



# How To Be Assertive

Your ability to be assertive will affect everything you do, in every area of your life. It has an impact on how you spend your time on a day to day basis but also impacts your major life decisions as well as general feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction with your life.

Assertive behaviour is:

“Behaviour which enables a person to act in his own best interests, to stand up for himself without undue anxiety, to express his honest feelings comfortably, or to exercise his own rights without denying the rights of others” - Calberti and Emmons

Being assertive encompasses two main elements:

*1 - Being able to communicate your feelings, needs and opinions effectively to other people*


*2 - Being able to set boundaries for yourself and say 'No' where necessary*

Most people struggle with these two elements in at least some areas of their lives.

When you find it difficult to be assertive you may find that you think or feel the following things:

- \* I feel angry when people are taking me for granted
- \* I say yes to too many things
- \* I can't let people down
- \* I feel resentful at having to do everything
- \* I get angry for the smallest of reasons
- \* I wish I could just say how I feel
- \* I don't know why people don't understand me

**'Be who you are and say how you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind'** - Dr Seuss



Living your life without being able to express yourself and set appropriate boundaries can lead to, or contribute to:

- \* Resentment
- \* Frustration
- \* Anger - often directed in entirely unrelated places that feel safe (eg, at a partner when the problem is at work)
- \* Depression - Feeling hopeless and that you have no control over your own life
- \* Anxiety - Finding yourself in situations that you don't really want, trying to avoid conflict, feeling out of control etc.
- \* Ill-health - Attempting to suppress or reject your own emotions and needs can mean they linger in your body causing physical complaints such as frequent headaches, pain, high blood pressure and tiredness.
- \* Unsatisfactory relationships - When you are unable to express your needs your intimate relationships and friendships are likely to feel unsatisfactory. Also, that bubbling resentment can create arguments and tensions that are difficult to resolve.

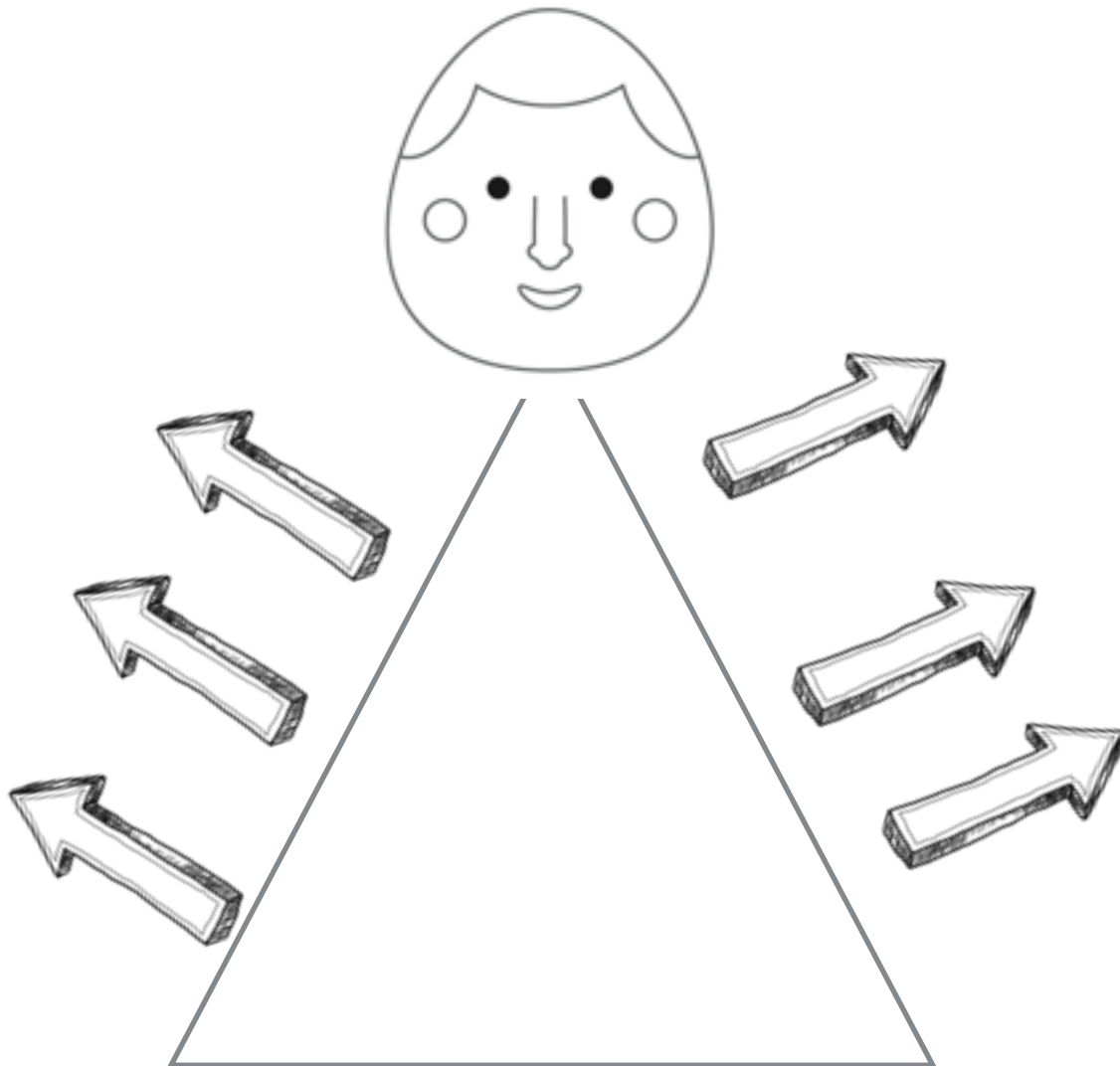
When you begin to realise the detrimental effects of your lack of assertiveness skills, it becomes clear that the cost to you is too high. You may have internalised rules about the importance of pleasing people or not making a fuss, but its time to challenge these. You deserve better than these consequences.

So, learning to be more assertive allows you to:

- \* Feel more in control of your life
- \* Feel more confident
- \* Say 'no' more easily and without making an excuse or feeling guilty
- \* Make sure your needs and feelings are being considered
- \* Express yourself clearly
- \* Be authentic to who you really are
- \* Improve your relationships
- \* Allow you to feel generally healthier and happier.

Look at the picture below and imagine this represents you (you can get artistic and make it look like you if you wish). Write in or around the arrow all the things that you are giving out to other people. This might be things like time, needing to please, extra work, never say no, always pleasing etc.

Then, inside the body write down the things you are suppressing. These might be things like your specific needs, anger, resentment, loneliness, exhaustion, fear, anxiety etc.



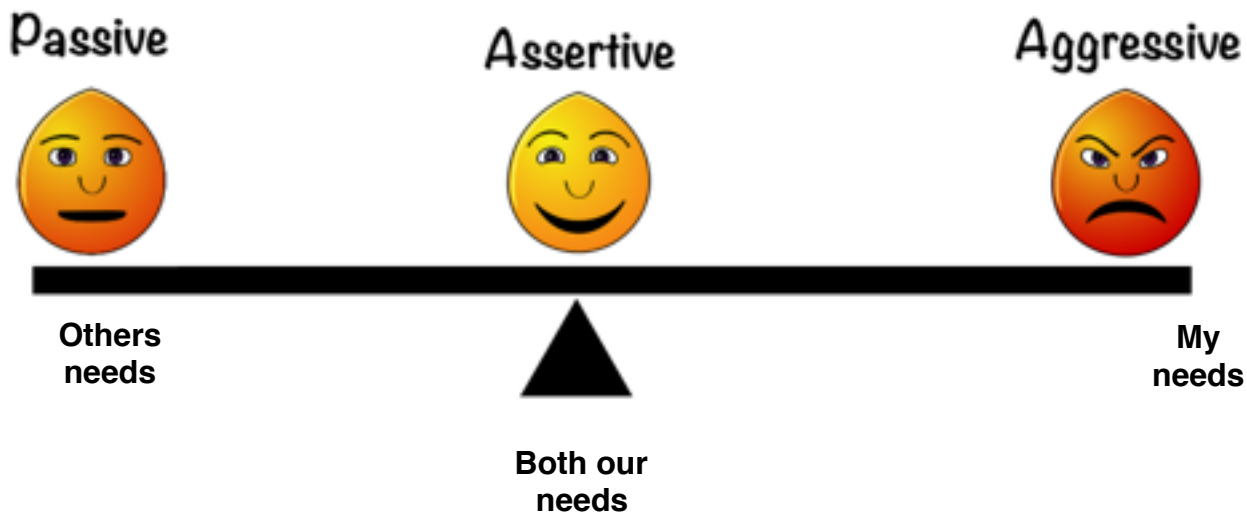
- Adapted from Jacqui Marson

When we are struggling to express ourselves assertively, usually what we are suppressing inside is very different to what we are giving out to other people.

The hope is that through learning and applying assertiveness skills, we can bring these into alignment so that what we give out on the outside reflects what is inside and vice versa. This helps to ensure that we are living an authentic life and being true to ourselves in our actions.

(It is, of course normal to have some things inside that we do not express for various reasons).

Our behaviour can change according to the situation we are in, the person we are dealing with and how we are feeling. Assertiveness is about getting the balance right between passive and aggressive and depends on whose needs we are considering as a priority. Assertiveness means you are considering and respecting both yours and the other persons needs equally and communicating this.






Read each of the following statements and see if you can identify whether they are passive (P), Assertive (A) or Aggressive (Agg)

1. Something is bothering you but you remain silent so as not to cause a fuss \_\_\_\_\_
2. You don't let a conversation end until the other person admits you are right \_\_\_\_\_
3. You say 'I am not happy with this service and I would like a refund' \_\_\_\_\_
4. You say 'you make me feel really stupid when you do that' \_\_\_\_\_
5. You say to your colleague 'You can't talk to me that way' \_\_\_\_\_
6. You are reluctant to ask for help because it might make you appear incompetent \_\_\_\_\_
7. You say 'I felt uncomfortable when you said that to me' \_\_\_\_\_
8. Your partner is late to meet you so you say 'Why are you so late?' \_\_\_\_\_
9. A friend says 'don't be so sensitive' \_\_\_\_\_
10. You decide not to assert your feelings to a friend because you are at another friends wedding and decide you don't feel its worth raising the issue \_\_\_\_\_

Answers: 1P, 2Agg, 3A, 4Agg, 5Agg, 6P, 7A, 8Agg, 9Agg, 10A

Can you identify yourself in different situations and perhaps others in your life based on the descriptions below?



Passive	Assertive	Aggressive
		
Values others more than self	Values self equal to others	Values self more than others
Hurts self to avoid hurting others	Tries to hurt no one (including self)	Hurts others to avoid being hurt
'Your ok, Im not ok'	'Im ok, your ok'	Im ok, your not'
Is afraid to speak up	Speaks openly	Dominates conversation, talks over others
Agrees with others even when conflicting with personal feelings	Balances respecting own feelings with respecting others feelings	Only considers and expresses own feelings
Avoids eye contact	Friendly, comfortable eye contact	Staring, intimidating eye contact
Compliant and submissive	Firm but polite	Harsh, patronising, forceful
Suppresses own feelings	Expresses feelings tactfully	Expresses feelings to the detriment of others
Very sensitive to disapproval	Sensitive to both self and others	Disrespectful to others
May feel anxious, unimportant and sad	Feels secure, confident and caring	May feel superior, can get angry quickly. May be self protective.
Damages self esteem	Builds self esteem	Damages self esteem

**'The basic difference between being assertive and aggressive is how our words and behaviour affects the rights and wellbeing of others'** - Sharon Anthony Bower

Most of us will be passive in some situations and aggressive in others, even though we may feel this is not desirable.

There are usually reasons behind all behaviours and since being assertive can be difficult at times, its not surprising that the balance tips for each of us at different times.

**Common causes of passive and aggressive behaviour:**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Passive</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Fear - Of being rejected Of upsetting other people Of not being liked Of being thought of badly</li> <li>* Low self esteem - Feeling unworthy Not believing in their rights Believing other peoples opinions are more valid Seeking acceptance</li> <li>* Lack of skills - not knowing how to be assertive</li> <li>* Beliefs - I should never make a fuss I should aim to please people I should always be helpful</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Aggressive</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Insecurity - Feeling threatened Protecting themselves Feeling powerless Fear of doing things differently</li> <li>* Benefits - Often being aggressive will get you what you want in the short term</li> <li>* Lack of skills - not knowing how to be assertive and get their needs met any other way</li> <li>* Beliefs - I need to be noticed I need to win</li> </ul>

**‘Assertiveness is your ability to act in harmony with your self esteem without hurting others’**



might find it very easy to set boundaries at work to make sure your workload is appropriate and you are treated well, but you might find yourself feeling like a doormat in a certain friendship.

Think about the different elements of your life and the different relationships you have with family members, friends and partners. Try to decide whether you are assertive or not in each life area and relationship and jot down your thoughts.

Areas where I am assertive	Areas where I am less assertive

Making changes to become more assertive can be challenging. You may find that other people don't like your new assertive skills and try to push back, or you might find that it is tiring for you to make the necessary changes. Try to be gentle with yourself through this process.

I suggest that you start your journey to assertiveness by focusing on one area of your life - it could be a particular friendship, your boss or even your interactions with sales people.


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● **I have decided to focus on becoming more assertive with** ●

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# Bill of Rights

I have the right to:

1. Express my opinions and values
2. Express my feelings
3. Be treated with respect as an equal human being
4. Say "I do not understand" and ask for more information
5. Make mistakes and change my mind
6. Make requests
7. Act independently of any roles in my life
8. Decline responsibility of other people's problems
9. Say "Yes" or "no" for myself
10. Deal with others without being dependent on them for approval.

- Adapted from Anne Dickinson



Notice your reactions as you read the Bill of Rights. Most people have one or two rights that feel are more difficult to put into practice or that they forget more than others. These ten rights apply to any situation and to every human being on the planet. You are no exception.

You might find it useful to put this Bill of Rights somewhere you will see it everyday. You could make it the background on your computer or on your phone or you could put it in the front of your diary. It is really important to keep reminding yourself of these rights and let them help you recognise when you could be more assertive.

For some people, (particularly those who have been passive for a long time or have been in close, regular contact with an aggressive person), they have completely lost touch with what they actually do want and so struggle to know what to ask for when being assertive. Using the Bill of Rights as a reference is really helpful to begin to explore what you want and deserve again.



## Your Assertiveness Toolbox

Here are all the skills you will need to be more assertive in any interaction or situation in your life. You will need to use these skills over and over again. The more you practice and use assertiveness skills, the more natural it will feel.

### Remember

Using assertiveness skills does not necessarily mean that other people in your life will change their behaviour. What it does mean is that you can express yourself honestly, assert your opinions and rights and choose how to proceed with relationships within the boundaries you determine.



### **Use your body language**

The aim of communicating assertively is to be respectful but honest. Therefore, you should aim for your body to be relaxed. Try to make sure that your shoulders are down away from your ears, your hands are loose by your sides (you might find it useful to have something to hold) and you are facing the other person in an appropriate manner.

If the other person is standing up, it is useful for you to match this and also stand up so it doesn't feel like you are being talked down to. It can also help to stand up if you are having a difficult conversation over the phone as standing up can make you feel you have more authority.

Some people find it useful to imagine yourself as a tree, stood firmly with your feet rooted to the floor. This can give a sense of authority and remind you that you are entitled to your rights and you do not have to be swayed by another person.

If it is possible in the situation, you might suggest going for a walk and talking through the issue as you walk to take away some of the pressure of the interaction.

Try to maintain relaxed, friendly eye contact as you are expressing yourself with honesty and respect. Avoiding eye contact is passive and staring at the other person is aggressive so aim for natural eye contact, as you would have with someone you are comfortable with.

Use deep breathing to keep yourself calm and to try to keep your voice steady.



## Use 'I' statements

Assertiveness is about being able to express your feelings, needs and wishes without judging how another person feels or blaming them for how you feel. You should be aiming to use facts not judgements. Your approach is to respect yourself in equal measure to respecting another person.

When being assertive, it is important to use 'I' statements to convey your message in a strong yet honest way. Using 'I' statements allows you to take responsibility for how you feel and make it clear that you are simply expressing yourself to others and sharing what is true for you.

So 'you make me feel...' becomes 'I feel...'

Here are some examples....

'I would like a refund'

'When you raise your voice like that I feel.... I would like you to...'

'When you don't tell me how you feel, I get anxious'

Since you are simply expressing yourself through honest 'I' statements, there is no opening for an argument from the other person. You are not assigning blame, you are not looking for sympathy you are just taking responsibility for how you feel and expressing it honestly.

You may need to be willing to allow silence during this interaction as the other person may be unused to expressing yourself in this way. Don't be tempted to fill the silence by justifying yourself, just allow the silence to let what you have said sink in.

### Remember

You are only responsible for your own feelings, you are not responsible for how other adults feel. You are also not required to please people. It may be necessary to let people down sometimes for the sake of your wellbeing.



## The Broken Record

This can be a very useful technique when you are interacting assertively with someone who tends to be more aggressive in their communication and may attempt to avoid the issue or throw excuses at you.

Once you have decided what you need to communicate and have done so through your 'I' statements it can be very disheartening when the other person then argues with you or belittles how you feel. At this point it would be very easy to revert back to being unassertive and losing the good work you put in to getting this far.

So, if you find yourself faced with the other person in the interaction arguing with you, telling you that you are wrong or anything else you find difficult to cope with, its time to use the broken record technique.

This involves repeating your assertive statement over and over again, as many times as necessary until the other person really hears what your are saying. You can acknowledge what the other person is saying but remain assertive with your original statement.

You might say...

'I am hearing what you are saying to me but (repeat previous assertive statement)  
'I don't want another drink'....'You can have another drink but I don't want one, thank you'  
'It's too expensive'...'I know its on offer but its too expensive'...'I know I won't fine it elsewhere but its too expensive'



## Saying 'No'

Getting comfortable wth saying 'no' is often essential when learning to be assertive as it helps you to lay down boundaries and priorities the things you really want and need to spend your time on. Whenever you receive a request consider the implications of saying yes - what will you have to sacrifice?

*Remember*

It is ok to say 'No'

Make sure you practice saying 'No' and get comfortable with it. The more confidently you say it, the less chance there will be of other people trying to change your mind or persuade you.

When saying 'No', keep the following in mind:

- Be clear and unambiguous
- Allow the other person to express their feelings if necessary
- Don't apologise
- Don't make excuses
- You don't need to justify yourself



## Act 'as if'

It can be helpful to think of someone you know who is assertive and manages situations in a way you really respect.

Imagine you could put yourself in their shoes to deal with your situation. How would they act? What would they say?

Now imagine you could act 'as if' you are that person and can deal with the situation in exactly the way you would like to.

No one needs to know that you are only pretending to have the confidence to act differently.

This can really help to just give you the little confidence boost you need to assert yourself. The more you behave in an assertive way, the easier it will become and you will no longer need to pretend.



## Extra Bits & Bobs

Here are a few extra tips and tricks that can make your journey to assertiveness a little easier.

- Don't be afraid to ask for more time to think about something before you commit (you might need to think about the implications for you or consider what you truly want to do)

e.g., 'that sounds really interesting but I am not sure whether it will be possible for me at the moment, let me check a few things and get back to you'


- Summarise the issue at hand to show your respect for their feelings as well as your own

- Be specific about what you want and remember that other people can't read your mind (you might need to work on tuning in with yourself to work out what it is that you do want so you can communicate this to other people)

- Mentally rehearse the situation before you face it - see yourself in your mind's eye calmly and assertively putting your point across or saying 'no' in exactly the way you would like to do it.

*Remember*

Other people are also entitled to be assertive - this does not have to change how you feel or what you believe to be right for you.



Learning to be assertive is not always easy and it is really important to treat yourself with kindness as you are making changes and experimenting in different situations.

It is also really important to review your progress after you have dealt with a situation so as to celebrate your wins and progress as well as to consider what you could improve for next time.

After you have used assertiveness skills in a situation record what happened here:

The situation was...
I intended to....
What happened was...
One thing I am proud of is...
One thing I would do differently next time is...

*Remember*

‘Even if people dislike my decision, I am still a worthwhile and likeable person’

## Angela's Word

When Angela was very young,  
Age two or three or so,  
Her mother and her father  
Taught her never to say NO.  
They taught her that she must agree  
With everything they said,  
And if she didn't, she was spanked  
And sent upstairs to bed.

So Angela grew up to be  
A most agreeable child;  
She was never angry  
And she was never wild;  
She always shared, she always cared,  
She never picked a fight,  
And no matter what her parents said,  
She thought that they were right.

Angela the Angel did very well in school  
And, as you might imagine, she followed every rule;  
Her teachers said she was so well-bred,  
So quiet and so good,  
But how Angela felt inside  
They never understood.

Angela had lots of friends  
Who liked her for her smile;  
They knew she was the kind of gal  
Who'd go the extra mile;  
And even when she had a cold  
And really needed rest,  
When someone asked her if she'd help  
She always answered "Yes".

When Angela was thirty-three, she was  
a lawyer's wife.  
She had a home and family, and a nice  
suburban life.  
She had a little girl of four  
And a little boy of nine,  
And if someone asked her how she felt  
She always answered, "Fine."  
But one cold night near Christmas time  
When her family was in bed,  
She lay awake as awful thoughts went  
spinning through her head;

She didn't know why, and she didn't know how,  
But she wanted her life to end;

So she begged whoever put her here  
To take her back again.  
And then she heard, from deep inside,  
A voice that was soft and low;  
It only said a single word  
And the word it said was... NO!

From that moment on, Angela knew  
Exactly what she had to do.  
Her life depended on that word,  
So this is what her loved ones heard:

NO, I just don't want to;  
NO, I don't agree;  
NO, that's yours to handle;  
NO, that's wrong for me;  
NO, I wanted something else;  
NO, that hurt a lot!  
NO, I'm tired, and NO, I'm busy,  
And NO, I'd rather not!

Well, her family found it shocking,  
Her friends reacted with surprise;  
But Angela was different, you could see it in her  
eyes;  
For they've held no meek submission  
Since that night three years ago  
When Angela the Angel  
Got permission to say NO.

Today Angela's a person first, then a mother and  
a wife.  
She knows where she begins and ends,  
She has a separate life.  
She has talents and ambitions,  
She has feelings, needs and goals.  
She has money in the bank and  
An opinion at the polls.

And to her boy and girl she says,  
"It's nice when we agree;  
But if you can't say NO, you'll never grow  
To be all you're meant to be.  
Because I know I'm sometimes wrong  
And because I love you so,  
You'll always be my angels  
Even when you tell me NO."

~Barbara K. Bassett