

# Asserting Yourself

There are many reasons why you may find it difficult to be more assertive. The way you communicate with others is usually established when you are young. Parents, siblings, teachers and other significant relationships can all have an impact on your ability to be assertive. Culture and gender also play an important role.

Assertiveness is an alternative to passive, manipulative or aggressive behavior. It is a type of communication that expresses needs, feelings and preferences in a way that respects both you and the other person. It involves stating clearly what you would like to happen but not demanding that it does.

## Types of Communication

**Aggressive** behavior involves expressing your feelings, needs and ideas at the expense of others—for example, by being sarcastic, blaming or dismissive of other people’s opinions. This may provide a temporary sense of power or control, but in time this behavior can distance you from others and lead to you feeling isolated.

**Passive** behavior avoids expressing your feelings and needs openly. You may ignore your own rights and allow others to infringe on them. The benefit of behaving passively is that you avoid conflict but at great cost because you rarely get what you want. Over time, this can contribute to low self-confidence and low self-esteem.

**Passive-aggressive** behavior means you will usually be indirect or unclear about what you think or feel. This can leave the other person feeling confused. You may find yourself expressing feelings of victimhood or martyrdom to make the other person feel guilty. Passive-aggressive communication can avoid rejection and hurt but can also leave you feeling emotionally low, isolated and resented by others for not being clear in your communication.

**Assertive** behavior aims to be honest, direct, clear, expressive, persistent and respectful. You achieve what you want some of the time, but when you don’t, you can still feel good about yourself because you have expressed your needs and wants clearly and honestly. Assertiveness builds confidence, self-esteem and self-respect. One of the downsides of being assertive is that you may meet conflict or confrontation so you may need to develop new ways of dealing with these.

## Becoming More Assertive

### *Express Your Feelings*

- Own your feelings and practice “I” statements such as “I feel upset,” or “I feel happy.”
- State your feelings in a clear and direct manner.
- If it seems appropriate, reflect back the other person’s feelings: “It sounds like you feel disappointed about...”

### *Try “Two Track” Listening*

- Focus on feelings—your own and the other person’s.
- Stay with both tracks—the other’s feelings and your own—but try to distinguish whose feelings are whose.
- Empathize with the other person but not at the expense of losing touch with your own experience. See these “hooks” as invitations which you can choose to refuse.

### *Describe Behavior*

- Focus on the specific behavior not the whole person.
- Avoid labels or “always” statements such as “You are always...”
- Describe the action and not the motive.

### *Be Specific*

- Be clear and specific about what you would like.
- Request a small change and only one or two at a time.
- Consider if the other person can realistically meet your request.

### **Saying “No”**

Many people find saying “no” difficult. It is useful to remember that when you say no, you are refusing a request not rejecting the person. You have the right to say no to unreasonable requests or to something you do not want to do. The key to saying no is to keep the reply short. Simply say:

“No thank you.”  
“I’ve decided not to.”  
“I don’t want to.”

You do not need to apologize excessively or give a long, detailed justification. In some circumstances, you may feel a brief apology is appropriate, but only say it once. You do not need to keep repeating it. If you want to explain your reasons for saying no that’s fine, but keep them brief.

You should not feel pressured into offering a compromise, but the ability to do so when appropriate is a useful skill.

### Example:

You and your lab partner are under pressure to finish an experiment by 6.00 p.m. It is not going well. Your partner tells you that s/he is leaving because s/he has other work to do and asks you to finish the experiment alone. You are not happy about this.

An assertive response might include some of the following:

- “I’m unhappy about your decision to leave early.” (Express feelings)
- “I appreciate that you’re worried because you have other work to do.” (Two track listening)
- “I feel let down that you’re leaving now when we agreed to do this together.” (Express feelings)
- “I’d like you to stay and work with me until the time we agreed to finish.” (Specify change)