

# BEING ASSERTIVE: REDUCE STRESS, COMMUNICATE BETTER

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*Being assertive is a core communication skill.*

1. It means that you express yourself effectively and stand up for your point of view, while also respecting the rights of others.
2. Being assertive helps boost self-esteem and earns others' respect.
3. Some people are naturally assertive. If you tend to be more passive, you can learn to be more direct. Or if you tend to be aggressive, you can learn to tone down your communication style.

### WHY ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION MAKES SENSE

*It's based on mutual respect; assertiveness is an effective and diplomatic communication style.*

1. Being assertive shows that you respect yourself because you're willing to stand up for your interests and express your thoughts and feelings.
2. It shows that you're cognizant of the rights of others and willing to work on resolving conflicts.
3. It's not just what you say - your message - but also how you say it. Assertive communication - which is direct and respectful - gives you the best chance of successfully delivering your message. On the other hand, if you communicate in a way that's passive or aggressive, the content of your message may get lost because people are too busy reacting to your delivery.

### ASSERTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE BEHAVIOR

*If your style is passive, you may seem to be shy or easygoing. You avoid all conflict.*

1. The message you're sending is that your thoughts and feelings aren't as important as other people's. You're giving others the license to disregard your needs. For example: You agree when a colleague or your program director asks you to take over a project or give a presentation even though your plate is full and extra work means you'll have to miss your family reunion.
2. You may tell yourself that behaving passively keeps the peace and prevents conflicts. What it does is get in the way of authentic relationships. It may cause you internal conflict because your needs or those of your family always come second. This internal conflict may lead to:

- a. Stress
- b. Resentment
- c. Seething anger
- d. Feelings of victimization
- e. Desire to exact revenge

### ASSERTIVE VERSUS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

*Aggressive may come across as a bully who disregards the needs, feelings and opinions of others.*

1. You may appear self-righteous or superior. Very aggressive people humiliate and intimidate others, and may even be physically threatening.
2. You may think that being aggressive gets you what you want. However, it comes at a high cost. Aggression undercuts trust and mutual respect.
3. Others may come to resent you, leading them to avoid or oppose you.

### PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

*If you communicate in a passive-aggressive manner, you may say "yes" when you want to say "no."*

1. You may be sarcastic or complain about others behind their backs.
2. You may have developed a passive-aggressive style because you're unable to be direct about your needs and feelings.
3. Over time passive-aggressive behavior damages relationships and undercuts mutual respect.

### THE BENEFITS OF BEING ASSERTIVE

*Being assertive offers many powerful benefits.*

1. It helps you keep people from walking all over you, as the saying goes.
2. It can help you from steamrolling others.  
Behaving assertively can help you:
  - a. Gain self-confidence and self-esteem
  - b. Understand and recognize your feelings
  - c. Earn respect from others
  - d. Improve communication
  - e. Create win-win situations
  - f. Improve your decision-making skills
  - g. Create honest relationships
  - h. Gain more job satisfaction
3. Research suggests that being assertive can help people cope better with many mental health problems, including depression, anorexia, bulimia, social anxiety disorder and schizophrenia.

## LEARNING TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE

People develop different styles of communication based on their life experiences.

1. Your style has probably become so ingrained that you're not even aware of it.
2. People stick to the same communication style over time! you can learn to be more flexible.
3. Here are some tips to help you become more assertive:
  - a. **Assess your style.** Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Do you say yes to additional work even when your plate is full? Are you quick to judge or blame? Do people seem to dread or fear talking to you?
  - b. **Use "I" statements.** Using "I" statements lets others know what you're thinking without sounding accusatory. For instance, say, "I disagree," rather than, "You're wrong."
  - c. **Practice saying no.** If you have hard time turning down requests, try saying "No I can't do it now." Don't beat around the bush - be direct. If an explanation is appropriate, keep it brief.
  - d. **Rehearse what you want to say.** If it's challenging to say what you want or think, practice typical scenarios. E.g. if you want to present a case, write it out, practice what you want to say, and say it out loud. Consider role playing with friend or colleague and ask for feedback.
  - e. **Use body language.** Communication isn't just verbal. Act confident even if you aren't feeling it. You may find that your body convinces your brain! Keep an upright posture but lean forward a bit. Make regular eye contact. Maintain a neutral or positive facial expression. Don't wring your hands or use dramatic gestures. It can help to practice in front of a mirror.
  - f. **Keep emotions in check.** Conflict is hard for most people. Maybe you get angry or frustrated, or maybe you feel like crying. Although these feelings are normal, they can get in the way of resolving conflict. If you feel too emotional going into a situation, wait a bit if possible. Then, work on remaining calm. Breathe slowly. Keep your voice even and firm.
  - g. **Start small.** At first, practice your new skills in situations that are low risk. For instance, try out your assertiveness on a partner or friend before tackling a difficult situation at work. Evaluate yourself afterward and tweak your approach as necessary.

## WHEN YOU NEED HELP BEING ASSERTIVE

Remember, learning to be assertive takes time and practice.

1. If you've spent years silencing yourself, becoming more assertive won't happen overnight.
2. If anger leads you to be too aggressive, you may need to learn anger management techniques.
3. If despite your best efforts you're not making progress, consider formal assertiveness training.
4. If anger, stress, anxiety or fear are getting in your way, talk with a mental health provider.
5. The payoff will be worth it. By becoming more assertive, you can begin to express your true feelings and needs more easily. You may even find you get more of what you want as a result.

## Five Distinct Behavioral Styles for Dealing with People

	(1) Submissive	(2) Caring	(3) Collaborative	(4) Compelling	(5) Aggressive
Degree of Assertiveness	No assertiveness	Low assertiveness	Mid assertiveness	High assertiveness	Off the scale into intimidation
How You Come Across	Disinterested, passive, shy or not opinionated	Interested, caring and supportive	Collaborative and a team player, willing to both give and take	Persuasive and assertive, yet not running over others	Aggressive and overbearing
Behavioral Emphasis	Avoid conflict, don't rock the boat	Show empathy and understanding to others	An equal emphasis on personal needs and the needs of others	Emphasis on personal needs and asserting personal views	Run over people to get your way
Involvement of Others	No involvement ("Whatever you want is fine with me")	High Involvement	Mid Involvement	Low Involvement	No involvement ("My way or the highway")
Communication Style	No openness in communication	Asking questions, clarifying, summarizing, and empathizing (emphasis on trying to understand others)	Equal mixture of asking questions and selling your viewpoint	Persuading, selling and showing enthusiasm for your viewpoint (emphasis on trying to be understood by others)	One-way communication; little or not listening
Effect on Others	No respect; take you for granted; low morale	Willingness to respond honestly	Desire to work together; teamwork	Willing to respond positively if ideas are good	Compliance, resentment, feeling defeated; anger