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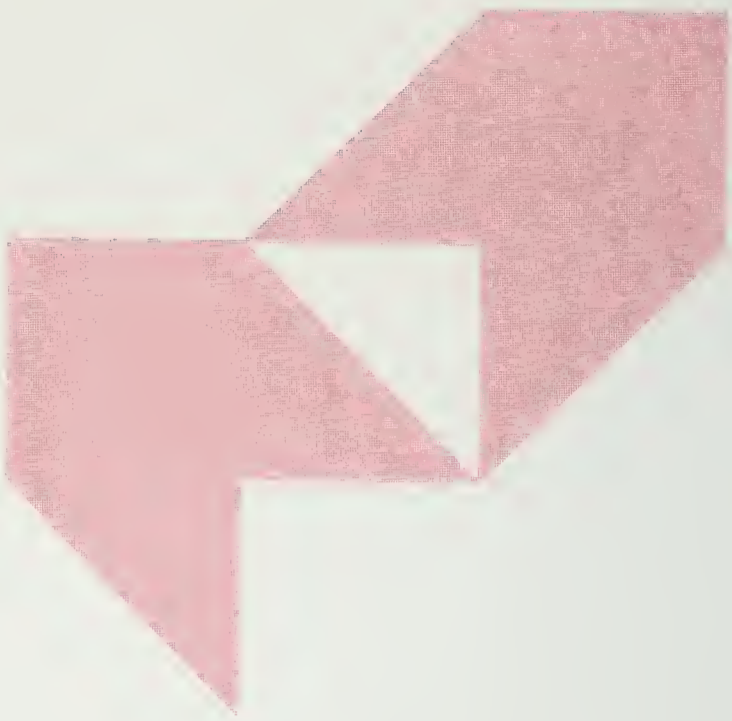
Assertiveness

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Do you often find that others coerce you into thinking their way? Is it difficult for you to express your positive or negative feelings openly and honestly? Do you sometimes lose control and become angry at others who don't warrant it?

A "yes" answer to any of the above questions may be an expression of a common problem known as "lack of assertiveness."

What Is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is the ability to express yourself and your rights without violating the rights of others. It is appropriately direct, open, and honest communication which is self-enhancing and expressive. Acting assertively will allow you to feel self-confident and will generally gain you the respect of your peers and friends. It can increase your chances for honest relationships, and help you to feel better about yourself and your self-control in everyday situations. This in turn, will improve your decision-making ability and possibly your chances of getting what you really want from life.

"Assertiveness basically means the ability to express your thoughts and feelings in a way that clearly states your needs and keeps the lines of communication open with the other" (*The Wellness*

Book, Ryan and Travis). However, before you can comfortably express your needs, you must believe you have a legitimate right to have those needs. Keep in mind that you have the following rights:

- The right to decide how to lead your life. This includes pursuing your own goals and dreams and establishing your own priorities.
- The right to your own values, beliefs, opinions, and emotions — and the right to respect yourself for them, no matter the opinion of others.
- The right not to justify or explain your actions or feelings to others.
- The right to tell others how you wish to be treated.
- The right to express yourself and to say, “No,” “I don’t know,” “I don’t understand,” or even “I don’t care.” You have the right to take the time you need to formulate your ideas before expressing them.
- The right to ask for information or help — without having negative feelings about your needs.
- The right to change your mind, to make mistakes, and to sometimes act illogically — with full understanding and acceptance of the consequences.
- The right to like yourself even though you’re not perfect, and to sometimes do less than you are capable of doing.
- The right to have positive, satisfying relationships within which you feel comfortable and free to express yourself honestly — and the right to change or end relationships if they don’t meet your needs.
- The right to change, enhance, or develop your life in any way you determine.



When you don't believe you have these rights — you may react very passively to circumstances and events in your life. When you allow the needs, opinions, and judgments of others to become more important than your own, you are likely to feel hurt, anxious, and even angry. This kind of passive or nonassertive behavior is often indirect, emotionally dishonest, and self-denying.

Many people feel that attending to their legitimate needs and asserting their rights translates to being selfish. Selfishness means being concerned about only *your* rights, with little or no regard for others. Implicit in your rights is the fact that you are concerned about the legitimate rights of others as well.

Selfishness and Aggressiveness

When you behave selfishly, or in a way that violates the rights of others, you are, in fact, acting in a destructive, aggressive manner — rather than in a constructive, assertive manner. There is a very fine line that divides the two manners of action.

Aggressiveness means that you express your rights but at the expense, degradation, or humiliation of another. It involves being so emotionally or physically forceful that the rights of others are not allowed to surface. Aggressiveness usually results in others becoming angry or vengeful, and as such, it can work against your intentions and cause people to lose respect for you. You may feel self-righteous or superior at a particular time — but after thinking things through, you may feel guilty later.

What Assertiveness Will Not Do

Asserting yourself will not necessarily guarantee you happiness or fair treatment by others, nor will it solve all your personal problems or guarantee that others will be assertive and not aggressive. Just because you assert yourself does not mean you will always get what you want; however, lack of assertiveness is most certainly one of the reasons why conflicts occur in relationships.

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Specific Techniques for Assertiveness

1. Be as specific and clear as possible about what you want, think, feel. The following statements project this preciseness.

“I want to . . .”

“I don’t want you to . . .”

“Would you . . . ?”

“I liked it when you did that.”

“I have a different opinion. I think that . . .”

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

It can be helpful to explain exactly what you mean and exactly what you don’t mean, such as “I don’t want to break up over this, but I’d like to talk it through and see if we can prevent it from happening again.”

2. Be direct. Deliver your message to the person for whom it is intended. If you want to tell Jane something, tell Jane; do not tell everyone *except* Jane; do not tell a group, of which Jane happens to be a member.

3. “Own” your message. Acknowledge that your message comes from *your* frame of reference, *your* conception of good vs. bad or right vs. wrong, *your* perceptions. You can acknowledge ownership with personalized (“I”) statements such as “I don’t agree with you” (as compared to “You’re wrong”) or “I’d like you to mow the lawn” (as compared to “You really should mow the lawn, you know”). Suggesting that someone is wrong or bad and should change for his or her *own* benefit when, in fact, it would please *you* will only foster resentment and resistance rather than understanding and cooperation.

4. Ask for feedback. “Am I being clear? How do you see this situation? What do you want to do?” Asking for feedback can encourage others

to correct any misperceptions you may have as well as help others realize that you are expressing an opinion, feeling, or desire rather than a demand. Encourage others to be clear, direct, and specific in their feedback to you.

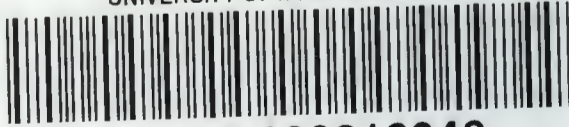
Learning to Become More Assertive

As you learn to become more assertive, remember to use your assertive "skills" selectively. It is not just what you say to someone verbally, but also how you communicate nonverbally, with voice tone, gestures, eye contact, facial expression, and posture that will influence your impact on others. You must remember that it takes time and practice, as well as a willingness to accept yourself as you make mistakes, to reach the goal of acting assertively. 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.

Need Additional Help?

If you are interested in additional specific techniques for becoming more assertive, some excellent references are: *The Assertive Option*, A. Lange and P. Jakubowski, Champaign, Illinois: Research Press, 1978; and *Your Perfect Right*, R. Alberte and M. Emmons, San Luis Obispo, California: Impact, 1970.

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