

Being Assertive

A Self Help Guide



Assertiveness is the ability to stand up for ourselves and to say how we feel when we feel we need to.

It includes:

- Expressing your own opinion and feelings.
- Saying “no” without feeling guilty.
- Setting your own priorities i.e. choosing how you spend your time.
- Asking for what you want.
- Being able to take reasonable risks.
- Choosing not to assert yourself at times when you feel it would be better not to say anything.

If you are missing out on any of these it is possible that you have difficulty asserting yourself. This sheet explains more about the problems and gives some suggestions on how to be more assertive.

The problem of lack of assertiveness

Here are a few typical problems caused by lack of assertiveness.

- Saying “yes” to requests for favours from friends and relatives, no matter how unfair the requests are.
- Being afraid to return damaged goods or point out poor service in shops and restaurants.
- Difficulty expressing positive feelings i.e. giving compliments.
- A fear of being criticised by others.
- A fear of people in authority.

People who do not assert themselves not only fail to get what is due them and also tend to feel bad about themselves. They may go over a situation in their mind time and time again thinking, “Why didn’t I say that?” or “If only I’d done this”. This can lead to feelings of blame, depression and anxiety.



Common misconceptions about being assertive

The main reason for unassertive behaviour is a fear of what might happen if you are assertive. What do you fear might happen if you did stand up for your rights? You may fear that you would feel extremely guilty or anxious after asserting yourself. These fears are usually based on false beliefs about assertiveness. Let's have a look at some of these myths.

I'll be being selfish if I say what I want

All we are doing by being assertive is putting our own needs on an equal level with the needs of other people. It is important for our own well being to do this. This is helpful for other people as well. We are not doing anyone a favour by letting them take us for granted or get whatever they want from us.

Here is another example of how it can help other people. Supposing you were watching a film in a cinema and the person behind you was talking all the time. By politely saying something like: "excuse me, would you mind not talking while the film is on", you would be helping both yourself and the people around you.

Note that this is quite different from an aggressive comment like "Why don't you shut up!" which is only likely to lead to an argument.

If I stand up for myself the other person will become upset and angry

This assumes that other people are always unreasonable. Remember, you are only asking to be treated as an equal and not making big demands. Most people will recognise this and accept your point of view. In fact, you may be surprised how easily they agree with you.

People won't like me if I say what I want

Think of the people you know who are assertive. Do you think any less of them for that? The chances are you respect them more for being assertive. People are likely to think more of you if you assert yourself as it means they know where they stand with you.

I feel too anxious to start being assertive

This is something of a vicious circle. Being assertive for the first time is always hard but it becomes easier after that.



Pinpoint Problem Areas

The first task in becoming assertive is to work out the situations where you do not stand up for yourself. Does it occur at work, at home or when you are out with friends? Does it occur more often with certain types of people (e.g. those in authority, young people, relatives, the opposite sex)?

Is it harder giving compliments or criticism or are both difficult? Think about what you fear might happen in these situations if you were assertive and consider how realistic this is in the light of the discussion above.

Here is an example:

Gill often found herself feeling upset after seeing a couple who were good friends of hers, Jen & Bob. She realised that they often asked her to babysit for their young son, Luke. Of course, she wanted to be helpful but often it prevented her from getting much needed time for herself. However, she always agreed and she felt it was selfish to say “no” and would make her feel guilty. Meanwhile, she was becoming more and more stressed because of the lack of time to relax.

Make a list of situations where you would like to be more assertive:



Planning and Rehearsal

Having chosen a situation and identified the problems, the next step is to plan what you are going to say and do. Of course, it is not possible to make complete plans as you do not know exactly what will happen. The most important thing is to plan what you want to say (and do) and the best way of saying it.

It often helps to have a “dry run” or rehearsal before actually going into the situation. You can do this with a friend or by yourself. If you are doing this with a friend, ask them to play the other person. Then you could try swapping round, with you playing the other person.

Here are some tips on behaving assertively:

- Keep what you want to say clear and to the point. Avoid long explanations.
- Look at the other person, stand (or sit) upright and keep a calm tone of voice.
- There’s no need to apologise if you feel you are in the right.
- Be polite but firm.
- Try to relax, rather than becoming angry.

Gill decided to be open with Jen & Bob about the problem, saying something like “I really like looking after Luke but I’ve got so much on just now I feel really stressed. At the moment I’m looking after him every week. How about if we made it once a fortnight?” She discussed this with another friend who said it sounded fine and suggested one or one or two small improvements in how she said things.

Going into the situation

You may feel nervous beforehand but this is quite natural. Try and keep to what you have planned to say even if the conversation doesn’t quite go as you expected. And remember, you can only do your best. After it’s all over ask yourself how you did. What things did you do well? What could be improved upon? Give credit to yourself where it is due and learn as much as you can from what happened to apply to the next time.



Some Specific Techniques

The following are suggestions you may find helpful for particular situations:

“I” messages

If you are unhappy about someone’s behaviour is it best to say how you feel rather than attacking the other person. This means using the word “I” in what you say.

For example, suppose you had cooked a meal several evening on the run for your partner or flatmate and each time he or she had arrived late and the dinner had been spoiled. A suitable “I” message might be:

“I get very upset when you arrive late for dinner because I put a lot of energy into making it and I feel it’s a waste if the food is cold or overdone.”

This tells the other person how you feel and paves the way for a helpful discussion of the situation. This is different from “you” messages which attack the other person. For example:

“You’re always late for dinner. You’re selfish and inconsiderate. You can make your own dinner from now on.”

The Scratched Record

This can be useful with strangers when you have a specific task e.g. when taking goods back to the shops. It consists simply of repeating your point several times no matter how the other person tries to divert you. For example:

Customer: “Hello, I’d like to return these trousers because they’ve got a mark on them”.

Shopkeeper: “Hmm...well, it’s only a small mark. It will probably wash off”.

Customer: “I’d still like them changed please”.

Shopkeeper: “We don’t have any more of that size in stock”.

Customer: “I would like a replacement pair”.

Shopkeeper: “OK. We’ll re-order them and they should be in by the end of the week”.



Taking Criticism

One important feature of being assertive is to be able to take helpful criticism (as opposed to negative insults) as well as to give it. This type of criticism is often a chance to learn about yourself as others see you. It is often helpful to simply listen to what the other person is saying and repeat back in your own words what they said. For example:

A: "You don't suit that shirt at all!"

B: "OK...there's something you don't like about it".

A: "The colour's wrong for you and the collar's too large".

B: "You feel it would be better some other colour".

A: "Well I thought that blue shirt you had on yesterday looked great. I hope you don't think I'm being too blunt".

Notice that B neither immediately agrees with what was said nor becomes defensive.

Two unhelpful replies to A's first comment would be:

B: "Yes, I'm a terrible dresser" - which is not what A said. A was talking about one shirt, not how B dresses all the time.

B: "What a cheek! You're no supermodel yourself" - which is likely to lead to an argument!

By simply listening to what A said it was possible for B to find out something useful about the way he or she looks and gain the respect of A for being able to accept the comment.

A final word

If you look again at the list of assertive skills at the beginning of this handout, you will see that the last one says "The right to choose not to assert yourself". There is no rule saying that you have to assert yourself all the time and in some situations you may feel it is better not to say anything. Generally, though, you are likely to find that being more assertive has a significant positive impact on your life.



Where can I get further help?

We hope you will find this guide helpful. In order to get the maximum benefit, it is best to continue the exercises described here over a period of several weeks, as problems usually take some time to overcome. These approaches are tried and tested and most people find them beneficial if they persist. You are learning new, healthy habits which will stand you in good stead for the future. It is a good idea to keep this guide handy so that you can keep referring to it from time to time.

If, after a few weeks, you feel you are making little progress, then seek help in overcoming your problem. Your GP is the best person to talk to first. Your GP may suggest a talking treatment or tablets or both. He or she may suggest you see a mental health worker who can offer expert help with your problems.

If you feel so distressed that you have thoughts of harming yourself or you feel you are at risk of harming others, then visit your doctor as soon as possible and explain to him or her how you are feeling.

Further Information and Resources

For further information and self-help resources go to Moodjuice online:
www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk

Moodjuice Forth Valley is a web site designed to offer information and advice to those experiencing troublesome thoughts, feelings and actions. From the site you are able to print off other self-help guides covering conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress, panic and sleep problems. In the site you can explore various aspects of your life that may be causing you some distress and obtain information on organisations, services and other self-help materials, that can offer you support and information which will allow you to help yourself.