

## **Being Assertive in a Diverse World**

Do you want to feel more confident in expressing your opinions—to be able to “hold your own” in an argument or class discussion? Do you want to be able to express your feelings (whether positive or negative) in a genuine fashion? Or do you want to limit your tendency to lose control and get angry at those who may not deserve it? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you may benefit from reading this brochure and learning how to become more assertive.

### **What is Assertiveness?**

Assertiveness is the ability to express yourself openly and honestly while also reflecting a genuine concern for others. It is about having the confidence to be yourself, to be true to your values and beliefs, and to be courageous enough to speak up when needed. Acting assertively can increase your chances for honest relationships, help you to feel better about yourself, and give you a sense of control in everyday situations. However, asserting yourself will not necessarily guarantee you happiness or fair treatment by others. Just because you assert yourself does not mean you will always get what you want.

Nonetheless, by developing an ability to express yourself, you may be able to reduce your stress, increase your feelings of self-worth, improve your decision-making abilities, and feel more self-confident in relationships.

When confronted with difficult situations, people can sometimes respond passively or aggressively. Passive people tend to be distrustful of their own thoughts and feelings. Therefore, they often think about appropriate “comebacks” or “what I should have said” long after the situation has ended. This person often feels inhibited, anxious, and allows others to depreciate their value. Other individuals may respond aggressively to difficult situations. Aggressive individuals express their rights but often at the expense, degradation, or humiliation of others. Consequently, the aggressive person may get what they want, but they may lose the respect of others in the process. Assertiveness falls in between these two responses. And if being assertive does not come naturally, it can feel like being between a rock and a hard place, or what has been bluntly described as “a middle ground between being a bully and a doormat” (Barnette, 2000). We hope that this brochure demonstrates some of the subtleties and nuances of acting in an assertive manner.

This brochure focuses on assertive communication that allows you to express your wishes, thoughts, and feelings in ways that show respect for the others’ wishes, thoughts and feelings. It also addresses potential barriers to being assertive and how assertiveness may look different across cultures.

### **Components of Assertive Behavior**

There are several important aspects that contribute to assertiveness – it involves not only what you say but also how you say it. Keep in mind that there are cultural variations in what is considered appropriate for assertive communication. Many of the components listed below are embedded in a Western context, where self-assertion is considered

valuable in developing more direct and open communication and a greater sense of equality in relationships. We list some cultural considerations in the sections that follow.

### What To Say

There are ways to express the content of your message such that the other individual will be more likely to hear you. Express yourself and your feelings, and take responsibility for them rather than labeling or blaming the other person. You do not need to put someone else down to express yourself. Remember that assertiveness includes the expression of affection as well as feelings of anger or frustration. Specifically:

1. **Be as specific and clear as possible about what you want, think, and feel.** Vague or tentative statements will likely lead to misinterpretation. The following statements project this preciseness:

“I feel...”

“I don’t want to...”

“I have mixed reactions. I agree with these aspects for these reasons, but am distressed about these aspects for these reasons.”

2. **“Own” your message.** Acknowledge that your message comes from your frame of reference and your perceptions. You can acknowledge ownership with personalized (“I”) statements such as “I don’t agree with you” (as compared to “You’re wrong”). Blaming statements such as this, rather than a statement of ownership, will likely foster resentment and resistance rather than understanding and cooperation.

3. **Ask for feedback and then listen carefully to the other person.** “Am I being clear?” Does that make sense? How do you see this situation? What do you want to do?” Asking for feedback can make it clear to the other person that you are expressing an opinion, feeling, or desire rather than a demand. Listening to their feedback and engaging in a discussion can correct any misperceptions either of you have. Encourage others to be clear, direct, and specific in their feedback to you.

### How to Say It

1. **Eye Contact:** Looking directly but comfortably at the person to whom you’re speaking helps communicate your sincerity and interest. Looking away or staring too intently can be uncomfortable for the other person.

2. **Body Posture:** Turning towards an individual feels much more personal than turning away or to the side. A slumped, passive stance makes it difficult to stand up for oneself – both literally and figuratively.

3. **Physical Contact and Distance:** Closeness is a nonverbal form of communication that varies greatly across cultures. In western cultures, standing or sitting closely or touching suggests intimacy in a relationship (unless you are in a crowded space). Being too close or too far away may offend someone and have an impact on his or her ability to listen openly to you.

4. **Facial Expression and Gestures:** Your expression should match your message. When you are angry, the most effective way is to deliver your message with a straight, non-

smiling facial expression, not with a big smile and jovial gestures.

5. **Voice:** A level, even tone of voice is both clear and convincing without being intimidating or ignorable. Consider your tone, inflection, and volume when speaking.

6. **Timing:** Generally, the best practice is to respond in the moment. It will allow you to focus on your feelings at the time. However, it is never too late to return to a person at a later time to share your feelings about an interaction.

7. **Listening:** Actively listening and attending to another person is a reflection of assertive listening. It reflects a commitment to understanding and respect for another individual's needs and wishes. It may mean that you avoid expressing yourself right away so that you can fully listen.

### **Cultural Variations in Assertiveness**

The components of assertive behavior listed in this brochure are provided to facilitate appropriately assertive communication in a Western-based cultural setting. And while we hope these tips will enhance your assertiveness while living, socializing, and communicating in U.S. culture, we recognize that there are important variations in interpersonal communication across cultures that impact the “what” and “how” of being assertive. For example, traditional Asian cultures value subtlety and indirectness in communication. More direct or confrontational styles may be viewed as disrespectful and lacking in finesse.

Nonverbals, an important aspect of communication, may also vary. For instance, individuals from Latino, African/African American, Arab, South American, or French backgrounds may tend to stand much closer together when conversing than do European Americans. In terms of facial expressions, while demonstrating congruence between your inner feelings and outward expressions is generally helpful, it is important to consider that in some cultures (e.g., Japanese and Chinese), restraint of strong emotions such as anger and sadness is considered to be a sign of wisdom and maturity. Tone of voice, too, can show considerable variation. Many European Americans tend to speak more loudly and charismatically than people from Asian countries but may be considered soft-spoken compared to Arabs. Finally, behaviors used to show that one is listening may also vary by culture. African Americans may not always look at their conversation partner, nod their head, or say “uh huh” to indicate that they are listening. The “take-home” message is that what is considered appropriately assertive can vary by culture. Be thoughtful about how your own cultural background and those of others may play a role.

### **Barriers to Assertiveness**

Many people struggle to develop assertiveness because they believe that they do not have the right to be assertive, lack the skills to express themselves effectively, or feel highly anxious or fearful about asserting themselves. They may also struggle due to social and cultural factors. Since assertiveness tends to require a sense of safety and belonging, individuals who feel different or that they cannot be themselves, may be less apt to act in an assertive manner. In other words, when people are afraid or uncomfortable, they often hold back. For instance, individuals who are a member of a cultural minority group

(whether ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation) may fear being judged or rejected and thus keep their views or other important parts of themselves hidden. Women, for example, are not taught to directly communicate their wants and needs the same way that men are. And when they do communicate their needs, they are more likely to be viewed as aggressive rather than assertive. Assertiveness thus extends beyond individual skills and into the community. Ultimately, being assertive is about creating an open and accepting environment that welcomes a diversity of styles and perspectives, thereby enabling others to live and act in an authentic, assertive manner.

### **Examples of an Assertive Student**

*Scenario 1:* Your roommate is driving you up a wall—she never cleans up her messes, she uses your things without asking, and often has her boyfriend over without asking you first. What do you do? Instead of shooting her dirty looks (that don't seem to work) or complaining endlessly to your parents and friends, try talking with her in an assertive manner. Consider the following possibilities:

**Passive response:** Say nothing, but get upset when you clean up her messes.

**Aggressive response:** “You're such a rude person to leave your filthy clothes and dishes all over the place! I wish I had a single room.”

**Assertive response:** “I was hoping we could talk about keeping our room clean. I get frustrated when you don't do your dishes. Maybe we could come up with a reasonable solution together.”

*Scenario 2:* The partner you have been assigned for a group project is frequently late to meetings and doesn't seem to do his share of the work. He just showed up 15 minutes late for your meeting at the library. What do you do?

**Passive response:** “Hi, let me show you what I've been working on so far” [while inside you're thinking: once again, I'm doing all the work!].

**Aggressive response:** “Late again?! I wish I hadn't gotten paired with someone so irresponsible.”

**Assertive response:** “Before we start, I'd like to talk to you about our meetings. I have been irritated when we don't start on time. We were supposed to meet at 8:30 and now it's 9:00. Can we discuss this, so that we can work well together?”

### **Learning to Become More Assertive**

As you learn to become more assertive, it may be helpful to work with a therapist, friend, or family member whom you trust. Remember to use your assertive skills selectively. It takes time and practice, as well as a willingness to accept yourself as you make mistakes, to reach the goal of acting assertively. It can be helpful to keep a special notebook and log entries including self-examination, readings, goals, etc., as well as the situations, people, attitudes, behaviors, and obstacles you encounter as you practice expressing yourself. Observe your own behavior, keep track of your progress, and set realistic goals. As you practice your techniques, it is often helpful to have accepting relationships and a supportive environment. People who understand and care about you are your strongest

assets. Once again, becoming assertive is a process that unfolds over time, and practice and patience will help you on your journey to become more assertive.

### **Additional Resources**

Alberti, R. E., & Emmons, M. L. (2008). *Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Living* (9th ed.). Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, Inc.

Barnette, V. (2000, September). *Assertive Communication*. Retrieved June 3, 2008, from The University of Iowa University Counseling Service Web site: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~ucs/asertcom.html>

Bishop, S. (2006). *Develop Your Assertiveness* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Kogan Page Publishers.

Dryden, W. & Constantinou, D. (2005). *Assertiveness Step by Step*. London: Sheldon Press.

McClure, J. S. (2003). *Communication with Backbone...Not Bite*. Denver: Albion Street Press.

Paterson, R. J. (2000). *The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

Townend, A. (2007). *Assertiveness and Diversity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

From University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Counseling Center website