



From the website:

<http://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/directory/i/improving-assertiveness>

# Assertiveness skills

Being assertive means being confident enough to clearly and effectively express your feelings and opinions, while still valuing those of others. It's important because it impacts directly on the way that you communicate and interact with other people and helps build your self-esteem.

## *Details*

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### ***What is assertive behaviour?***

Assertiveness involves being clear about what you feel, what you need and how it can be achieved. This requires confident, open body language and the ability to communicate calmly without attacking another person. Being assertive involves the following skills.

- Say "yes" when you want to, and say "no" when you mean "no" (rather than agreeing to do something just to please someone else).
- Decide on, and stick to, clear boundaries and be confident to defend your position, even if it provokes conflict.
- Understand how to negotiate if two people want different outcomes.
- Be able to talk openly about yourself and be able to listen to others.
- Be able to give and receive positive and negative feedback.
- Have a positive, optimistic outlook.

Learning to use these skills will help you to express your thoughts and feelings freely, speak up for yourself, know your rights, reason effectively and control your anger.

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### ***Types of behaviour***

When you enter into a discussion or an argument, there are several different ways in which you might behave and react to the situation; these are known as passive, aggressive or assertive behaviours.

## **Passive behaviour**

If you try to avoid any sort of conflict or feel that your views are less important than others, you're being passive. In this situation you may use sarcasm, give in resentfully or remain silent at your own cost.

## **Aggressive behaviour**

Aggressive behaviour often arises when you're angry. You feel the need to get your own way, regardless of other people's feelings or opinions, and, as a result, people stop listening to you. You may bottle up feelings that eventually explode, leaving no room for communication. If you act aggressively you may not listen to others, interrupt other's point of view, make threats or shout and use dramatic words and be hostile.

## **Assertive behaviour**

Being assertive is completely different to being passive or aggressive. Assertiveness involves clear, calm thinking and respectful negotiation within a space where each person is entitled to their opinion.

If you lack assertiveness, it can affect your relationships both personally and professionally. If you act passively or aggressively in situations, over time, it can lead to stress, anxiety or even depression as well as having a negative impact on your physical health too.

By looking carefully at how you communicate with others, you can begin to identify ways in which you can be more assertive and help to improve your quality of life.

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## ***How to improve your assertiveness skills***

With a bit of practice or training, most people can learn how to become more assertive. It's a communication skill that you can improve and get better at using in your everyday life.

## **Body language**

The way in which you hold yourself has an important impact on how you're perceived and treated. Assertive people generally stand upright, but in a relaxed manner, and look people calmly in the eyes.

A good first step to becoming more assertive is to consider your own body language. You can practise being assertive with a friend or in front of a mirror by:

- facing the other person, or yourself, and trying to stay calm
- breathing steadily to keep you calm
- speaking clearly and steadily at a normal volume – don't whisper or raise your voice
- showing that you're listening
- keeping your face relaxed and open

## **Communication**

Clear communication is an important aspect of assertiveness. Some examples are listed below.

- Express your feelings. Try not to generalise your feelings by saying ‘you’ in conversation when you actually mean ‘I’. Also, you should recognise that you have choices and so say ‘I could’ and ‘I might’ instead of ‘I must’ and ‘I should’.
  - Say no. This is often difficult because you don’t want to feel like you’re letting people down, be seen as unhelpful, unable to cope, or you may find the other person intimidating. However, it’s important to remember that you’re allowed to say no. Keep the conversation polite, clear and simple and don’t apologise for saying no.
  - The ‘broken record’ technique. This involves repeating your point over and over again in a calm and firm voice until it’s clear to the other person. It’s particularly useful if you’re explaining something to a manipulative person, or someone who isn’t listening.
  - Listen to the person you’re talking too, treat them with respect and courtesy and try to see their point of view.
  - Accept that conversations won’t always go to plan – if you can recognise this at the time then you can suggest continuing the conversation at another time, or agree to disagree.
  - Practice makes perfect – like any new skill, it will take practice to put some of these assertive behaviours into action.

## **Training**

Try searching on the internet or going to your local library to find out details of assertiveness classes available in your area. Most adult education institutions offer courses in assertiveness training. Always find out how experienced the counsellor or therapist is before you start classes.

Self-help books and resources on the internet can also be helpful if you would rather teach yourself the skills you need.

## **Counselling or psychotherapy**

If you think past experiences are having a negative influence on the way you behave, it may help to talk through these experiences with a trained counsellor. This may bring back painful memories of unpleasant experiences you have had, but it can help you to understand why you act as you do. It will help you to think differently about yourself and to have positive, assertive behaviour.

You may also find [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) useful. CBT involves helping you to overcome unhelpful patterns in the way you think and behave, including aggressive and passive behaviour.

There are several different types of talking therapies available – speak to your GP for more information and advice about which type may be right for you.

# Assertiveness and self-confidence

## *how to help build, boost, and develop self-confidence and assertiveness*

Building self-confidence and assertiveness is probably a lot easier than you think. 'Non-assertive' people (in other words 'normal people') do not generally want to transform into being excessively dominant people. When most people talk about wanting to be more assertive, what they usually really mean is:

- 'How can I become more able to resist the pressure and dominance of excessively dominant people?'
- 'How can I stand up to bullies (or one bully in particular)?'
- And also, 'How can I exert a little more control in situations that are important to me?'

Pure assertiveness - dominance for the sake of being dominant - is not a natural behaviour for most people. Most people are not naturally assertive. Most people tend to be passive by nature. The assertive behaviour of highly dominant people tends to be driven by their personality (and often some insecurity). It is not something that has been 'trained'.

For anyone seeking to increase their own assertiveness it is helpful to understand the typical personality and motivation of excessively dominant people, who incidentally cause the most worry to non-assertive people.

It's helpful also at this point to explain the difference between leadership with dominance: Good leadership is inclusive, developmental, and a force for what is right. Good leadership does not 'dominate' non-assertive people, it includes them and involves them. Dominance as a management style is not good in any circumstances. It is based on short-term rewards and results, mostly for the benefit of the dominant, and it fails completely to make effective use of team-members' abilities and potential.

The fact is that most excessively dominant people are usually bullies. Bullies are deep-down very insecure people. They dominate because they are too insecure to allow other people to have responsibility and influence, and this behaviour is generally conditioned from childhood for one reason or another. The dominant bullying behaviour is effectively reinforced by the response given by 'secure' and 'non-assertive' people to bullying. The bully gets his or her own way. The bullying dominant behaviour is rewarded, and so it persists.

Dominant, bullying people, usually from a very young age, become positively conditioned to bullying behaviour, because in their own terms it works. Their own terms are generally concerned with satisfying their ego and selfish drives to get their own way, to control, to achieve status (often implanted by insecure ambitious parents), to manipulate, make decisions, build empires, to collect material signs of achievement, monetary wealth, and particularly to establish protective mechanisms, such as 'yes-men' followers ('body-guards'), immunity from challenge and interference, scrutiny, judgement, etc. Early childhood experiences play an important part in creating bullies. Bullies are victims as well as aggressors. And although it's a tough challenge for anyone on the receiving end of their behaviour they actually deserve sympathy.

**N.B. Sympathy is not proposed here to be a sole or significant tactic in countering bullying. Rather, sympathy is advocated as a more constructive, stronger, alternative feeling to being fearful or intimidated.**

Non-assertive people do not normally actually aspire to being excessively dominant people, and they certainly don't normally want to become bullies. When most people talk about wanting to be more assertive, what they really mean is 'I'd like to be more able to resist the pressure and dominance of excessively dominant people.' Doing this is not really so hard, and using simple techniques it can even be quite enjoyable and fulfilling.

Importantly, the non-assertive person should understand where they really are - a true starting point: non-assertive behaviour is a sign of strength usually, not weakness, and often it is the most appropriate behaviour for most situations - don't be fooled into thinking that you always have to be more assertive.

Understand where you want to be: what level of assertiveness do you want? Probably to defend yourself, and to control your own choices and destiny (which are relatively easy using the techniques below), not to control others.

For people who are not naturally assertive, it is possible to achieve a perfectly suitable level of assertiveness through certain simple methods and techniques, rather than trying to adopt a generally more assertive personal style (which could be counter-productive and stressful, because it would not be natural). People seeking to be more assertive can dramatically increase their effective influence and strength by using just one or two of these four behaviours prior to, or when confronted by a more dominant character or influence, or prior to and when dealing with a situation in which they would like to exert more control. Here are some simple techniques and methods for developing self-confidence and more assertive behaviour.

### *assertiveness and self-confidence methods and techniques*

1. Know the facts relating to the situation and have the details to hand.
2. Be ready for - anticipate - other people's behaviour and prepare your responses.
3. Prepare and use good open questions.
4. Re-condition and practice your own new reactions to aggression ([posters](#) can help you think and become how you want to be - display positive writings where you will read them often - it's a proven successful technique).
5. Have faith that your own abilities and style will ultimately work if you let them.
6. Feel sympathy for bullies - they actually need it.
7. Read inspirational things that reinforce your faith in proper values and all the good things in your own natural style and self, for example, [Ruiz's The Four Agreements](#), [Kipling's If](#), [Desiderata](#), [Cherie Carter-Scott's 'rules of life'](#), [Wimbrow's The Guy In The Glass](#), etc.

### **know the facts and have them to hand**

Ensure you know all the facts in advance - do some research, and have it on hand ready to produce (and give out copies if necessary). Bullies usually fail to prepare their facts; they dominate through bluster, force and reputation. If you know and can produce facts to support or defend your position it is unlikely that the aggressor will have anything prepared in response. When you know that a situation is going to arise, over which you'd like to have some influence, prepare your facts, do your research, do the sums, get the facts and figures, solicit opinion and views, be able to quote sources; then you will be able to make a firm case, and also dramatically improve your reputation for being someone who is organised and firm.

### **anticipate other people's behaviour and prepare your responses**

Anticipate other people's behaviour and prepare your own responses. Role-play in your mind how things are likely to happen. Prepare your responses according to the different scenarios that you think could unfold. Prepare other

people to support and defend you. Being well prepared will increase your self-confidence and enable you to be assertive about what's important to you.

### **prepare and use good open questions**

Prepare and use good questions to expose flaws in other people's arguments. Asking good questions is the most reliable way of gaining the initiative, and taking the wind out of someone's sails, in any situation. Questions that bullies dislike most are deep, constructive, incisive and probing, especially if the question exposes a lack of thought, preparation, consideration, consultation on their part. For example:

- 'What is your evidence (for what you have said or claimed)?'
- 'Who have you consulted about this?'
- 'How did you go about looking for alternative solutions?'
- 'How have you measured (whatever you say is a problem)?'
- 'How will you measure the true effectiveness of your solution if you implement it?'
- 'What can you say about different solutions that have worked in other situations?'

And don't be fobbed off. Stick to your guns. If the question is avoided or ignored return to it, or re-phrase it (which you can prepare as well).

### **re-condition and practice your own new reactions to aggression**

Re-conditioning your own reaction to dominant people, particularly building your own 'triggered reactions', giving yourself 'thinking time' to prevent yourself being bulldozed, and 'making like a brick wall' in the face of someone else's attempt to dominate you without justification. Try visualising yourself behaving in a firmer manner, saying firmer things, asking firm clear, probing questions, and presenting well-prepared facts and evidence. Practice in your mind saying 'Hold on a minute - I need to consider what you have just said.' Also practice saying 'I'm not sure about that. It's too important to make a snap decision now.' Also 'I can't agree to that at such short notice. Tell me when you really need to know, and I'll get back to you.' There are other ways to help resist bulldozing and bullying. Practice and condition new reactions in yourself to resist, rather than cave in, for fear that someone might shout at you or have a tantrum. If you are worried about your response to being shouted at then practice being shouted at until you realise it really doesn't hurt - it just makes the person doing the shouting look daft. Practice with your most scary friend shouting right in your face for you to 'do as you are told', time after time, and in between each time say calmly (and believe it because it's true) 'You don't frighten me.' Practice it until you can control your response to being shouted at.

### **have faith that your own abilities will ultimately work if you use them**

Non-assertive people have different styles and methods compared to dominant, aggressive people and bullies. Non-assertive people are often extremely strong in areas of process, detail, dependability, reliability, finishing things (that others have started), checking, monitoring, communicating, interpreting and understanding, and working cooperatively with others. These capabilities all have the potential to undo a bully who has no proper justification. Find out what your strengths and style are and use them to defend and support your position. The biggest tantrum is no match for a well organised defence.

### **feel sympathy rather than fear towards bullies**

Re-discover the belief that non-assertive behaviour is actually okay - it's the bullies who are the ones with the problems. Feeling sympathy for someone who threatens you - thereby resisting succumbing to fearful or intimidated

feelings - can help to move you psychologically into the ascendancy, or at least to a position where you can see weaknesses in the bully.

Aggressors and bullies were commonly children who were not loved, or children forced to live out the aspirations of their parents. In many ways all bullies are still children, and as far as your situation permits, seeing them as children can help you find greater strength and resistance. [Transactional Analysis theory](#), and especially the [modern TA concepts](#), are helpful for some people in understanding how this sort of childhood emotional damage affects people, and how specific communications can be planned and used in response to excessive dominance, bullying, temper tantrums, and other threatening behaviours.

N.B. The point above about feeling sympathy for bullies should not be seen as approval or justification for bullying. Neither is sympathy proposed here to be a sole or significant tactic in countering bullying. Rather, sympathy is advocated as a more constructive, stronger, alternative feeling to being fearful or intimidated. People responsible for bullying are the bullies, not the victims. So if you are a bully: get some feedback, get some help, and grow up.

Several tactics are explained above to tackle bullying head-on, as is often very necessary. Additionally in most western world countries, and many others besides, there are now serious laws and processes to protect people from bullying, and these protections should be invoked whenever bullying becomes a problem.

## Assertiveness - An Introduction

See also: [Building Confidence](#)

Assertiveness is a skill regularly referred to in social and communication skills training.

Being assertive means being able to stand up for your own or other people's rights in a calm and positive way, without being either aggressive, or passively accepting 'wrong'.

Assertive individuals are able to get their point across without upsetting others, or becoming upset themselves.

Although everyone acts in passive and aggressive ways from time to time, such ways of responding often result from a lack of self-confidence and are, therefore, inappropriate ways of interacting with others.

This page examines the rights and responsibilities of assertive behaviour and aims to show how assertiveness can benefit you. You may also be interested in our pages on [Self-Esteem](#) and [Negotiation](#).

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## What is Assertiveness?

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines assertiveness as:

*"Forthright, positive, insistence on the recognition of one's rights"*

**In other words:**

***Assertiveness means standing up for your personal rights - expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways.***

It is important to note also that:

***By being assertive we should always respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people.***

Those who behave assertively always respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people as well as their own.



Assertiveness concerns being able to express feelings, wishes, wants and desires appropriately and is an important personal and interpersonal skill. In all your interactions with other people, whether at home or at work, with employers, customers or colleagues, assertiveness can help you to express yourself in a clear, open and reasonable way, without undermining your own or others' rights.

Assertiveness enables individuals to act in their own best interests, to stand up for themselves without undue anxiety, to express honest feelings comfortably and to express personal rights without denying the rights of others.

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## ***Passive, Aggressive and Assertive***

**Assertiveness is often seen as the balance point between passive and aggressive behaviour, but it's probably easier to think of the three as points of a triangle.**

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### **Being Assertive**

**Being assertive involves taking into consideration your own and other people's rights, wishes, wants, needs and desires.**

Assertiveness means encouraging others to be open and honest about their views, wishes and feelings, so that both parties act appropriately.

#### **Assertive behaviour includes:**

- Being open in expressing wishes, thoughts and feelings and encouraging others to do likewise. See our page on [Managing Emotions](#).
- Listening to the views of others and responding appropriately, whether in agreement with those views or not. See our page on [Active Listening](#).
- Accepting responsibilities and being able to delegate to others. See our page on [Delegation Skills](#) for more.
- Regularly expressing appreciation of others for what they have done or are doing. See our page on [Gratitude and Being Grateful](#).
- Being able to admit to mistakes and apologise.
- Maintaining self-control. See our page on [Self-Control](#) for more.
- Behaving as an equal to others. See our page on [Justice and Fairness](#) to explore further.

**Those who struggle to behave assertively may find that they behave either aggressively or passively.**

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### **Being Passive**

**Responding in a passive or non-assertive way tends to mean compliance with the wishes of others and can undermine individual rights and self-confidence.**

Many people adopt a passive response because they have a strong need to be liked by others. Such people do not regard themselves as equals because they place greater weight on the rights, wishes and feelings of others. Being passive results in failure to communicate thoughts or feelings and results in people doing things they really do not want to do in the hope that they might please others. This also means that they allow others to take responsibility, to lead and make decisions for them.

See our [Personal Presentation](#) and [Self-Esteem](#) pages for tips on how to increase your personal confidence.

A classic passive response is offered by those who say 'yes' to requests when they actually want to say 'no'.

For example:

*"Do you think you can find the time to wash the car today?"*

A typical passive reply might be:

*"Yes, I'll do it after I've done the shopping, made an important telephone call, finished the filing, cleaned the windows and made lunch for the kids!"*

A far more appropriate response would have been:

*"No, I can't do it today as I've got lots of other things I need to do."*

The person responding passively really does not have the time, but their answer does not convey this message. The second response is assertive as the person has considered the implications of the request in the light of the other tasks they have to do.

**Assertiveness is equally important at work as at home.**

If you become known as a person who cannot say no, you will be loaded up with tasks by your colleagues and managers, and you could even make yourself ill.

When you respond passively, you present yourself in a less positive light or put yourself down in some way. If you constantly belittle yourself in this way, you will come to feel inferior to others. While the underlying causes of passive behaviour are often poor self-confidence and self-esteem, in itself it can further reduce feelings of self-worth, creating a vicious circle.

See our pages on [Building Confidence](#) and [What is Self-Esteem?](#) for more information.

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## Being Aggressive

**By being aggressive towards someone else, their rights and self-esteem are undermined.**

Aggressive behaviour fails to consider the views or feelings of other individuals. Those behaving aggressively will rarely show praise or appreciation of others and an aggressive response tends to put others down. Aggressive responses encourage the other person to respond in a non-assertive way, either aggressively or passively.

See our page on [Transactional Analysis](#) for more about this.

There is a wide range of aggressive behaviours, including rushing someone unnecessarily, telling rather than asking, ignoring someone, or not considering another's feelings.

Good interpersonal skills mean you need to be aware of the different ways of communicating and the different response each approach might provoke. The use of either passive or aggressive behaviour in interpersonal relationships can have undesirable consequences for those you are communicating with and it may well hinder positive moves forward.

It can be a frightening or distressing experience to be spoken to aggressively and the receiver can be left wondering what instigated such behaviour or what he or she has done to deserve the aggression.

If thoughts and feelings are not stated clearly, this can lead to individuals manipulating others into meeting their wishes and desires. Manipulation can be seen as a covert form of aggression whilst humour can also be used aggressively.

See our page: [Dealing with Aggression](#) for more information.

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## **Different Situations Call for Different Measures**

### **– or do they?**

**You may find that you respond differently — whether passively, assertively or aggressively — when you are communicating in different situations.**

It is important to remember that any interaction is always a two-way process and therefore your reactions may differ, depending upon your relationship with the other person in the communication.

You may for example find it easier to be assertive to your partner than to your boss or vice versa. However, whether it is easy or not, an assertive response is always going to be better for you and for your relationship with the other person.

Find more at: <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/assertiveness.html#ixzz3kTH0TdZE>