your refusal the first time that you turn them down – especially if you've been saying yes for years. Be ready for them to push again and respond with a refusal that is just as strong or stronger.
- **The broken record technique.** Don't feel you have to rephrase your response every time. If you keep repeating the same message, eventually the other person will hear it. This may start sounding odd, but it will be the other person provoking it.

- **Don't wait for acceptance.** You don't have to convince the other person to accept your refusal or agree with it. If you keep explaining yourself every time that they repeat the request, then you are saying that they have the ultimate power.
- **Accept the consequences.** You have the right to say no, but the other person has the right not to like it. When you say no there may be unpleasant consequences in the way that others react. Recognise and accept this.

Making requests

Many people are quite passive when it comes to making requests. They may feel they don't have the right to ask. Or they may fear the consequences of the request. The result: they avoid asking for help even when it is perfectly reasonable to do so. Consider these tips and observations about making requests.

- **What would you like to happen?** Begin by asking yourself what you would like to happen in this situation. If you are used to taking a passive stance, you may find that it is hard to know what you want, let alone to ask for it.
- **What would be reasonable?** Before making your request, decide for yourself what you think would be reasonable, given the circumstances. Use your list of assertive rights if you have difficulty with this.
- **Don't apologise for asking.** You have the right to ask for just about anything – as long as you recognise that the other person has the right to refuse.
- **Avoid putting yourself down as part of the request.** Instead, try to ask in as straightforward way as possible.
- **Before making your request define the situation.** Be as clear as you can without making a long speech. *"It's been a long time since we went out together"*.
- **Express how you are feeling in this situation.** Focus a bit more on the positive emotions you wish you were feeling than on the negative emotions you are currently feeling. *"In situations like this I don't feel as close to you as I would like"*.
- **Use "I" statements.** Take responsibility for your emotions. You should not be trying to blame how you feel on the other person. This will only make them defensive. "I" statements make your request more personal; they communicate that you take responsibility for your own feelings, and they avoid implicit insults.
- **Be clear but brief.** In most situations your request should take no more than one or two sentences. Be specific.
- **Frame the request positively.** Say what you want, not what you don't want.
- **Focus on behaviour.** What do you want the person to do? Don't ask for changes in how the person thinks or feels. Also avoid being too general.
- **Describe the outcome** that you think will follow if the other person does go along with what you suggest. Perhaps you will feel better. Perhaps you will do something for the other person in return. Sometimes the outcome will be a concrete effect in the outside world.

- **Perhaps if the person doesn't do what you request, you will do something they won't like.** Remember that negative consequences often cause resentment. The research shows that punishments are less effective at changing behaviour than are rewards.

Some guidelines:

- **Only set barriers that you are willing and able to defend.** If you make threats that you cannot keep (I'll quit this job, leave you, ground you for a year, never speak to you again, etc.), people will not take your attempts to be assertive seriously.
- **Don't start getting assertive when you are strained to the limit.** Remember that the relationship will get tougher for a while. Pick a time when you have the strength to handle the pressure.
- **Don't back down.** When you set the barrier and the other person begins to push against it, be prepared to keep to the rule. Otherwise, they will push harder the next time.
- **Don't get assertive with everyone in your life at once.** You probably won't be able to stand having all of your relationships becoming more difficult at once. Pick one person at a time.

Practising what you have learned

You cannot expect to become assertive overnight. It will take time and practice to learn these new skills and to apply them consistently. It will also take time for your family/friends to adjust to your new behaviour. If you are usually aggressive people will probably be pleased with your new behaviour. On the other hand, if you are normally quite passive, some people may feel threatened when you start to assert yourself. Remember though that this fear is their problem, not yours. You are simply reclaiming your assertive rights. Give yourself time and make any changes gradually. As your assertive behaviour starts to feel more natural you should begin to feel more confident and happier with yourself.