

The Art of Self-Assertion:

Learning to Advocate on Your Own Behalf (excerpt from The Kit: A Resource for Consumers of Mental Health Services and Family Carers)

ASSERTIVENESS is viewed as the open, direct and appropriate expression of thoughts and feelings, with due regard to the rights of others. Being assertive means understanding your rights and sticking up for them without being aggressive. Have you ever:

- ◆ Hesitated to question a mistake on a restaurant bill because you were afraid of making a scene?
- ◆ Backed out of telling a shop-keeper that he shortchanged you because there were a lot of people in the shop waiting to be served?
- ◆ Said 'yes' when you wanted to say 'no'?

Do You Have Trouble Being Assertive? - You're Not Alone

A term which is well known, especially to consumers, is compliance. Complying with requests is a normal part of daily social life. But there are some times when a willingness to comply can exceed what is reasonable.

Most of us have been rewarded, first as children and later as adults, for compliant, obedient, or 'good' behaviour. Perhaps this is why so many people find it difficult to assert themselves. Or perhaps non-assertion is related to the anxiety that accompanies 'making a scene' or feeling disliked by others.

Every human being has three basic rights:

- ◆ The right to refuse
- ◆ The right to request
- ◆ The right to right a wrong

Self-assertion involves standing up for these rights by speaking out on your own behalf. Self-assertiveness is not just about getting things your own way.

A basic distinction can be made between self-assertiveness and aggressive behaviour

Assertiveness is a direct, honest expression of feelings and desires. It is not exclusively self-serving, since pent-up anger can be destructive to relationships. People who are non-assertive are usually patient to a fault. In contrast, aggression does not take into account the feelings or rights of others. Aggression is an attempt to get one's own way, no matter what.

Comparison of Non-assertive, Aggressive & Assertive behaviour

Non-assertive behaviour

Initiator: Self-denying, inhibited, hurt and anxious; lets others make choices; goals not achieved

Other person: Feels sympathy, guilt or contempt for initiator; achieves goals at initiator's expense

Aggressive behaviour

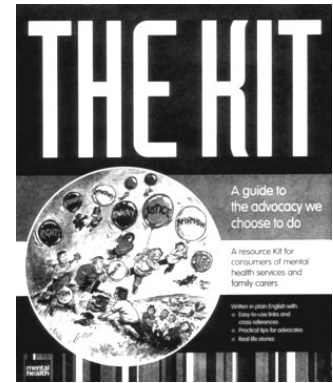
Initiator: Achieve's goals at others' expense; expresses feelings, but hurts others; chooses on behalf of others or puts them down

Other person: Feels hurt, defensive, humiliated, or taken advantage of; does not meet own needs

Assertive behaviour

Initiator: Self-enhancing; acts in own best interest; expresses feelings; respects rights of others; goals usually achieved; self-respect maintained

Other person: Needs are respected and feelings expressed; may achieve goal; self-worth maintained



How to Become More Assertive – Self-assertion techniques

Everybody can learn to become more assertive by practising each assertive action until it can be repeated even under stress. For example, imagine the following scene: you're waiting to be served at the local take-away café where you're buying lunch and people who arrive after you are being served before you; you're due back at work soon and won't have time to eat what you're trying to buy, you're getting a little upset and perhaps a bit angry.

To improve your assertiveness, you can begin by rehearsing the dialogue, posture and gestures you can use to confront the shop attendant another time. Working in front of a mirror can be very helpful or, even better, role-play the scene with a friend. Have the friend take the part of a really aggressive shop attendant as well as a cooperative and pleasant one.

Rehearsal and role-playing can also be used in any situation where you expect there may be some confrontation, for example, when you're discussing an oven that won't work with your landlord, or when you're discussing some unacceptable treatment you received in hospital from a nurse or doctor.

Another important principle in becoming more assertive is 'overlearning'. When you rehearse or role-play assertive behaviour, it is essential to keep practising until your responses become natural and almost automatic, otherwise you will

probably become flustered in the actual situation.

Another technique which can be very useful is the 'broken record'. A useful way to stop assertion becoming aggression is to simply restate your request as many times and in as many ways as necessary. In the box below is an illustration of how the 'broken record' can be used:

The Manager Can't See You Now

Individual: I would like to see the manager about the abuse that I received from two of his staff.

Assistant: I'm sorry but without an appointment you can't see the manager.

Individual: I have just been abused by two staff members and I would like to speak to the manager now as the matter is extremely serious.

Assistant: There is an appointment available Friday morning next week if you would like to see the manager then.

Individual: I understand that I don't have an appointment, however, as the matter is very serious I would like to see him now.

Assistant: The manager is a very busy man and can't just see people when they want him to.

Individual: I'm sure that the manager is busy, however, as the matter is very serious I would like to see him now.

The individual asking to see the manager hasn't become aggressive with the assistant, hasn't quit, nor passively gone away. Quite often, simple persistence is all that is necessary for simple self-assertion.

Sometimes people may behave plainly rude or aggressive. Generally

people strongly feel the urge to retaliate in a similar fashion. But, if this, happens, the outcome is unlikely to be favourable for them and all that occurs is an escalation of angry emotions. Responding assertively in these situations is a real challenge.

An assertive way to respond verbally to aggressive people is:

1. If you are wrong, admit it
2. Acknowledge the person's feelings
3. Assert yourself about the other person's aggression
4. Quickly end the conversation

An Illustration of How to use these Steps

You have just come out of an important meeting when a member of your advocacy group comes up to you and says angrily, "You absolute idiot, what a stupid thing you said in there, why don't you use your brain. You've probably stuffed everything up for all of us."

An assertive response, using the four steps outlined above is:

"I'm sorry if I said the wrong thing. I didn't do it intentionally. It's obvious you're upset, but I don't like you calling me names or yelling at me. I can understand your point without that."

Learning self-assertion skills may be difficult at first. However, with practice and use, they become easier and eventually can be mastered.

Summary

In summary, self-assertion is not necessarily confidence or self-assurance. It is a way of combating anxieties associated with living in an often impersonal and competitive world. Self-assertion is empowering in that it maintains the right to refuse, the right to request and the right to correct a wrong.