Assertiveness Training

In this chapter you will learn to:

* Evaluate your current patterns of communication
* Differentiate between aggressive, passive, and assertive styles of communication
* Examine mistaken traditional assumptions and your assertive rights
* Express your feelings and opinions, set limits, and initiate change
* Use nonverbal assertive communication
* Listen assertively
* Avoid manipulation

BACKGROUND

Andrew Salter (1949) initially described assertiveness as a personality trait. It was thought that some people had it, and some people didn't, just like extroversion or stinginess. But Wolpe (1958) and Lazarus (1966) redefined assertiveness as “expressing personal rights and feelings.” They found that nearly everybody could be assertive in some situations, and yet be totally ineffectual in others. The goal of assertiveness training is to increase the number and variety of situations in which assertive behavior is possible, and decrease occasions of passive collapse or hostile blowup.

You are assertive when you stand up for your rights in such a way that the rights of others are not violated. Beyond just demanding your rights, assertiveness implies that you can: express your personal likes and interests spontaneously; talk about yourself without being self-conscious; accept compliments comfortably; disagree with someone openly; ask for clarification; and you can say no. In short, when you are an assertive person, you can be more relaxed in interpersonal situations.

Some people think that assertiveness training turns nice people into irascible complainers or calculating manipulators. Not so. It's your right to protect yourself when something seems unfair. You are the one who best understands your discomfort levels and your essential needs.
How you interact with people can be a source of major stress. Assertiveness training can reduce that stress by teaching you to stand up for your legitimate rights, without bullying others or allowing them to bully you. You can use assertive communication to reduce conflict and build strong, supportive relationships.

Before reading any further, write down how you would typically respond to the following problem situations:

1. You finish shopping in the market, and after you walk out you discover that the change is three dollars short.
   
   I would:

2. You order a rare steak and it arrives medium-well done.
   
   I would:

3. You’re giving a friend a lift to a meeting. The friend keeps puttering around for half an hour and you realize that you will arrive late for the meeting.
   
   I would:

4. You’ve been looking forward all week to seeing a particular movie, and your companion informs you that he or she wants to see a different movie.
   
   I would:
5. You're relaxing watching TV after a long, hard day. Your spouse pops in, list in hand, and says, “I thought you’d never get here. Quick, go out and pick up these things from the store.”

*I would:

6. While you wait for the clerk to finish with the customer ahead of you, another customer comes in and the clerk starts to wait on him before you.

*I would:

After you have written down what you would do in these problem situations, set your responses aside. They will be put to use shortly.

Investigators such as Jakubowski-Spector (1973) and Alberti and Emmons (1995) have demonstrated that people who show relatively little assertive behavior do not believe that they have a right to their feelings, beliefs, or opinions. In the deepest sense, they reject the idea that we are created equal and are meant to treat each other as equals. As a result, they can't find grounds for objecting to exploitation or mistreatment. Most likely such people learned as children some traditional assumptions that implied their perceptions, opinions, feelings, and wants were less important or less correct than those of others. They grew up doubting themselves and looking to others for validation and guidance.

When you were a child, you didn't have much choice about which traditional assumptions you were taught. Now, however, you have the option of deciding whether to continue behaving according to assumptions that keep you from being an assertive adult. Each of the following mistaken assumptions violates one of your legitimate rights as an adult:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mistaken Traditional Assumptions</th>
<th>Your Legitimate Rights</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. It is selfish to put your needs before others' needs.</td>
<td>You have a right to put yourself first sometimes.</td>
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<td>2. It is shameful to make mistakes. You should have an appropriate response for every occasion.</td>
<td>You have a right to make mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If you can't convince others that your feelings are reasonable, then the feelings must be wrong, or maybe you are going crazy.</td>
<td>You have a right to be the final judge of your feelings and accept them as legitimate.</td>
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<td>4. You should respect the views of others, especially if they are in a position of authority. Keep your differences of opinion to yourself. Listen and learn.</td>
<td>You have a right to have your own opinions and convictions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. You should always try to be logical and consistent.</td>
<td>You have a right to change your mind or decide on a different course of action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. You should be flexible and adjust. Others have good reasons for their actions and it's not polite to question them.</td>
<td>You have a right to protest unfair treatment or criticism.</td>
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<td>7. You should never interrupt people. Asking questions reveals your stupidity to others.</td>
<td>You have a right to interrupt in order to ask for clarification.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Things could get even worse, don't rock the boat.</td>
<td>You have a right to negotiate for change.</td>
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<td>9. You shouldn't take up others' valuable time with your problems.</td>
<td>You have a right to ask for help or emotional support.</td>
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<td>10. People don't want to hear that you feel bad, so keep it to yourself.</td>
<td>You have a right to feel and express pain.</td>
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<td>11. When someone takes the time to give you advice, you should take it very seriously. They are often right.</td>
<td>You have a right to ignore the advice of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mistaken Traditional Assumptions</td>
<td>Your Legitimate Rights</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Knowing that you did something well is its own reward. People don’t like show-offs. Successful people are secretly disliked and envied. Be modest when complimented.</td>
<td>You have a right to receive formal recognition for your work and achievements.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. You should always try to accommodate others. If you don’t, they won’t be there when you need them.</td>
<td>You have a right to say no.</td>
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<td>14. Don’t be antisocial. People will think you don’t like them if you say you’d rather be alone than spend time with them.</td>
<td>You have a right to be alone, even if others would prefer your company.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. You should always have a good reason for what you feel and do.</td>
<td>You have a right not to have to justify yourself to others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. When someone is in trouble, you should help them.</td>
<td>You have a right not to take responsibility for someone else’s problem.</td>
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<td>17. You should be sensitive to the needs and wishes of others, even when they are unable to tell you what they want.</td>
<td>You have a right not to have to anticipate others’ needs and wishes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. It’s always a good policy to stay on people’s good side.</td>
<td>You have a right not to always worry about the goodwill of others.</td>
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</table>
| 19. It’s not nice to put people off.  
If questioned, give an answer.                           | You have a right to choose not to respond to a situation.                 |

As you continue working through this chapter, keep in mind that assertive communication is based on the assumption that you are the best judge of your thoughts, feelings, wants, and behavior. Nobody is better informed than you are regarding how your heredity, history, and current circumstances have shaped you into a unique human being. Therefore, you are the best advocate for expressing your positions on important issues. Because of your uniqueness, there are many times when you differ with significant people in your life. Rather than overpowering the meek or giving in to the aggressive, you have the right to express your position and try to negotiate your differences.
SYMPTOM-RELIEF EFFECTIVENESS

Assertiveness training has been found to be effective in dealing with depression, anger, resentment, and interpersonal anxiety, especially when these symptoms have been brought about by unfair circumstances. As you become more assertive, you begin to lay claim to your right to relax and take better care of yourself.

TIME TO MASTER

Some people master assertiveness skills sufficiently for symptom relief with just a few weeks of practice. For others, several months of step-by-step work are needed to experience significant change.

INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Three Basic Interpersonal Styles

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned, not a personality trait that some are born with and others are not. The first step in assertiveness training is to identify the three basic styles of interpersonal behavior.

- **Aggressive style.** In this style, opinions, feelings, and wants are honestly stated, but at the expense of someone else’s feelings. The underlying message is “I’m superior and right, and you’re inferior and wrong.” The advantage of aggressive behavior is that people often give aggressive individuals what they want in order to get rid of them. The disadvantage is that aggressive individuals make enemies, and people who can’t avoid them entirely may end up behaving dishonestly toward them in order to avoid confrontations.

- **Passive style.** In this style, opinions, feelings, and wants are withheld altogether or expressed indirectly and only in part. The underlying message is “I’m weak and inferior, and you’re powerful and right.” The advantage of passive communication is that it minimizes responsibility for making decisions and the risk of taking a personal stand on an issue. The disadvantages are a sense of impotence, lowered self-esteem, and having to live with the decisions of others.

- **Assertive style.** In this style, you clearly state your opinions, feelings, and wants without violating the rights of others. The underlying assumption is “You and I may have our differences, but we are equally entitled to express ourselves to one another.”
The major advantages include active participation in making important decisions, getting what you want without alienating others, the emotional and intellectual satisfaction of respectfully exchanging feelings and ideas, and high self-esteem.

To test your ability to distinguish interpersonal styles, label person A's behavior in the following scenes as aggressive, passive, or assertive:

SCENE 1
A: Is that a new dent I see in the car?
B: Look, I just got home, it was a wretched day, and I don't want to talk about it now.
A: This is important to me, and we're going to talk about it now.
B: Have a heart.
A: Let's decide now who is going to pay to have it fixed, when, and where.
B: I'll take care of it. Now leave me alone, for heaven's sake!
A's behavior is  □ Aggressive  □ Passive  □ Assertive

SCENE 2
A: You left me by myself at that party ... I really felt abandoned.
B: You were being a party pooper.
A: I didn't know anybody—the least you could have done was introduce me to some of your friends.
B: Listen, you're a grown-up. You can take care of yourself. I'm tired of you nagging to be taken care of all the time.
A: And I'm tired of your inconsiderateness.
B: Okay, I'll stick to you like glue next time.
A's behavior is  □ Aggressive  □ Passive  □ Assertive

SCENE 3
A: Would you mind helping me for a minute with this file?
B: I'm busy with this report. Catch me later.
A: Well, I really hate to bother you, but it’s important.

B: Look, I have a four o’clock deadline.

A: Okay, I understand. I know it’s hard to be interrupted.

A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

SCENE 4

A: I got a letter from Mom this morning. She wants to come and spend two weeks with us. I’d really like to see her.

B: Oh no, not your mother! And right on the heels of your sister. When do we get a little time to ourselves?

A: Well, I do want her to come, but I know you need to spend some time without my relatives underfoot. I’d like to invite her to come in a month, and instead of two weeks, I think one week would be enough. What do you say to that?

B: That’s a big relief to me.

A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

SCENE 5

A: Boy, you’re looking great today!

B: Who do you think you’re kidding? My hair is a fright and my clothes aren’t fit for the Goodwill box.

A: Have it your way.

B: And I feel just as bad as I look today.

A: Right. I’ve got to run now.

A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

SCENE 6

While at a party, A tells her friends how much she appreciates her boyfriend taking her out to good restaurants and to the theater. Her friends criticize her for being such an old-fashioned, unliberated woman.
A: Not so. I don’t make nearly as much at my job as he does at his. I couldn’t afford to take us both out or pay my own way to all the nice places we go. Some traditions make sense, given the economic realities of both of our lives.

A’s behavior is □ Aggressive □ Passive □ Assertive

Now that you have labeled person A’s responses in these scenes as aggressive, passive, or assertive, compare your assessment with ours:

Scene 1. A is aggressive. A’s seemingly innocent question is actually an accusation in disguise. A’s insistence on immediate action with total disregard for B’s state of mind sets up a polarized conflict in which B is likely to withdraw, and feel wrong and defensive.

Scene 2. A is aggressive. The tone is accusing and blaming. B is immediately placed on the defensive and no one wins.

Scene 3. A is passive. A’s timid opening line is followed by complete collapse. The file problem must now be dealt with alone.

Scene 4. A is assertive. The request is specific, nonhostile, and open to negotiation.

Scene 5. A is passive. A allows the compliment to be rebuffed and surrenders to B’s rush of negativity.

Scene 6. A is assertive. She stands up to the prevailing opinion of the group and achieves a clear, nonthreatening statement of her position.

Step 2: The Assertiveness Questionnaire*

The second step in assertiveness training is to identify those situations in which you want to be more effective. Having clarified the three interpersonal styles, now reexamine your responses to the six problem situations presented at the beginning of this chapter. Label your responses as falling primarily in the aggressive, passive, or assertive style. This is a start in objectively analyzing your behavior and finding out where assertiveness training can most help you.

To further refine your assessment of the situations in which you need to be more assertive, complete the following questionnaire. Put a check mark in column A by the items that are applicable to you and then rate those items from 1 to 5 in column B:

1. Comfortable
2. Mildly uncomfortable
3. Moderately uncomfortable
4. Very uncomfortable
5. Unbearably threatening

(Note that the varying degrees of discomfort can be expressed whether your inappropriate reactions are hostile or passive.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEN do I behave nonassertively?</th>
<th>A Check here if the item applies to me</th>
<th>B Rate from 1-5 for discomfort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking for help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stating a difference of opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Receiving and expressing negative feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Receiving and expressing positive feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with someone who refuses to cooperate</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking up about something that annoys me</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking when all eyes are on me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Protesting a rip-off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding to undeserved criticism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making requests of authority figures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiating for something I want</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to take charge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking for cooperation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Proposing an idea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with attempts to make me feel guilty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking for service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for a date or appointment</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
WHO are the people with whom I am nonassertive?

Parents
Fellow workers, classmates
Strangers
Old friends
Spouse or mate
Employer
Relatives
Children
Acquaintances
Salespeople, clerks, hired help
More than two or three people in a group
Other

WHAT do I want that I have been unable to achieve with nonassertive styles?

Approval for things I have done well
To get help with certain tasks
More attention, or time with my mate
To be listened to and understood
To make boring or frustrating situations more satisfying
To not have to be nice all the time
Confidence in speaking up when something is important to me
Greater comfort with strangers, store clerks, mechanics, and so on
Confidence in asking for contact with people I find attractive
To get a new job, ask for interviews, raises, and so on
Comfort with people who supervise me or work under me
To not feel angry and bitter a lot of the time
To overcome a feeling of helplessness and the sense that nothing ever really changes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Check here if the item applies to me</td>
<td>Rate from 1-5 for discomfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To initiate satisfying sexual experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do something totally different and novel</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To have time by myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do things that are fun or relaxing for me</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</table>

**WHY am I hesitant to be assertive?**
If I'm assertive, I am concerned that I might appear to be:
- Selfish
- Imperfect or foolish
- Wrong or crazy
- Disrespectful
- Illogical or inconsistent
- Inflexible
- Stupid
- A troublemaker
- A complainer
- Unappreciative
- A show-off
- Uncooperative
- Uncaring
- Insensitive
- Unfriendly
- Rude
- Weak*
- Other

*Aggressive people worry about being taken advantage of, not getting what they want, and not being obeyed if they are perceived as weak.
Evaluating your responses. Now, examine your answers and analyze them for an overall picture of what types of situations and people threaten you. How does nonassertive behavior contribute to the specific items you checked on the Why list? In constructing your assertiveness program, initially focusing on items you rated as falling into the 2–3 range will be useful. These are the situations that you will find easiest to change. Items that are very uncomfortable or threatening can be tackled later.

If you checked off any of the items on the Why list that address your concerns about appearing in a negative light if you are assertive, review the Mistaken Traditional Assumptions and Your Legitimate Rights from which the items on the Why list were derived. Remember that you are your own best advocate, and that you have a responsibility to take care of yourself even when you don’t have the full approval or support of others.

It’s natural to feel anxious when you are doing something new. With practice, you will feel more comfortable behaving assertively. You may not always get what you want when you are assertive, inasmuch as other people also have the right to disagree and say no, but you are much more likely to achieve your goals when you behave assertively rather than passively or aggressively. Chapter 12, Refuting Irrational Ideas, is another resource that can help you examine unhelpful self-talk that contributes to your discomfort with being assertive.

Step 3: Describing Your Problem Scenes

The third step in assertiveness training, according to Sharon and Gordon Bower (2004), is to describe your problem scenes. Select a mildly to moderately uncomfortable situation that suggests itself from items on the Assertiveness Questionnaire. Write out a description of the scene, being certain to include who the person involved is, when it takes place (time and setting), what bothers you, how you deal with it, your fear of what will take place if you are assertive, and your goal. Always be specific! Generalizations will make it difficult later on to write a script that will make assertive behavior possible in this situation. The following is an example of a poor scene description.

I have a lot of trouble persuading some of my friends to listen to me for a change. They never stop talking, and I never get a word in edgewise. It would be nice for me if I could participate more in the conversation. I feel that I just let them run over me.

Notice that the description doesn’t specify who the particular friends are, when this problem is most likely to occur, how the nonassertive person acts, what fears are involved in being assertive, and a specific goal for increased involvement in the conversation. This scene might be rewritten as follows:
My friend Joan (who), when we meet for a drink after work (when), often goes on and on—nonstop—about her marriage problems (what). I just sit there and try to be interested (how). If I interrupt her, I'm afraid she'll think I just don't care (fear). I'd like to be able to change the subject and talk sometimes about my own life (goal).

Here is a second poor scene description:

A lot of times I want to strike up a conversation with people, but I worry that maybe they don't want to be disturbed. Often I notice someone who seems interesting, but I can't imagine how to get his or her attention.

Once again there is a lack of detail. No clear statement is made as to who these people are, when the experience takes place, how the nonassertive person behaves, or the specific goal. The described scene will become much more useful by including the following elements:

There is an attractive girl (who) who always brings a bag lunch and often sits at my table in the cafeteria (what, where) at lunch (when). I just eat in silence and read my book (how). I would like to start a conversation by asking about her boss, who has a very hard-to-get-along-with reputation (goal), but she looks so intent on her book I'm afraid she will think that I was rude and be annoyed if I interrupt her (fear).

As you write three or four problem scenes, you will likely recall the thoughts and feelings you actually experienced. You might notice, for example, that in each problem scene you shoot yourself down with negative thoughts ("I can't do it ... I'm blowing it again ... boy, do I look stupid"), or you usually feel tense in the stomach and seem to be breathing way up in your chest. Some of the strategies in other chapters of this workbook that will help you cope with distressing habitual thoughts and physical reactions when you act assertively are: Refuting Irrational ideas, Facing Worry and Anxiety, Coping Skills for Anxiety, Anger Inoculation, Applied Relaxation Training, and Breathing (diaphragmatic breathing). This chapter, however, primarily focuses on changing your habitual way of behaving in these problematic interpersonal situations.

Step 4: Your Script for Change

The fourth step in assertiveness training is writing your script for change. A script is a working plan for dealing with the problem scene assertively. There are five elements in a script:

1. **Arrange a time and place to discuss your problem that is convenient for you and for the other person.** For example, "After we have dinner tonight in the living room, I will ask my roommate if she would be willing to talk about keeping the living room tidy. If she doesn't want to do it then, I'll ask her to name a more convenient time." This step
may be excluded when dealing with spontaneous situations in which you choose to be assertive, such as when a person cuts ahead of you in a line of waiting people.

2. Define the problem situation as specifically as possible. This is essential for focusing the discussion. Here is your opportunity to state the facts as you see them and share your opinion and beliefs without attacking the other person. For example: “I notice that your clothes, books, and papers are left out in the living room for days at a time. We live in a small apartment, and when one person doesn’t clean up after herself, the place gets messy fast.”

3. Describe your feelings so that the other person has a better understanding of how important the issue is to you. Once your feelings are expressed, they can often play a major role in helping you get what you want, especially when your opinion differs markedly from that of your listener. If nothing else, the listener may be able to relate to and understand your feelings about an issue even when she or he totally disagrees with your perspective. When you share your feelings, you become less of an adversary.

   There are three useful rules to remember when assertively expressing your feelings:

   a. Do not substitute an opinion for a feeling (“I feel that you’re a lazy, immature slob!”). More accurate feeling statements are “I hate living in a messy house. I resent having to clean up after you in order to have a neat living room.”

   b. Use “I messages” that express your feelings without evaluating or blaming others. Rather than saying “You are inconsiderate” or “You piss me off,” you would say “I’m annoyed and frustrated.”

   c. Use “I messages” to connect the feeling statement with specific behaviors of the other person. For example, “I feel angry and frustrated when you leave your things in the living room for days at a time.” Contrast the clarity of this message with this vague blame statement: “I feel pissed off because you are so inconsiderate.”

4. Express what you want in one or two easy-to-understand sentences. Be specific and firm. Instead of expecting others to read your mind and magically meet your needs, as in the case of the passive individual, clearly state your wishes and needs. Rather than assuming that you are always right and entitled to getting your way, as an aggressive person might, state your wants as preferences, not as commands. For example, “I would like you to not leave clothes, books, and papers in the living room when you are not using them.”

5. Reinforce the other person to give you what you want. The best reinforcement is to describe positive consequences. “We will have a neater living room.... We’ll save money.... We’ll have more time together.... I’ll give you a backrub.... My mother will
stay only one week. . . . I'll be less tired and more fun to be with. . . . I'll be able to get my work in on time. . . . Little Julia will do better in school," and so on.

In some cases, describing positive consequences may be ineffective. If the person you're dealing with seems resistant or if you feel that you're having trouble motivating him or her to cooperate with you, consider describing some negative consequences for failure to cooperate. The most effective negative consequences are descriptions of the alternative way you will take care of yourself if your wishes aren't accommodated.

* If we can't leave on time, I'll have to leave without you. Then you'll have to drive over later by yourself.
* If you can't clean the bathroom, I'll hire someone to do it once a week and add it to your rent.
* If you won't fold and put away your clothes, I'll just leave them in this box. I guess you can sort through it whenever you need something.
* If you keep talking in this loud, attacking way, I'll leave. We can talk again tomorrow.
* If you get drunk at the party, I'm driving home.
* If your check bounces again, we'll have to work on a cash-only basis.
* If you keep talking during the movie, I'm going to ask the manager to come over here and deal with the problem.
* If you can't give me an accurate idea of when you'll be home, I'm not going to cook dinner and keep it warm for you.

Notice that these examples are different from threats. The consequence of noncooperation is that the speaker takes care of his or her interests. The consequences are not designed to hurt, merely to protect the speaker. Threats usually don't work because they make people so angry. If you do make a threat ("You won't go to my sister's wedding? I won't go to your family reunion!"), be sure you are willing and able to back it up before you make the threat. Even then, it will often do more harm than good.

As an example of a script for change, let's say that Jean wants to assert her right to have half an hour every day of uninterrupted peace and quiet while she does her relaxation exercises. Frank often interrupts with questions and attention-getting maneuvers. Jean's script goes like this:

Arrange a time and place to discuss the situation.

I'll ask Frank if he's willing to discuss this problem when he gets home tonight. If he isn't, we'll set a time and place to talk about it in the next day or two.
Define the problem specifically.

At least once, and sometimes more often, I'm interrupted during my relaxation exercises—even though I've shut the door and asked for the time to myself. My concentration is broken and I find that relaxing deeply is harder.

Describe your feelings using "I messages."

I feel angry when my time alone is broken into and I feel frustrated that the exercises are then made more difficult.

Express what you want simply and firmly.

I would like not to be interrupted when my door is closed, except in a dire emergency. As long as it is closed, assume that I am still doing the exercises and want to be alone.

Reinforce the other person to give you what you want.

If I'm not interrupted, I'll come in afterward and chat with you. If I am interrupted, I will take more time to do the exercises.

In the next example, Nick demonstrates how to use the assertive script for change to say no. Nick has felt very reluctant to approach his coworker to tell her he has changed his mind about helping her with her new project. Nick's script is as follows:

Arrange a time and a place to discuss the situation:

I'll send her an e-mail tomorrow morning requesting a time to talk about this problem.

Problem:

Clara, I know that I agreed to help you with your new project, but I have discovered that it's taking much more time than I anticipated. I'm finding that I'm not getting my own work done, and that's going to cause me big problems with my boss.

Feelings:

I feel guilty about changing my mind and letting you down. I'm also feeling pressured and anxious about falling behind in my own work when a deadline is looming.

Wants:

I'm going to have to take myself off your project sometime in the next week. Is Friday too soon?

Reinforcement:

I might be available to help you in a smaller capacity after the end of the fiscal year next month. In the meantime, consider asking Jeff to help you out since he is between projects now.
(Note: Nick doesn’t have to offer a reinforcement to make his withdrawal from the project more acceptable to Clara, but he chooses to because he is willing to help her as long as his own work doesn’t suffer, and he wants to maintain a good working relationship with her.)

Now, here is an example of how you can use a script for change when a situation suddenly presents itself and you want to be assertive. You skip arranging a time. Before you speak, think of a sentence or two to complete the three essential elements of the script for change. Offer a reinforcement, if you like.

Crystal is watching TV in the family room when her little brother comes into the room, grabs the remote, and starts channel surfing. Crystal stifles her first response to call him “an inconsiderate little creep” and wrestle the remote away from him. After thinking about the four basic elements of her script for change, she says:

Lenny, I was watching my favorite program when you came in here and started channel surfing. (Problem)
I’m really annoyed that you turned off the program I was watching without consulting with me first. (Feeling)
I want you to turn back to my program right now. (Want) If you do that, I’ll leave the TV to you for the rest of the evening when my program is over in fifteen minutes. (Positive reinforcement)

Exercise: Read the following script for change, write down what you think is wrong with it, and then rewrite it on the blank Script for Change Form below, based on what you’ve learned about good scripts for change.

For the past two semesters, Julie has wanted to take a night class in ceramics. Each time, her husband had an excuse about why he could not watch the children on the night of the class. Here’s Julie’s script for change:

Arrange a time and a place to discuss the situation:

When Kevin gets home tonight.

Problem:

You’ve made it impossible for me to take my ceramics class for a whole year. I’ve been pushed around for too long.

Feelings:

I’m sick and tired of you being such a selfish, inconsiderate son of a gun.

Request:

You’re just going to have to suffer through babysitting while I take my class.
Reinforcement:

*If you don't like it, you can kiss this marriage good-bye.*

Problems with this script for change:

1. __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________

3. __________________________________________

4. __________________________________________

5. __________________________________________

Compare your ideas with the following problems we found in Julie's script for change:

1. She didn't get an agreement on the time and place for the discussion.

2. She used nonspecific and blaming phrases such as "made it impossible" and "pushed around."

3. She failed to specify exactly what her husband was doing that was a problem.

4. She accused her husband of being a selfish, inconsiderate son of a gun rather than expressing her feelings about his specific undesirable behaviors.

5. She did not specify which nights during the semester she needed her husband to do the child care or how long the semester would last. Instead, she made a very unappealing demand.

6. She threatened negative consequences that she probably would not be willing to carry out.

Now, rewrite Julie's script for change so that she is assertive:
Arrange a time and a place for discussion:
________________________________________
________________________________________

Problem:
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

Feelings:
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

Request:
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

Reinforcement:
________________________________________
________________________________________

Here is an example of how Julie might make her request:

Arrange a time and a place:
I’ll ask Kevin if he would be willing to talk about doing the child care during my ceramics night class after breakfast Saturday morning. If he’s not, I’ll ask him to name a time in the immediate future when he is.

Problem:
I’ve missed two previous ceramics classes because you weren’t available for child care on class night. I’ve waited a year and I would like to enroll this time.

Feelings:
I feel frustrated that I haven’t been able to explore something that really excites me. I also feel hurt and angry when you do other things rather than help me take the class.
Request:

I'd like you to look after the children on Wednesday nights between 6:30 and 9:00. The class starts January 25th and ends June 2nd.

Reinforcement:

If you're willing to do this for me, I'll cook your favorite meatloaf for you on Wednesdays, but if you're not, we'll have the expense of a babysitter.

In the new and improved script for change, the time to talk is agreed upon, the described problem behavior has become specific, the expressed feelings are now nonthreatening "I messages" tied to specific behaviors, and the request is simple and concrete. Julie's reinforcements are realistic and explicit. Note that negative reinforcement is often not necessary, and that positive reinforcement may require no more than the assurance that you will feel good if a certain behavior change is made. Elaborate promises usually can be avoided.

Exercise: Now, you can write your own scripts for change. Make several copies of the blank Script for Change Form so that you can write out different scripts for change.
SCRIPT FOR CHANGE FORM

Arrange a time and a place to discuss the situation (if appropriate):

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Define the problem specifically:

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Describe your feelings using "I messages":

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Express your request simply and firmly:

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Reinforce the other person to give you what you want (if you like):

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
Step 5: Assertive Nonverbal Communication

The fifth step in assertiveness training is to learn to use your body and tone of voice to support your assertive words. Practicing your assertive scripts for change in front of a mirror or with a friend will help you master the following five basic rules:

1. Maintain direct eye contact. Note that it is natural to blink and look away occasionally.
2. Maintain an erect body posture.
3. Speak clearly, calmly, and firmly.
4. Don’t whine or use an apologetic or hostile tone of voice.
5. Use gestures and facial expressions for emphasis that are congruent with what you have to say. Example: Use a serious look rather than a smile when you are saying no to a door-to-door salesperson.

Exercise: Rehearse your written scripts in front of a mirror, using assertive nonverbal communication. Be your own coach: observe what you are doing well and what you might improve next time.

Exercise: Record your rehearsals to further refine your assertive voice.

Exercise: Practice your script with a friend who can play the role of the other person. Afterwards, ask your friend’s opinion on what you did well and what you might do to improve when you express your script for change in real life.

Exercise: Use your script for change in a real-life situation. Afterwards, ask yourself what you did well, and how you could do better if you were to do it again. Did you get the response you wanted from the other person? If you didn’t, give yourself credit for trying to stand up for yourself. Continue to rehearse and then use your scripts for change in real life, adding in new assertiveness skills as you learn them.

Step 6: Assertive Listening

The sixth step of assertiveness training involves learning how to listen. As you practice being assertive in real-life situations, you will find that sometimes you need to deal with an issue that is important to the other person before he or she will be able to focus on what you have to say. This is especially true when what you want directly conflicts with long unspoken and unmet needs of the listener.
The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook

For example, if your spouse responds to your request for change with, "You want an hour of silence when you get home from work? Well, I haven't said this before because you're working so hard, but I'm ready to tear out my hair after spending the entire day with the kids. I have needs too, you know," it might be wise to practice assertive listening at this point.

In listening assertively, you focus your attention on the other person so that you can accurately hear the speaker's opinions, feelings, and wishes. Assertive listening involves three steps:

1. Prepare. Become aware of your feelings and needs. Are you ready to listen? Are you sure that the other person is really ready to speak?

2. Listen and clarify. Give your full attention to the other person; listen to the speaker's perspective, feelings, and wants. If you are uncertain about one of these three elements, ask the speaker to clarify with more information: I'm not quite sure how you view the situation... could you say more about it? How do you feel about this? I don't understand what you want... could you be more specific?

3. Acknowledge. Communicate to the other person that you heard his or her position. For example, you might say, I hear you don't want to take on this new project because you're feeling overwhelmed with your current responsibilities and want to catch up. Another way to acknowledge the other person's feelings is to share your feelings about what has already been said: I'm feeling overwhelmed too, and I feel terrible about having to ask you to do more work.

Assertive listening and assertive expressing go together. Here is a sequence in which both people use assertive listening and expressing skills to solve a problem. John is unhappy about the way Carmen communicates her needs to him.

*John:* Is this a good time to talk about something that's bugging me a little? *(Arrange)*

*Carmen:* Okay.

*John:* Yesterday you told me you were feeling cut off and kind of abandoned by me. *(Problem)* I felt like I was doing something horrible to you. I felt very wrong, but totally confused about what exactly I was doing. *(Feelings)* Rather than making such generalized complaints like that, could you say what I'm not doing that you need, or what I could change? *(Request)* I think I could be a lot more responsive that way. *(Reinforce)*

*Carmen:* What was it you needed more information about? *(Clarify)*

*John:* What you needed me to do, at that moment, to feel closer.
Carmen: Okay, so what you’re saying is that when I talk about my feelings without making any specific requests for change, that leaves you feeling confused and responsible. (Acknowledge)

John: Right.

Carmen: Well, sometimes I’m just telling you how I feel. I don’t know why I feel that way or what to do about it. Telling you is an attempt to open the discussion. (Redefining problem)

John: I see. So you really aren’t sure what I could do at that point. (Acknowledge) How about just saying you aren’t sure and asking what we could do about it together? Making it “we” instead of just me would help a lot on my end. (New request)

Carmen: That sounds right. I like it.

Notice that Carmen clarifies and acknowledges before attempting any further explanation of the problem from her point of view. Then, in a nonblaming way, she explains why she can’t go along with John’s request. John, in turn, acknowledges what Carmen has said. He then uses this new information to make a second proposal that works better for Carmen.

But here’s the rub: You can’t always expect the other person to play by the rules. There are times when you’ll have to both express and listen assertively in the face of defensive or hostile reactions. Consider Hal and Sara’s case:

Sara: I have a problem with the cash projections. Can we talk? (Arrange)

Hal: Whatever.

Sara: Currently you’re only running them out for the next three months, and I can’t see how sales, inventory, and costs are going to interact six to eight months down the line. (Define) I’m getting pretty nervous about the big printing bills because we don’t know if the money will be there. (Describe feeling) Could you run out the cash projection for at least six months? (Express request) I think we’d all breathe easier. (Reinforce)

Hal: Forget it, Sara. There’s no time. I haven’t got the bodies in my department to do stuff like that. Take a Valium and cool out.

Sara: How much extra work would it take? (Clarify)

Hal: Forget it, Sara. (Loudly) Forget it, okay?
Sara: I hear you. You’re overworked and haven’t the staff to take on anything extra. (Acknowledge) But I’m wondering, how many extra hours of work are involved? (Clarify)

Hal: At least twenty. Keep pushing, Sara. I’m up to here with everybody’s demands.

Sara: I hear how stressed you are. (Acknowledge) If once a month I got a twenty-hour bookkeeper from the pool for you, could you handle it? (New request)

Hal: Probably. Let me see the body first, Sara.

In the face of sarcasm and anger, Sara continues to clarify and acknowledge until she understands Hal’s problem. Hostile resistance doesn’t sidetrack her. She keeps working to understand Hal’s stresses and needs so she can make a new, more acceptable proposal.

Exercise: Role-play assertive listening with a friend. Have your friend play the role of a real person in your life who isn’t ready to hear your script because he has issues of his own that are getting in his way. Use assertive listening to help him express his problems, feelings, and wants. Alternatively, write out a dialogue as you imagine it taking place between you (the assertive listener) and the other person (the expreessor).

Exercise: Practice assertive listening in everyday life with or without combining it with a script for change. Be sure the other person wants to express the issue.

Step 7: Arriving at a Workable Compromise

The seventh step of assertiveness training is learning how to arrive at a workable compromise. When two people’s interests are in direct conflict, a fair compromise that totally satisfies both parties is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Instead, look for a workable compromise you both can live with, at least for a while. Although a compromise might emerge naturally in your discussion, sometimes you and the other person might have to make a list of all the alternative solutions you can think of. Cross off the list those that aren’t mutually acceptable. Finally, decide on a compromise you can both live with. This brainstorming process is most effective if you let your imaginations run wild while you are generating ideas. It’s best to agree to review a workable compromise in a specified length of time, such as a month. At that time, you can examine the results of your changed behavior. If you aren’t both sufficiently satisfied, you can renegotiate and fine-tune your compromise.

Typical compromise solutions include the following:

- My way this time, your way next time.
- I get part of what I want and you get part of what you want.
• Meeting halfway.
• If you’ll do _________ for me, I’ll do _________ for you.
• We’ll do this one my way, but we’ll do _________ your way.
• We’ll try my way this time, and if you don’t like it, you can veto it next time.
• We’ll try your way this time, and if I don’t like it, I can veto it next time.
• My way when I’m doing it, your way when you’re doing it.

If you feel resistant to brainstorming and making lists of alternatives, try this simpler approach. When someone doesn’t want to give you what you want, ask for a counterproposal. If the counterproposal isn’t acceptable to you, make a new one of your own. But first do a little assertive listening to uncover the other person’s feelings and needs in the situation. Keep going back and forth with counterproposals until something works for both of you.

A second route to compromise asks this question: What would you need from me to feel okay doing this my way? The answer may surprise you and offer solutions you never thought of.

**Exercise:** Plan how you will use a workable compromise in a situation where you are in conflict with another person. Combine it with your script for change and assertive listening.

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**Step 8: Avoiding Manipulation**

The eighth and final step to becoming an assertive person is learning how to avoid manipulation. Inevitably, you will encounter blocking gambits from those who seek to ignore your assertive requests. The following techniques are proven ways to overcome the standard blocking gambits.

**Broken record:** When you find that you are dealing with someone who won’t take no for an answer or refuses to grant you a reasonable request, you can carefully choose a concise sentence to use as your broken-record statement that you’ll say over and over again. For example, you could say to your insistent four-year-old, “Jeff, I am not going to give you any more candy.” You might say to the aggressive used-car salesman, “I am not going to buy a car today, I’m just looking.” You could say to the uncooperative store clerk, “I want you to give me back my money for this defective radio.” Briefly acknowledge that you have heard the other person’s point, and then calmly repeat your broken-record statement without getting sidetracked by irrelevant issues. “Yes, but… Yes, I know, and my point is… I agree, and… Yes, and as I was saying, … Right, but I’m still not interested.”
Content-to-process shift. Shift the focus of the discussion from the topic to an analysis of what is going on between the two of you. "We're getting off the point now." "We've been derailed into talking about old issues." "I realize I'm doing all the talking. I get the impression you don't feel comfortable talking to me about this right now. Am I right?"

Defusing. Ignore the content of someone's anger, and put off further discussion until she has calmed down. "I can see that you are very upset and angry right now. Let's discuss it later this afternoon."

Assertive delay. Put off a response to a challenging statement until you are calm, have more information, or know exactly how you want to respond. "Yes ... very interesting point.... I'll have to reserve judgment on that.... I need more time to think about the issue.... I don't want to talk about it at this time."

Assertive agreement. Acknowledge criticism you agree with. You don't need to give an explanation unless you wish to. "You're right. I did botch the Sudswell account." "Thanks for pointing out that I was smiling when I was trying to say no to that salesman. No wonder I couldn't get rid of him." "You're right, boss, I am half an hour late ... my car broke down."

Clouding. When someone puts you down as a person, acknowledge something in the criticism you can agree with, and ignore the rest. Agree in part. "You're right. I am late with the report." Agree in the probability. "You may be right that I am often late." Agree in the principle (agreeing with the logic without agreeing with the premise). "If I were late as often as you say, it certainly would be a problem." When clouding, rephrase the critic's words so that you can honestly concur. By giving the appearance of agreeing without promising to change, you soon deplete the critic of any reasons to criticize you.

Assertive inquiry. Invite criticism to find out what is really bothering the other person. "I understand you don't like the way I chaired the meeting last night. What was it about my behavior that bothered you? What is it about me that you feel is pushy? What is it about my speaking out that bothers you?"

Prepare yourself against a number of typical blocking gambits that will be used to attack and derail your assertive requests. Some of the most troublesome blocking gambits include the following:

Laughing it off. Your assertion is responded to with a joke. "Only three weeks late? I've got to work on being less punctual!" Use the content-to-process shift ("Humor is getting us off the point") and/or the broken record ("Yes, but...", "As I was saying...").
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Accusing gambit. You are blamed for causing the problem. "You always cook dinner so late, I'm too tired to do the dishes afterward." Use clouding ("That may be so, but you are still breaking your commitment") or simply disagree ("Eight o'clock is not too late to do the dishes").

The beat-up. Your assertion is responded to with a personal attack. "Who are you to worry about being interrupted—you're the biggest loudmouth around here." The best strategies to use are assertive irony ("Thank you") in conjunction with the broken record or defusing ("I can see you're angry right now; let's talk about it after the meeting").

Delaying gambit. Your assertion is met with "Not now, I'm too tired," or "Another time, maybe." Use the broken record, or insist on setting a specific time when the problem can be discussed.

"Why" gambit. Every assertive statement is blocked with a series of "why" questions, such as, "Why do you feel that way... I still don't know why you don't want to go... why did you change your mind?" The best response is to use the content-to-process shift ("Why isn't the point. The issue is that I'm not willing to go tonight") or the broken record.

Self-pity gambit. Your assertion is met with tears and the covert message that you are being sadistic. Try to keep going through your script using assertive agreement ("I know this is causing you pain, but I need to get this resolved").

Quibbling. The other person wants to argue with you about the legitimacy of what you feel, or the magnitude of the problem, and so forth. Use the content-to-process shift ("We're quibbling now and we've gotten off the main concern") with the assertion of your right to feel the way you do.

Threats. You are threatened with statements such as, "If you keep harping at me like this, you're going to need another boyfriend." Use assertive inquiry ("What is it about my requests that bothers you?") as well as content-to-process shift ("This seems to be a threat") or defusing.

Denial. You are told, "I didn't do that," or "You've really misinterpreted me." Assert what you have observed and experienced, and use clouding ("It may seem that way to you, but I've observed...").

Exercise: Write out at least one example from your life for each type of manipulation listed above. Make up or borrow examples if you need to. Following each example of manipulation, write an assertive response to it.

Exercise: Allow yourself to imagine or role-play with a friend the worst possible response that could be made to your scripts for change that you are most reluctant to express in real life. Become desensitized to the possible "nightmare" response by facing it, and then prepare your countermeasures. When you are ready, follow up by expressing your script in real life.
Exercise: Continue writing out, rehearsing, and expressing your scripts for change in real life on a frequent basis. In time, the writing and rehearsing can be eliminated, except in the most challenging situations. Combine or use separately the other assertiveness skills you learned in this chapter. As with all learned behavior, your assertiveness skills will improve and your confidence will grow with practice.

FURTHER READING


