

Assertiveness - Overview

Assertiveness is being able to express opinions, thoughts, and feelings clearly in a non-confrontational way. It is the ability to respect and exert our own rights without denying the rights and personal boundaries of others.



An assertive person has **near-complete control** over his life and he would not let aggressive people take advantage of him.

Characteristics of Assertive People

Assertive people tend to have the following characteristics –

- They are aware of their rights and feel free to exercise them.
- They express their feelings, thoughts, and opinions confidently.
- They know how to manage their anger and yet be rational about it.
- They have the ability to build amicable relationships with other people.
- They believe in friendships where both people have equal rights of opinion.

Example

Assertive people are open to negotiating any proposition without insisting on their version. For example, imagine this situation –

Rajat offers rides to his neighbor Nikhil, who is also his colleague, to office every day. Yet, Nikhil never offers to pay for gas. This makes Rajat feel taken advantage of. While an aggressive person will shout and a passive person will continue to sulk, Rajat – **being an assertive person** – speaks up –

Assertiveness - Four Ways of Behavior

You need to consider the following four ways of behavior when it comes to assertiveness –

Four Ways of Behavior

The Passive Way

People exhibiting passive behavior tend to the needs of others more than their own, as they think they are inferior to others. Passive people may not agree to what others say, but they usually follow others' decisions to avoid confrontation, blame, or responsibility. However, passive people suffer from self-esteem-related issues such as depression, as their needs are always overlooked.

The Aggressive Way

Aggressive people believe in standing up for their rights, even if it comes at the cost of jeopardizing the rights and hurting the feelings of other people. They believe in exerting their own rights, but not in equal rights. They usually get their own way by bullying, intimidating, or being pushy with others. Over a period of time, they suffer from isolation issues, as people are unlikely to stay affectionate with aggressive people for long.

Passive-Aggressive Way

People who exhibit this behavior do it to retain some order of freedom and independence in a strongly imposed-upon environment. This is an indirect way to express hostility by being irrational, unreasonable, and sullen. These people avoid speaking out their real feelings but reveal them in far more sarcastic and hurtful ways.

The Assertive Way

People who are assertive respect their rights, and those of others. They present their viewpoints firmly and confidently, but carefully choose their words to avoid hurting people's feelings and emotions. They know to control their anger and exhibit the most appropriate behavior in any given situation.

Assertiveness - Scales

When people with different thoughts and sensibilities are put in some situation, they exhibit behavior that vary from one to another.

Let us observe four types of people and their different behaviors in those situations –

Scenario 1

Karan is a writer who likes to spend time with himself while writing. Every afternoon, his neighbor – who is a retired senior citizen – drops in for a casual chat. Karan doesn't appreciate this daily intrusion on his privacy. How can he handle this situation?



Passive – (*this is so not happening right now*) Hi Uncle! Come in.



Aggressive – (*time to put an end to this once and for all*) Look. This daily visiting has to stop. It's difficult putting ideas on paper as it is, without you knocking at my door every single day.



Passive-aggressive – (*and here comes the lonely loser...*) Oh, hi! You totally knocked me over with this surprise visit.



Assertive – (*he doesn't know that I'm busy. How do I put it before him?*) As I was saying about that writing assignment of mine- it is challenging and demands a lot of imagination from me. I would appreciate if I could spend some time in the afternoon with myself. We could still meet on the weekends.

Scenario 2

Diya has been waiting in the queue of a subway inquiry post for the last 30 minutes to get the details of a particular train. Just when she is about to be attended to, a guy jumps the queue and requests her to let him put his query across. What would Diya do?



Passive – (*yeah... treat me like the push-over I am*) Hmm... okay.



Aggressive – (*just who does this prince think he is!*) Why do you think I was waiting? Because there were other people. You do the same; it won't hurt.



Passive-aggressive – (*why don't I just offer you a cup of tea too*) Oh, sure. I was just checking the weather.



Assertive – (*he seems to be in a hurry but I have been waiting for long too*) I have been waiting for quite some time too. I won't take very long, I promise.

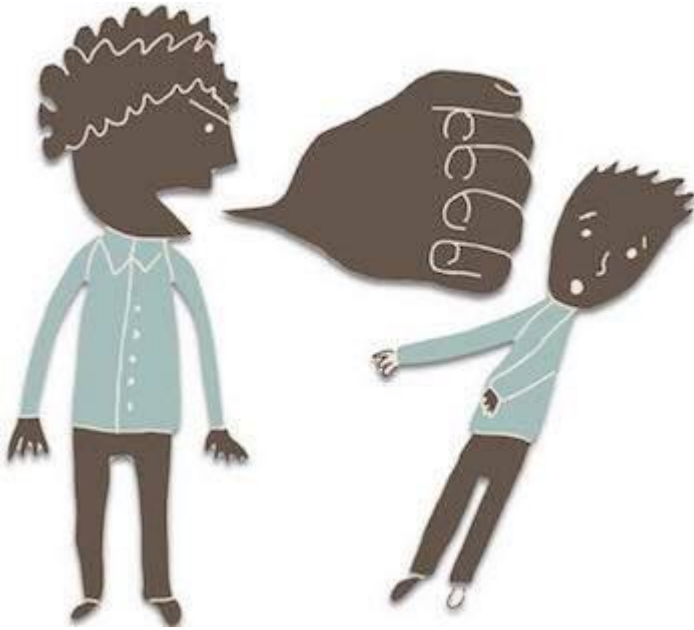
Assertiveness - Assertion & Aggression

People tend to mistake assertiveness as aggression, but there are remarkable differences between the two.

Being Assertive vs. Being Aggressive

Being assertive means you are capable of voicing your thoughts and opinions, and knowing how to seek constructive feedback from others. You know how to handle criticism and opposing views. When you take a decision as an assertive person, it results in a negotiation where the interests of both the parties are honored.

Being aggressive means you exert your rights and blatantly express your needs, but only by humiliating, insulting and degrading others. You might consider that to be motivating others, but it's all about selfishly pursuing your own ambitions without taking others' thoughts and opinions into consideration. It involves pushy, violent, and dominating behavior.



Interestingly, people exhibiting both the behaviors are extremely competitive and goal-oriented. However, an assertive person would take the team along with him on his way forward, whereas the aggressive person would pressurize and exhaust, even step on other people to reach his goal. As a result, assertive people celebrate their success with **everyone participating in it**, as they can see their own success in his. On the contrary, an aggressive person celebrates his success alone.

Assertiveness - Questionnaire

Given below is a list of scenarios. Try imagining yourself in them to see how comfortable you feel in each of the following situations.

Assertiveness Questionnaire

Do you wish to check your own assertiveness? Use this questionnaire by following these guidelines –

- Read the scenario carefully.
- Tick in one of the columns 1, 2, 3, or 4 according to your level of comfort given as follows –
 - 1 – You are very uncomfortable
 - 2 – You are slightly uncomfortable
 - 3 – You are reasonably comfortable
 - 4 – You are very comfortable
- Tally the total ticks in the individual boxes.

If you get more than 5 ticks on 4, you are an assertive person!

DIFFICULT SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4
You can speak up when you didn't get the service you expected in a restaurant.				
When you are angry, you tend to express it.				
You can keep cool when a person criticizes you.				
You can speak in front of a group of people.				
You can tell a person to stop doing something that annoys or bothers you.				
You can request your friend unapologetically to return an item he borrowed.				
You can start a conversation with a stranger.				
You can return a defective item to the shop you bought it from.				
You can ask someone a favor of him.				
You can admit to ignorance on a particular topic.				
You can deal with opposing ideas and constructive criticism.				
You can say 'no' unapologetically to a request someone made to you.				
You express your feelings in front of a friend.				
You can argue with another person for your rights.				

You can refuse a friend a favor when you are not interested.

Assertiveness - Tips

By observing how people communicate with each other or by introspecting how you communicate with people around you, especially in cases of undesired situations, you automatically tend to understand your personality.

Tips for Assertiveness

Here are some simple tips on being assertive –

Use positive posture

Use direct eye-contact, sit straight, and use a firm yet pleasant voice to communicate.

Listen to the question

Listen to what is being asked to you. If you agree to a request without even hearing it, you might end up taking on more work than you had bargained for!

Choose your words

Be clear and precise with your choice of words, so that the other person knows exactly what you mean. At the same time, make sure your words don't come across as too blunt and straight-forward.

Don't say 'Sorry' unnecessarily

Apologizing unnecessarily transfers the power to the other person, as apologizing comes with a guilt of having done something wrong. Others might exploit this guilt to extract favors out of you.

Don't defend unless required

Saying you can't do something need not be something that makes you feel guilty about. Don't make excuses stating why you won't do something.

Hold your fort

People who have been used to listening to 'yes' from you for years might get shocked on seeing you asserting your rights. If they try and push you hard, respond with an equally determined rebuttal.



The broken record technique

Keep using the same rebuttal every time the person repeats his request. For example,

- "Can I borrow your bike from you?"
- "I am sorry but I cannot lend you my bike. I might need it."
- "I'll bring it back as soon as I can. I need it urgently. Aren't you my friend?"
- "Yeah, I am. However, I cannot lend my bike to you."
- "I would do the same for you. You won't miss it for more than an hour."
- "See, I know am your friend but I cannot lend my bike. I might need it."

Don't expect acceptance

If you explain your decision every time you take a stance, you will come across as someone guilty of your actions. Let people adjust to the changes in you, rather than you changing as per their wish.

Accept the consequences

Saying 'no' might be met with displeasure initially, but the trick is to persist being assertive in face of opposition. That will eventually lead the person to change his method of dealing with you.

Assertiveness - Limits

Though being assertive makes your life comfortable to a great extent by guarding you against getting offended, and making people value your opinions sincerely, it has some limitations.

Assertiveness Won't Do?

Let us see practically what assertiveness cannot do.

- Promise happiness.
- Address all of your issues.
- Promise that others will also behave assertively with you always.
- Promise that you will achieve what you desire.

However, you will be subject to internal emotional conflict unless you exercise assertiveness in your life.

Don't set unrealistic barriers

If you let people know of irrational stances that you have taken – like saying that you will quit your job if your salary is not hiked, when everybody knows that you need the job – chances are, people will start treating you without any serious thought.

Don't get assertive in extreme situations

On occasions where there is an immediate danger to life and limb, it's wise to let go of your rights temporarily.

Don't back down

Once you have taken a stance, try your best to stick to your resolution till the last. Remember that people will push you hard when you start taking a stance, and **they will push harder once you give in**, as the message you will be sending is that the next time you oppose something, they should try harder at intimidating you.

Don't get assertive with all at the same time

People are used to you behaving with them in a certain way. Once you start being assertive, the changes in your behavior could surprise, even startle others. It's always wise to start being assertive with one person at a time.

Assertiveness - Dealing With Anger

People, by their own experience, know the unwelcoming effects of anger on their physical and emotional stability, and the unexpected consequences of them being angry in some situations. Still, some people find it hard to control their anger.

Dealing with Anger

Plan before preaching

Before discussing anything sensitive topic or giving feedback, always be sure of the words that you use are appropriate and well-suited.

Talk to one at a time

Most people find receiving feedback in front of a group of people humiliating. They face too much embarrassment to focus on your message. Try to talk to one person at a time.



Choose your timing

Wait for a suitable time to provide feedback. Remember that feedbacks are given to help a person improve. He needs to be receptive at the time of conversation. Avoid giving feedback when he is stressed, worried, or tired.

Talk to-the-point

The person receiving the feedback must know which exact areas he needs to work on, so be precise in giving the feedback.

Mention the positives too

Techniques like the “**Sandwich Feedback**” where the feedback about negatives is sandwiched between two positive feedbacks ensure a person takes the feedback constructively.

Strengthen the relationship

Assure the person- in case he feels threatened while listening to the feedback- that irrespective of what the feedback is, you both will continue to share a cordial relationship. Learn to say ‘no’ where the other person gets persuasive.

Map To Assertiveness 1

Practice Session 1

Carry a pocket-diary with you and jot down the scenarios you don't feel completely comfortable in, and note how you behaved and handled the situation. Once you are done negotiating with that scenario, take some time off and try to find out what could have been a better response.

1.

2.

3.

4.

Map To Assertiveness 2

Practice Session2

Read the following situations. Think what would be the best way to deal with them

-

- **Your boss** approaches you at your desk late in the evening, just when you were leaving, and asks you to stay back late that evening and help him in filing an important report

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- **Your best friend** asks you to write her an application for Sick Leave that she can produce in front of her supervisor. You are very busy with your work.

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- **Your colleagues**, with similar experience levels, are getting paid higher than you. You have got a promotion but there was no raise in your salary. You decide to have a word with your boss about this.
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- **Your friend** and you purchased a blender but on reaching home and trying it for the first time, you find that it doesn't work. You return to the shop and ask for a replacement but the salesperson won't listen.

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