

STAND UP! STAND PROUD!

Assertiveness



Assertiveness is an important life skill. It gives us the confidence to improve the quality of our communication with others that contributes to our level of happiness. Developing assertive skills means that we can learn and practice behaviors that communicate our rights, opinions, feelings and needs without violating the rights of others.

Why are assertive behaviors important? They provide a mechanism to express your feelings when others try to intimidate you or take advantage of you. In our fast paced society, we often face aggressive behavior from others. A common example is a person who rudely breaks in front of you when you have been waiting to pay for an item in a store. He/she acts indignant when you confront them. "Excuse me but I was in line ahead of you. Please move to the back of the line." You have firmly stated your rights and what you want to happen. If the person ignores you, what do you do? You may claim your rights by not allowing them to take advantage of you while respecting their rights. "I'm sure that you wouldn't want others breaking in front of you. Show me the same respect and move to the end of the line." If you are not offended or in a hurry, there is no harm in letting the aggressive party move ahead knowing that you are in complete control of your decisions. You must be the judge of how you are affected by aggressive behaviors from others.

Behaving assertively consists of an honest and clear statement of the facts and our feelings, needs and opinions about what is happening. You may persist in expressing your feelings by calmly repeating your reasons for calling this person on their violation without your becoming aggressive. You can prepare for a common breach of your rights when someone directs aggressive behavior toward you and, yes, you do need to prepare and practice your responses. Many people have difficulty showing assertive behaviors.



They may be unassertive because they:

- Want to be liked by the aggressive person
- Don't want to make anyone angry
- Don't like confrontation
- Confuse assertive behavior with being selfish
- Think that if you are nice to others, they will (always) be nice to you

Do any of these reasons remind you of your behaviors or those of your friends and acquaintances? You may have been praised as a child for being compliant, agreeable and polite. These are admirable traits under certain conditions but are not very useful against aggressive behaviors from pushy people. There is a high emotional cost to people who consistently lack assertive skills.

These include:

- Loss of self-respect and dignity
- Loss of self-confidence
- Suffering from hurt feelings when disrespected by others
- Losing the respect of others

A consistent lack of assertiveness is evident in the following behaviors:

- Remaining silent in a group for fear of sharing your opinion
- Not asking questions when you don't understand something
- Not speaking up in a confident voice
- Trying to be invisible in a group
- Agreeing with everyone most of the time

What does lack of assertiveness mean to us in our daily lives? It means that you are not taking care of yourself and that you are jeopardizing relationships when you don't set clear and reasonable boundaries. This makes you feel taken advantage of. As a teacher educator in physical education, I observe many teachers in all stages of their careers. Mostly, I work with pre-service teachers who are juniors and seniors in college who are learning to become effective teachers. Certainly, I have seen many non-assertive behaviors. Several examples come to mind. It is common for novice teachers to end sentences by elevating their voices at the end of a sentence as if asking a question and adding the ubiquitous "Okay?" at the end. Examples include, "Boys and girls, can I have your attention, okay? Put your equipment between your feet, okay?" or "Line up quietly, okay?" Just the tone of voice asks for compliance.



For interns who want to be liked by their students, they freely allow requests to visit the water fountain or bathrooms in the middle of class and instantly find themselves losing half of their class. A third example is talking over student noise while giving directions or instructions. It just doesn't work! The first scenario is resolved by practicing a convincing voice tone and setting boundaries. A firm execution of class rules and routines resolve the other examples. Teacher voice tone should not convey anger or impatience since it is the teacher who has failed to hold students accountable. These corrected behaviors are assertive moves that communicate a caring teacher who requires an orderly classroom with a positive learning climate.

Only on rare occasions have I witnessed aggressive teacher actions toward children. Once, I saw aggressive behaviors exhibited by a transient teacher who yelled at kindergarten students and blamed them for wasting class time when, in fact, it was the teacher who was unorganized and seemed not to care enough to use the established rules and routines in place for the class. The children were visibly upset. The lesson was ruined and the children were left confused.

What are some ways that you as a college student can steer away from aggressive or contrite behaviors and move toward assertive ones?

Here are three steps to assertiveness:

1. Actively listen to what the aggressor is saying and show that you hear their point of view. Respect their right to express themselves.
2. Say what you think and what you feel without apology by using "I" statements.
3. State what you want to happen, what outcome you want to see, without apology or aggression in a calm, clear and straightforward way. Your voice tone is critical. Avoid getting angry, assigning blame or showing your temper.

If you don't agree with a request or action, say "No" with direct eye contact and non-defensive body language. If possible, select an appropriate time to be assertive. Your goal is to achieve a win-win situation. Practicing these skills is required along with persistence and calmness. These are winning strategies for successful self-assertion.



Here is a story to illustrate this – it's my casserole story:

My best friend and I were going to visit her cousin in a nearby town for a holiday dinner. My friend had agreed to bring a vegetable casserole, cookies and a pie. The morning that we were to leave, I packed the food that I had brought for the visit and hurried to get suitcases and other items in the car. We had a pleasant drive to the cousin's home where my friend pulled up to the front door of the apartment to drop me off before parking and said, "Be sure to put the casserole in the oven and turn it on." I replied, "Okay, where is it?" and she said in amazement, "Didn't you pack it!" I replied "No, I haven't seen it." At that, she said angrily, "I can't believe that you left the casserole. Now I have to go to the store and get more ingredients!" I replied, "I did not see the casserole and I don't appreciate your tone. You needed to remind me to pack it. I was very busy getting other things packed in the car." At the same time, I got out of the car and grabbed the food cooler and shut the car door. My friend drove away very upset. I entered the house, greeted her cousin and told her what had happened with the casserole and how upset my friend was with me. She immediately said, "Don't buy more ingredients. We have plenty of vegetables already." She quickly called her cousin on the cell phone and told her to forget the casserole and come join the party. After a few minutes my friend arrived and we laughed about the whole event. Now we continue to laugh about the forgotten casserole that was later frozen and served at the next party.

As you can see, all things can end well when we replace our own tendency to respond aggressively to aggressive behaviors directed at us. It also helps to have others around us like the cousin who "doesn't sweat the small stuff."

G. Linda Rikard, Ed.D.

Associate Professor

School of Recreation, Health and Tourism

