

# Be assertive the right way



THE DOCTOR IS IN  
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This column is dedicated to the many healthcare providers who face the risk of aggressive behavior on a daily basis.

People often confuse assertiveness and aggressiveness. They are not the same. The former is good, but the latter, tinged with anger, will usually not leave you or the recipient feeling good.

Today, as people are working on redefining what they want their lives to look like, who they are, and how they'd like to be seen by others, these three "a" words assume even greater importance.

I've written frequently about the increase in stress and anxiety that I've witnessed in the office as people attempt to return to a new normal. Being assertive and working at having your needs met can help alleviate your stress and enhance your relationships.

When someone asks for a favor from you that you would have difficulty doing, yet you find it difficult to say no, communicating this positively and not acting out will benefit everyone.

How comfortable are you when you must ask for a favor? Do you ever feel angry and have a hard time expressing yourself appropriately?

How do you respond when interrupted by someone offering advice or when someone cuts in front of you? What about when you're asked a question that you aren't prepared to answer?

Ever buy something at a store and want to return it? What if you aren't happy with your food at a restaurant?

While these scenarios can make you angry and anxious, your best response may be an assertive one. You may opt to respond passively, sometimes aggressively; but how you assert yourself and have your needs met will help you feel better.

While people have the right to make a request of you, you have the option of saying no. You are not rejecting the person who is asking you for something, but simply stating that you are unable (for whatever reason) to do what they have requested.

You don't owe anyone an explanation, need to make an excuse, apologize profusely, or feel guilty about turning someone or something down.

This is often where self-doubt comes in, but if you respond directly, without attacking, blaming or making an excuse, you are being appropriately assertive. You are allowed to have broad shoulders, but you don't need to take on issues that are not yours to take on, unless you choose to take them on.

You also have a right to appropriately and honestly express your opinions, feelings and beliefs and to have your needs met – and to feel good about it!

If you attack the person making the request – well, you may be seen as aggressive. If you are afraid to speak up, catch yourself making excuses and end by reluctantly acceding to the request even when you don't want to, you're probably being passive or nonassertive.

By being passive and not openly and honestly expressing your feelings, you may fail to get your own needs met.

We Israelis, while often responding assertively, may be inadvertently seen as aggressive because of our tone of voice or our expressions. For example, "Why can't you do that?" doesn't sound nearly as nice as "Could you please do this?" In addition, we are sadly often rushed and do not take the time for simple pleasantries. This is the perfect formula for our being seen as brusquer and more aggressive than intended.

It is important to remember that it is okay to say, "I will have to... think about that," "...check my calendar," "...talk to my partner" and so on. One of the nice ways to be assertive is to give yourself the choice with respect to time. You don't have to feel pressured to respond immediately or to be coaxed into changing your mind.

If you find yourself making many excuses and practically begging when you must ask a favor of someone else, remind yourself that you don't need a reason to make a request. They too, like you, have the right to refuse.

Remember to say what you mean and mean what you say. People cannot read your mind, and if you are direct, honest, respectful and nice, they will often agree to help out – especially if they feel that you appreciate it. In general, people like to do nice things for others. You just have to ask.



AGGRESSIVENESS DOES not leave you or the recipient feeling good. (Keystone/Getty Images)

LET'S LOOK at another scenario. Perhaps you are angry and upset, and want to let the person you are angry with know it. You may need to walk away for a brief period, to cool down before responding, and then state the issue directly and in a calm and non-accusatory voice. You'll be more likely to be heard. Use "I" statements, as they effectively help focus the listener. State the situation and the result, how you feel, and provide an appropriate alternative suggestion.

You may think that by acting assertively, you'll be thought of as rude or impolite. Let's say that you are invited to someone's house for dinner, you are dieting, and you are offered second helpings or a dessert that you would rather not have. It is okay to refuse. We often are impressed when we see that someone else has the willpower and determination to say "no," yet we set different standards for ourselves, thinking we are rude if we were to act the same way.

Many people try to avoid conflict at any cost. They would rather give in, agree, and keep the peace, in an endeavor to reduce their immediate anxiety. Ultimately, they will have more difficulty being assertive in the future and feel less good

about themselves, as they feel resentful and hurt.

Others feel that they do not have the right or deserve to have their needs met – that by being assertive they will be seen as selfish or will lose the respect and approval of others. Often envious of their friends who act assertively, they see their friends as having a different set of rules. This is very damaging to one's self-esteem. Imagine the reverse, of keeping silent or responding passively for so long that when you do respond, you feel such pent-up anger and so violated that the cork pops and you then overreact aggressively.

A close friend and I have an agreement to always be open and honest with each other. It is precisely because we have both been assertive, while being respectful of each other's needs, that we have such a good relationship.

There are times, too, when your own irrational beliefs prevent you from being assertive. For example, if you believe that you must be always loved by everyone, you might be reluctant to express your feelings, for fear of increasing conflict and risking disapproval. In reality, while you may want everyone's approval, you don't need it to be well-liked and function in society. You can choose to change aspects of your behavior that are not appropriate or becoming, but that should not prevent you from being assertive. You do not need to be perfect and competent in everything you do.

Assertiveness includes nonverbal cues as well. To be effective, these signals must agree with the spoken word. For example, when firmly stating what you want, it would be ineffective to look at your feet, stammer and stumble over the correct words, and have body posturing and gestures that weaken the strength of the important message you hope to convey.

Other helpful techniques include listening to the messages that you may tell yourself. Negative thoughts such as "I can never diet" or "I am a failure" need to be replaced with more positive ones, such as "I can try to stick to my diet for today" or "I will watch what I eat all week."

You can practice or rehearse what you would like to say or do. Imagine, for example, that you are at the buffet table at an event and practice making healthy food choices. Role-play the conversation where you ask your boss for a raise. Model appropriate behaviors over and over, until they feel like your own.

Being assertive takes lots of practice. It involves standing up for your rights, while also respecting the rights and needs of others.

Remember, being *aggressive* violates the needs and rights of others in an attempt to have your own needs met. At first, when you try being *assertive*, you may catch yourself being *aggressive*, but with time, patience and a little review, you will make it happen. The more you assert yourself, the easier it becomes. With greater self-confidence, you will feel less vulnerable, more secure and emotionally closer in a relationship. That sounds like a goal that is well worth having.

While assertiveness training is not a cure-all for everything, it can help you feel better about yourself at home, at work and with family and friends. That in itself is well worth it. ■

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