

Assertiveness

What is Assertiveness? – Assertiveness is the ability to express your opinions, feelings, ideas, and needs openly, in a way that is true to who you are and respectful of others. It involves standing up for yourself in a way that encourages conversation rather than defensiveness.

Why is Assertiveness important? – It is a healthy and honest form of communication that can eliminate the stress associated with holding things inside. Failing to be assertive can make you feel uneasy in social situations, resentful towards others, and can also lead to stress-related physical symptoms such as headaches, anxiety, and fatigue. Unhealthy alternatives to assertive communication are passivity and aggression. These forms are typically less successful because people are too busy responding to the delivery of your message to consider what you are saying. You don't usually get what you want being indirect.



Please others, ↓ self-respect	Willing to compromise, mutual respect	Please self, ↓ respect for others
Others needs are given priority	Respect own needs and needs of others	Own needs are given priority
Does not achieve desired goal	May achieve desired goal	Achieves desired goal at expense of others
Insecure response, ↓ self confidence	Builds self confidence and self esteem	Insecure response, ↓ self confidence
Anxious, angry Socially inhibited	Happy, confident Socially productive	Defensive, angry, controlling Socially destructive
Hold in thoughts, ideas and feelings	Express thoughts, ideas and feelings and encourages others to contribute	Express thoughts, ideas and feelings

Being assertive

- State the problem; make it about the situation/behavior and not about the person -**
It is harder for people to get defensive about what you are saying when you stick to the facts and don't include personal judgments. You will increase the likelihood of a positive conversation by separating the person from their behavior. For example "You're always late and clearly don't care" can be changed to "I've noticed that you were over 20 minutes late the last couple times we got together".
- I think you should use "I" Statements -** Practice using I statements to communicate your thoughts, feelings, and needs (e.g. "I feel happy" or "I want to try it this way"). I statements are typically clear. Taking responsibility for what you are feeling is honest and underlines the personal importance of your statements. Owning how you feel can also decrease anxiety.
- Get to the point -** Be clear and concise about what you want. Make sure requests are simple and specific; this will help others understand your request. Don't leave an opportunity for the other person to say no by using too tentative language when asking for what you want. For example, say "Will you please...?" instead of "Would you mind...?", and avoid the words if, maybe, perhaps and but.
- Aim for a win-win situation -** Being assertive is about initiating a dialogue between two people. Sometimes being assertive gets you what you want, other times it leads to compromise with mutual benefit. But that's better than getting none of what you want every day of the week.
- Don't dominate the conversation -** Once you have shared your needs, invite the other person to comment, add their ideas, and ask questions. Now you have a conversation! Remember to listen carefully so you can keep the dialogue going. Without inviting feedback, you risk coming across as aggressive or bossy.
- Empathize -** Empathy is about expressing genuine interest in what someone else is saying. By showing that you are trying to understand where someone else is coming from, you are increasing the likelihood that they will respond in kind. Empathy can also be disarming; empathy makes it difficult for others to stay defensive. When we don't have our guard up we can more easily reflect on a situation.
- Watch your body language -** Be aware of your non-verbal communication: face the person you are speaking with straight on, maintain eye contact, keep an open posture (i.e. don't cross your arms), keep your voice calm and your volume normal.

Adapted from Stein, S. J. & Book, H.E. (2006). *The EQi Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*.
Mississauga: John Wiley & Sons Canada. Ltd.



- **Practice makes perfect** - Until you are comfortable being assertive it helps to plan out what you are going to say in advance of a conversation. You can also anticipate the response of others. Rehearse these skills at home, and first practice using assertive communication with friends and family whom you trust.
- **Visit a success coach.** If you would like more information on how to incorporate these strategies into your study routine visit a success coach. To book an appointment, visit the student success office (2nd floor of south campus hall) or call 519-888-4567 ext. 84410.

Difficult situations

- **Responding to criticism.** Criticism is often misunderstood. Evaluate someone's criticism before selecting your preferred response, which may or may not be agreeing with them. If you are confused by the comment, you have the right to ask for more information, or question it. Try and respond to what was said by the other person, and not their tone. If you try and identify the behavior they are criticizing, rather than take it personally you will have an easier time not getting defensive.
- **Responding when emotional.** It is not recommended to attempt an important conversation when you can feel yourself getting angry or upset. If you can, don't respond immediately. It is fair to ask for a rain check; tell them you are open to speaking about this at another time. This allows you to flip out in private, compose yourself, reflect on what was said in a calm way, and respond in an assertive way in the future.
- **Saying "No".** You have a right to say no without feeling bad for doing so. We often have unhelpful beliefs about why it's bad to say no. If you find yourself having difficulty saying no, think about why this may be the case (e.g. it will seem uncaring or selfish, they may not like me, I will seem rude). Remind yourself that by saying no to something, you are making a choice...saying yes to something else. Prepare how you are going to say no and stick to it.

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