



Assertive Communication

Many people find it difficult to assert themselves in various situations. This means that they often find themselves acting on or carrying out requests when they do not really want to, or having difficulty expressing their wishes and/or preferences for what they do not want. In turn, this leads to either a sense of helplessness and loss of control, or sense of frustration and anger and may become a significant source of stress in day-to-day living.

It is important to emphasise that being assertive does not mean always getting your way. Being assertive means to develop an understanding of both your rights and obligations in a situation and the skills to negotiate the best possible realistic outcome. It means to stand up for your rights while simultaneously respecting the rights of the other party. This may involve a compromise.

We distinguish three types of behaviour:

1. Unassertive/Passive

Always appeasing the other party and letting them have their way. You consider the other party's rights and needs more important than yours.

2. Aggressive

Always insisting on having your way. You disregard the other party's rights and needs.

3. Assertive

Finding a balance – confidently standing up for your own needs and rights while acknowledging the needs and rights of the other party.

Situation	Unassertive / Passive Response	Aggressive Response	Assertive Response
Being asked to do something you have no time for	I will try to fit it in	Who do you think I am?	I understand this is urgent for you but I can't do it today
Asking a favour, e.g., borrowing a car	Not ask	I want you to lend me your car	I would really appreciate borrowing your car

Here is the outline you may find useful in following [assertive communication](#):

1. Acknowledge the other party's position

Try to swap places with them and ask yourself: How would I feel and what would I think if I were in their place? By communicating an understanding of what they think and feel to them, the other party will lower their defenses and become more open to an alternate point of view.

E.g., *Bill, I know you feel tired at the end of the day...*

2. State your position

Express your own thoughts and feelings about the situation by sticking to the facts and avoiding any blame or criticism of the other party. Describe the impact of the situation in form of "I" statements, for instance, "I feel hurt..." or, "It makes me upset..."

E.g., *...but I feel really upset when I wake up in the morning and I see all the dirty dishes sitting on the kitchen benchtop...*

3. Express your specific request

Operationalise your request and include as much specific detail as you think appropriate.

E.g., *...so could you wash the dishes before you go to sleep each night...*

4. Point out the positive consequences of your proposal

E.g., *... and that way it will keep the place cleaner and we may be able to get rid of the cockroaches. Also that way we may need to spend less time on cleaning on the weekend and may have more time to do some fun things together.*

5. Check with the other party and seek agreement with them on your proposal

E.g., *...Wouldn't you, too, like to have more fun time on the weekend? Do you think my request is reasonable?*

Dealing with difficult or aggressive people

Remember – you have no control over the other party. However hard you try to be assertive there will be other times when the other party will become aggressive.

In such cases it is the best policy to remain calm and refuse to buy into it. Should you become aggressive this will only escalate the other party's aggression and the whole interaction will spiral out of control. The best way to diffuse anger is by remaining calm and in control. Remain empathic but stand by your position. If necessary employ the 'broken record' strategy: continue repeating your message while acknowledging what is said to you, e.g., "I know you would like me to help you, but I can't come this Sunday... I know you would like me to help you, but I can't come this Sunday..."

Remember – much of what you convey is non-verbal. Be aware of the tone of your voice, facial expression, intonation and body language, including your eye contact.

To communicate with confidence, use a calm and steady voice, straight relaxed posture and steady voice.

If tempers (yours or other party's) are running high try to postpone the interaction. Make a time for the discussion.

It is best to engage in assertive communication when you are calm and can think straight. Avoid interpersonal interactions when tempers are flying high, or when you are too angry or anxious. In such situations it is better to postpone the discussion or make a time when you have both calmed down.