

# Assertiveness Skills



## What is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is the ability to state positively and constructively your rights or needs without violating the rights of others. When you use direct, open, and honest communication in relationships to meet your personal needs, you feel more confident, gain respect from others, and live a happier, fulfilled life.

## Benefits of Assertiveness

Acting assertive helps maintain honesty in relationships, allows you to feel more in control of your world, and improves your ability to make decisions.

## Roadblocks to Assertiveness

Fear that you will harm others, or that you will experience rejection and feel shame may prevent you from acting assertive. This is based upon a belief that other people's needs, opinions, and judgments are more important than your own. Believing assertiveness hurts another person can keep you from meeting your legitimate physical and emotional needs. As a result, you feel hurt, anxious, and angry about life.

Lessons learned from parents or caregivers contribute to your beliefs about the legitimacy of your personal rights. This can cause you to act passively to conform to these beliefs. A few examples include the right to decide how to lead your life, the right to pursue goals and dreams, the right to a valid opinion, the right to say how you want to be treated, the right to say "no", the right to change your mind, the right to privacy, the right to ask for help, and many more. Acting to assert any of these rights leads many people to think they are acting selfish.

## Is Assertiveness Selfish?

Selfish means being concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself. This is not assertiveness. Being assertive does not dismiss or ignore the needs of others. Assertiveness focuses legitimate or important needs.

## Is Assertiveness Aggressive?

Assertiveness is not aggression. Aggressive means that you express your rights at the expense of another or forcibly deny the rights of others. If you struggle with being assertive, you may have mislabeled assertive behavior by others as aggressive. This may help you feel justified about not being assertive. However, believing assertiveness is aggressive can prevent you from taking steps to improve your assertiveness skills.

## Practice Makes Better

Recognizing what causes your lack of assertiveness is helpful, but committing to change is more important. Practicing assertiveness skills help you confront old ways of thinking, help you become more naturally assertive, and are self-reinforcing. Keeping track of your progress is helpful. Be patient. In the beginning you won't be assertive at every opportunity. And you might be assertive in some situations where it isn't necessary. It's all part of the process of growing to be more assertive. Notice the general trend of your success. And give yourself a pat on the back as things change.

## Simple Assertiveness Formula

Each time an opportunity occurs to be assertive make notes in a small notebook. Consider keeping it in your pocket or purse.

Record: (1) the specific event that called for an assertiveness response; (2) what personal right was involved (i.e., the right to say "no"); (3) how you responded. What did you say? (4) What you did well in this situation; and (5) reminders to yourself about what you will do next time to be assertive if this situation is repeated.

## A Few Assertiveness Tips

Assertiveness frequently means using "I statements" combined with a word that describes "what" you want. For example, "I want", "I need", "I would prefer", "I do not like", "I am upset about", etc. Be careful not to minimize such statements by couching them with questions that subordinate your needs. Example: "I don't want to go to the store with you – do you mind?" or "I'm tired, can you do the dishes tonight—is that okay with you?"

## What EAP Can Do

Being assertive isn't easy for everybody. You may have a personal history or childhood experiences that serve as strong roadblocks to the changes you want to make. The EAP can provide professional counseling assistance to help you make faster progress in being assertive.