

## Being Assertive

Assertiveness is an attitude and a way of acting in any situation where you need to

- Express your feelings
- Ask for what you want, or
- Say no to something you don't want

Becoming assertive involves self-awareness and knowing what you want. Behind this knowledge is the belief that you have the right to ask for what you want. When you are assertive, you are conscious of your basic rights as a human being. You give yourself and your particular needs the same respect and dignity you'd give anyone else's. Acting assertively is a way of developing self-respect and self-worth.

If you are phobic or anxiety-prone, you may act assertively in some situations but have difficulty making requests or saying no to family members or close friends. Having perhaps grown up in a family where you felt the need to be perfect and please your parents, you've remained a "people pleaser" as an adult. With your spouse or others, you often end up doing many things you don't really want to do. This creates resentment, which in turn produces tension and sometimes open conflict in your relationships. By learning to be assertive, you can begin to express your true feelings and needs more easily. You may be surprised when you begin to get more of what you want as a result of your assertiveness. You may also be surprised to learn that assertive behavior brings you increased respect from others.

### Alternative Behavior Styles

Assertiveness is a way of acting that strikes a balance between two extremes: aggressiveness and submissiveness.

*Nonassertive* or *submissive* behavior involves yielding to someone else's preferences while discounting your own rights and needs. You don't express your feelings or let others know what you want. The result is that they remain ignorant of your feelings or wants (and thus can't be blamed for not responding to them). Submissive behavior also includes feeling guilty—or as if you are imposing—when you do attempt to ask for what you want. If you give others the message that you're *not sure* you have the right to express your needs, they will tend to discount them. Phobic and anxiety-prone people are often submissive because, as previously mentioned, they are overly invested in being "nice" or "pleasing" to everybody. Or

they may be afraid that the open expression of their needs will alienate a spouse or partner on whom they feel dependent.

*Aggressive* behavior, on the other hand, may involve communicating in a demanding, abrasive, or even hostile way with others. Aggressive people typically are insensitive to others' rights and feelings and will attempt to obtain what they want through coercion or intimidation. Aggressiveness succeeds by sheer force, creating enemies and conflict along the way. It often puts others on the defensive, leading them to withdraw or fight back rather than cooperate. For example, an aggressive way of telling someone you want a particular assignment at work would be to say, "That assignment has my name written on it. If you so much as look at the boss when she brings it up during the staff meeting, you're going to regret it."

As an alternative to being openly aggressive, many people are *passive-aggressive*. If this is your style, instead of openly confronting an issue, you express angry, aggressive feelings in a covert fashion through passive resistance. You're angry at your boss, so you're perpetually late to work. You don't want to comply with your spouse's request, so you procrastinate or "forget" about the request altogether. Instead of asking for or doing something about what you really want, you perpetually complain or moan about what is lacking. Passive-aggressive people seldom get what they want because they never get it across. Their behavior tends to leave other people angry, confused, and resentful. A passive-aggressive way of asking for a particular assignment at work might be to point out how inappropriate someone *else* is for the job or to say to a coworker, "If I got more interesting assignments, I might be able to get somewhere in this organization."

A final nonassertive behavior style is being *manipulative*. Manipulative people attempt to get what they want by making others feel sorry for or guilty toward them. Instead of taking responsibility for meeting their own needs, they play the role of victim or martyr in an effort to get others to take care of them. When this doesn't work, they may become openly angry or feign indifference. Manipulation only works as long as those at whom it is targeted fail to recognize what is happening. The person being manipulated may feel confused or "crazy" up to this point; afterward they become angry and resentful toward the manipulator. A manipulative way of asking for a particular assignment at work would be to tell your boss, "Gee, if I get that assignment, I think my boyfriend will finally have some respect for me," or to tell a coworker, "Don't breathe a word about this—but if I don't get that assignment, I'm going to finally use those sleeping pills I've been saving up."

*Assertive* behavior, in contrast to the above-described styles, involves asking for what you want (or saying no) in a simple, direct fashion that does not negate, attack, or manipulate anyone else. You communicate your feelings and needs honestly and directly while maintaining respect and consideration for others. You stand up for yourself and your rights without apologizing or feeling guilty. In essence, assertiveness involves taking responsibility for getting your own needs met in a way that preserves the dignity of other people. Others feel comfortable when you're assertive because they know where you stand. They respect you for your honesty and forthrightness. Instead of demanding or commanding, an assertive statement makes a simple, direct request, such as "I would really like that assignment" or "I hope the boss decides to give that particular assignment to me."

Which of the above five descriptions (nonassertive/submissive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, or assertive) fits you most closely? Perhaps more than one behavior style applies depending on the situation. The following exercise will assist you in identifying your preferred behavior mode when you want something.

## What's Your Style?\*

Think about each of the following situations, one at a time. How would you typically handle it? Would your approach be nonassertive (in other words, you wouldn't do anything about it), aggressive, passive-aggressive, or manipulative—or would you respond assertively? Note the style you'd use after each situation. If you have fewer than twenty-five out of thirty "assertive" responses, it would be useful for you to work on your assertiveness.

1. You're being kept on the phone by a salesperson who is trying to sell you something you don't want.
2. You would like to break off a relationship that is no longer working for you.
3. You're sitting in a movie and the people behind you are talking.
4. Your doctor keeps you waiting more than twenty minutes.
5. Your teenager has the stereo on too loud.
6. Your neighbor next door has the stereo on too loud.
7. You would like to return something to the store and get a refund.
8. You're standing in line, and someone moves in front of you.
9. Your friend has owed you money for a long time—money you could use.
10. You receive a bill that seems unusually high for the service you received.
11. Your home repair person is demanding payment but has done unsatisfactory work.
12. You receive food at a restaurant that is over- or undercooked.
13. You would like to ask a major favor of your partner or spouse.
14. You would like to ask a major favor of your friend.
15. Your friend asks you a favor that you don't feel like doing.
16. Your son/daughter/spouse/roommate is not doing their fair share of the work around the house.
17. You would like to ask a question but are concerned that someone else might think it's silly.
18. You're in a group and would like to speak up, but you don't know how your opinion will be received.
19. You would like to strike up a conversation at a gathering, but you don't know anyone.
20. You're sitting/standing next to someone who is smoking, and the smoke is beginning to bother you.
21. You find the behavior of your partner/spouse unacceptable.

22. You find your friend's behavior unacceptable.
23. Your friend drops by unexpectedly, just before you were about to leave to run some errands.
24. You're talking to someone about something important, but he or she doesn't seem to be listening.
25. Your friend stands you up for a lunch meeting.
26. You return an item you don't want to the department store and request a refund. The clerk diverts your request and offers to exchange the item for another.
27. You're speaking and someone interrupts you.
28. Your phone rings, but you don't feel like getting it.
29. Your partner or spouse "talks down" to you as if you were a child.
30. You receive an unjust criticism from someone.

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\* The idea for this questionnaire was adapted from Shirley J. Mangini, *Secrets of Self-Esteem*. Canoga Park, CA: N.O.V.A. Corp., 1986.

## The Assertiveness Questionnaire

To further clarify those situations in which you could be more assertive, complete the following questionnaire, developed by Sharon and Gordon Bower in their book *Asserting Yourself*. Check those items that apply in column A, and then rate the comfort level of those situations for you in column B:

- 1 = comfortable
- 2 = mildly uncomfortable
- 3 = moderately uncomfortable
- 4 = very uncomfortable
- 5 = unbearably threatening

(Note that the varying degrees of discomfort can be expressed whether your feelings are angry, fearful, or passive.)

A) Check here if the item applies to you	B) Rate from 1 to 5 for comfort level
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**When do you behave nonassertively?**

_____	_____	Asking for help
_____	_____	Stating a difference of opinion
_____	_____	Hearing or expressing negative feelings
_____	_____	Hearing or expressing positive feelings
_____	_____	Dealing with someone who refuses to cooperate
_____	_____	Speaking up about something that annoys you
_____	_____	Talking when all eyes are on you
_____	_____	Protesting a "rip-off"
_____	_____	Saying no
_____	_____	Responding to undeserved criticism
_____	_____	Making requests of authority figures
_____	_____	Negotiating for something you want
_____	_____	Having to take charge
_____	_____	Asking for cooperation
_____	_____	Proposing an idea
_____	_____	Asking questions

- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Dealing with attempts to make you feel guilty
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Asking for service
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Asking for a date or appointment
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Asking for favors
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Who are the people with whom you are nonassertive?**

- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Parents
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Fellow workers, classmates
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Strangers
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Old friends
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse or significant other
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Employer
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Relatives
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Children
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Acquaintances
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Salespeople, clerks, hired help
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ More than two or three people in a group
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**What do you want that you have been unable to achieve with nonassertive styles?**

- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Approval for things you've done well
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ To get help with certain tasks
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ More attention from, or time with, your partner
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ To be listened to and understood
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ To make boring or frustrating situations more satisfying
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ To not have to be nice all the time
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Confidence in speaking up when something is important to you
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Greater comfort with strangers, store clerks, mechanics, and so on
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Confidence in asking for contact with people you find attractive
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ To get a new job, ask for interviews, raises, and so on
- \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ Comfort with people who supervise you or work under you

_____	_____	To not feel angry and bitter a lot of the time
_____	_____	To overcome a feeling of helplessness and the sense that nothing ever really changes
_____	_____	To initiate satisfying sexual experiences
_____	_____	To do something totally different and novel
_____	_____	To have time by yourself
_____	_____	To do things that are fun or relaxing for you
_____	_____	Other _____

**Evaluating your responses.** What do your answers tell you about areas in which you need to develop more assertiveness? How does nonassertive behavior contribute to the specific items you checked on the "What" list? In developing your own assertiveness program, you might initially want to focus on items you rated as falling in the 2 to 3 range. These situations are likely to be the easiest to change. Items you rated as very uncomfortable or threatening can be handled later.

## Learning to Be Assertive

Learning to be assertive involves working on yourself in six distinct areas:

1. Developing nonverbal assertive behaviors
2. Recognizing and being willing to exercise your basic rights as a human being
3. Becoming aware of your own unique feelings, needs, and wants
4. Practicing assertive responses—first through writing and role-playing and then in real life
5. Assertiveness on the spot
6. Learning to say no

Each of these areas is considered in the remainder of this chapter.

## Developing Nonverbal Assertive Behaviors

Some of the nonverbal aspects of assertiveness include

- *Looking directly at* another person when addressing them. Looking down or away conveys the message that you're not quite sure about asking for what you want. The opposite extreme, *staring*, is also unhelpful because it may put the other person on the defensive.

- Maintaining an *open* rather than closed *posture*. If you're sitting, don't cross your legs or arms. If standing, stand erect and on both feet. Face the person you're addressing directly rather than stand off to the side.
- While communicating assertively, do not back off or move away from the other person. The expression "standing your ground" applies quite literally here.
- *Stay calm*. Avoid getting overly emotional or excited. If you're feeling angry, discharge your angry feelings *somewhere else* before you attempt to be assertive. A calm but assertive request carries much more weight with most people than an angry outburst.

Try practicing the above nonverbal skills with a friend by using role-playing in situations that call for an assertive response. A list of such situations can be found at the end of the section "Assertiveness on the Spot."

## Recognizing and Exercising Your Basic Rights

As adult human beings, we all have certain basic rights. Often, though, either we have forgotten them or else as children we were never taught to believe in them. Developing assertiveness involves recognizing that you, just as much as anyone else, have a right to all of the things listed under the *Personal Bill of Rights* that follows. Assertiveness also involves taking responsibility to *exercise* these rights in situations where they are threatened or infringed upon. Read through the *Personal Bill of Rights* and reflect on your willingness to believe in and exercise each one.

## *Personal Bill of Rights*

1. I have the right to ask for what I want.
2. I have the right to say no to requests or demands I can't meet.
3. I have the right to express all of my feelings, positive or negative.
4. I have the right to change my mind.
5. I have the right to make mistakes and not have to be perfect.
6. I have the right to follow my own values and standards.
7. I have the right to say no to anything when I feel I am not ready, it is unsafe, or it violates my values.
8. I have the right to determine my own priorities.
9. I have the right *not* to be responsible for others' behavior, actions, feelings, or problems.
10. I have the right to expect honesty from others.
11. I have the right to be angry at someone I love.
12. I have the right to be uniquely myself.
13. I have the right to feel scared and say "I'm afraid."
14. I have the right to say "I don't know."
15. I have the right not to give excuses or reasons for my behavior.
16. I have the right to make decisions based on my feelings.
17. I have the right to my own needs for personal space and time.
18. I have the right to be playful and frivolous.
19. I have the right to be healthier than those around me.
20. I have the right to be in a nonabusive environment.
21. I have the right to make friends and be comfortable around people.
22. I have the right to change and grow.
23. I have the right to have my needs and wants respected by others.
24. I have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.
25. I have the right to be happy.

Photocopy the above list and post it in a conspicuous place. By taking time to carefully read through the list every day, you will eventually learn to accept that you are entitled to each one of the rights enumerated.

## Becoming Aware of Your Own Unique Feelings, Needs, and Wants

Developing an awareness and ability to express your feelings was discussed in chapter 12. Being in touch with your feelings is an important prerequisite for becoming assertive. Learning to recognize and take care of your needs and wants will be considered in some detail in the following chapter, on self-esteem.

It's difficult to act assertively unless you're clear about 1) what it is you're feeling and 2) what it is you want or don't want.

Assertiveness involves saying how you feel inside *and* saying directly what changes you would like—such as “I'm feeling upset right now *and* I would like you to listen to me.” If you're feeling confused or ambivalent about your wants or needs, take time to clarify them first by writing them out or talking them out with a supportive friend or counselor. You might also use role-playing with a friend to ask for what you want in advance. Be sure not to *assume* that other people already know what you want: you have to make your needs known. Other people aren't mind readers.

## Practicing Assertive Responses

In learning to be more assertive it is often very helpful to play out your responses first on paper. Write out a problem situation that calls for an assertive response on your part. Then formulate in detail how you'll handle it. A trial run in writing can allow you to feel more prepared and confident when you actually confront the situation in real life.

### *Describing Your Problem Situation*

In their book *Asserting Yourself*, Sharon and Gordon Bower suggest that you first select a problem situation from *The Assertiveness Questionnaire*. Write a description of that situation, including the person involved (*who*), the time and setting (*when*), *what* bothers you about the situation, *how* you would normally tend to deal with it, what *fears* you have about consequences that would follow if you were to be assertive, and finally, your behavior *goal*.

It's important to be specific in these descriptions. For instance, the following description of a problem situation is too vague:

I have a lot of trouble persuading some of my friends to listen to *me* for a change. They never stop talking, and I never get a word in edgewise. It would be nice for me if I could participate more in the conversation. I feel that I'm just letting them run over me.

Notice that the description doesn't specify *who* the particular friend is, *when* this problem is most likely to occur, *how* the nonassertive person acts, what *fears* are involved in being assertive, and a specific *goal* for increased involvement in the conversation. A more well-defined problem situation might be as follows:

My friend Joan (*who*), when we meet for coffee after work (*when*), often goes on nonstop about her marriage problems (*what*). I just sit there and try to be interested (*how*). If I interrupt her, I'm afraid she'll think I just don't care (*fear*). I'd like to be able to change the subject and talk sometimes about my own life (*goal*).

### Exercise: Specifying Your Problem Situations

On a sheet of paper, write up two or three of your own problem situations. Be sure to specify the "who," "when," "what," "how," "fear," and "goal," as described above. If possible, choose situations that are current for you. Begin with a situation that's not very uncomfortable or overwhelming.

### *Developing an Assertive Response*

Now that you've defined your problem situations, the next step is to develop an assertive response for each one. For the purposes of learning assertiveness skills, such a response can be broken down into six steps (adapted from the Bowers' work):

1. Evaluate your rights within the situation at hand.
2. Designate a time for discussing what you want.
3. Address the main person involved and state the problem in terms of its consequences for you.
4. Express your feelings about the particular situation.
5. Make your request for changing the situation.
6. Tell this person the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) his or her cooperation.

Let's consider each of these points in greater detail:

1. **Evaluate your rights.** Refer back to the *Personal Bill of Rights*. What do you have a right to ask for in this situation?
2. **Designate a time.** Find a mutually convenient time to discuss the problem with the other person involved. This step, of course, would be omitted in situations when you need to be spontaneously assertive on the spot.
3. **State the problem situation in terms of its consequences for you.** Don't make the mistake of expecting other people to be mind readers. Most people are wrapped up in their own thoughts and problems and will have very little idea about what's going on with you unless you state your case explicitly. Clearly outline your point of view, even if what you're describing seems obvious to you. This will allow the other person to get a better idea of your position. Describe the problem as objectively as you can, without using language that blames or judges.

### Examples

"I'm having a problem with your stereo. I need to study for an exam tomorrow and the stereo is so loud I can't concentrate."

"I don't have any way to get to the grocery store today. My support person is sick and I'm out of milk, vegetables, and meat."

"It seems to me that you do most of the talking when we're together. I'd like to have the chance to tell you some of my thoughts and feelings, too."

4. **Express your feelings.** By telling other people about your feelings, you let them know how greatly their behavior affects you and your reactions. Even if the person you're addressing completely disagrees with your position, he or she can at least appreciate your strong feelings on an issue.

Each of us owns our personal feelings. Though it might at first seem hard to believe, nobody else *causes* you to have feelings of fear, anger, or sadness. Other people say and do all kinds of things, but it is your *perception*—your interpretation—of their behavior that is ultimately responsible for what you feel. You don't necessarily choose how you react to people—yet your reaction is based on your perception of the meaning of what they say or do.

In expressing feelings, always be sure to own your reactions rather than blame them on someone else. You can still point out what the other person did to stimulate your feelings, but be willing to take ultimate responsibility for them.

The best way to do this is to own your feelings by speaking about them in the first person (for example, "I felt sad when you forgot to call me at the time you said you would"). First-person statements acknowledge your responsibility for your feelings while second-person statements generally accuse or judge.

### Examples

Instead of saying, "You make me angry when you don't hear what I say," you can say, "I feel angry when you don't listen to me."

Instead of saying, "You show that you have no respect for me or this household when you leave things lying around," you can say, "I feel demeaned and devalued when you leave things lying around."

Instead of saying, "You don't care about me or my getting better—you don't ever help," you can say, "I feel very sad and unloved when you don't seem to be helping me in my attempt to get better."

5. **Make your request.** This is the *key* step to being assertive. You simply ask for what you want (or don't want) in a direct, straightforward manner. Observe the following guidelines for making assertive requests:
  - *Use assertive nonverbal behavior.* Stand squarely, establish eye contact, maintain an open posture, and work on staying calm and self-possessed.

- *Keep your request simple.* One or two easy-to-understand sentences will usually suffice: “I would like you to take the dog out for a walk tonight,” or “I want us to go to a marriage counselor together.”
- *Avoid asking for more than one thing at a time.*
- *Be specific.* Ask for exactly what you want—or the person you’re addressing may misunderstand. Instead of saying, “I’d like you to help me with my practice sessions,” specify what you want, such as “I’d like you to go with me when I practice driving on the freeway every Saturday morning.” Or instead of “I would like you to come home by a reasonable hour,” specify “I would like you to come home by twelve midnight.”
- *Use “I-statements” of the form:*
  - “I would like ...”
  - “I want to ...”
  - “I would appreciate it if ...”

*It’s very important to avoid using “you-statements” at the point of actually making a request. Statements that are threatening (“You’ll do this or else”) or coercive (“You have to ...”) will put the person you’re addressing on the defensive and decrease the likelihood of your getting what you want.*
- *Object to behaviors—not personalities.* When objecting to what someone is doing, object to the *specific behavior*—not to the *individual’s personality*. Let the person know you’re having a problem with something he or she is doing (or not doing), not with who he or she is as a person.
 

It’s preferable to say, “I have a problem when you don’t call to let me know you’re going to be late,” rather than “I think you’re inconsiderate for not calling me to let me know you’ll be late.”

Referring to the problem *behavior* preserves respect for the other person. Judging others personally usually puts them on the defensive. When objecting to someone’s behavior (for example, a lack of trustworthiness), always *follow up your complaint with a positive request*, such as “I would like you to keep your agreements with me.”
- *Don’t apologize for your request.* When you want to ask for something, do so directly. Say, “I would like you to ...” instead of “I know this might seem like an imposition, but I would like you to ...” When you want to decline a request, do so directly but politely. Don’t apologize or make excuses. Simply say, “No, thank you,” “No, I’m not interested,” or “No, I’m not able to do that.” If the other person’s response is one of enticement, criticism, an appeal to guilt, or sarcasm, just repeat your statement firmly until you’ve made your point.
- *Make requests, not demands or commands.* Assertive behavior always respects the humanity and rights of the other person. Thus an assertive response is always a request rather than a demand. Demanding and commanding are aggressive

modes of behavior based on the false assumption that you are always right or always entitled to get everything your way.

6. **State the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) the other person's cooperation.** With close friends or intimate partners, stating positive consequences of their compliance with your request can be an honest offer of give-and-take, rather than manipulation.

*Examples*

"If you take the dog out, I'll give you a back rub."

"If you give me the time to finish this project, then we'll have more time to do something special together."

In cases where you are dealing with someone with a history of being resistant and uncooperative, you may describe the *natural* consequences (usually negative) of a failure to cooperate. If at all possible, any negative consequences should naturally flow out of the objective reality of the situation rather than represent something that you arbitrarily impose. The latter will likely be perceived as a threat and may increase the other person's resistance.

*Examples*

"If we can't leave on time, then I'll have to leave without you."

"If you keep talking to me like this, I'm going to leave. We'll talk again tomorrow."

### **Sample Scenarios**

The six steps of an assertive response are illustrated below:

Jean would like a half hour of uninterrupted peace and quiet while she does her relaxation exercise. Her husband, Frank, has had the tendency to disrupt her quiet time with questions and other attention-getting maneuvers. Before confronting him, she wrote out an assertive response as follows:

1. *Evaluate your rights.*

"I have a right to have some quiet time to myself."

"I have a right to take care of my need for relaxation."

"I have a right to have my husband respect my needs."

2. *Designate a time.*

"When Frank gets home from work tonight, I'll ask him if we can sit down and discuss this issue. If it's not convenient for him tonight, we'll schedule a time within the next couple of days."

3. *State the problem situation in terms of its consequences.*

"I've let you know several times that I need half an hour each day for relaxation and I've even shut the door, but you still come in and ask me questions. This disturbs my

concentration and interferes with an important part of my program for managing my anxiety.”

4. *Express your feelings.*

“I feel frustrated when my attention is disrupted. I’m angry when you don’t respect my right to have some time for relaxation.”

5. *Make your request.*

“I would like to be uninterrupted during the time my door is closed, other than in cases of dire emergency. I’d like you to respect my right to have half an hour of quiet time each day.”

6. *State consequences of gaining cooperation.*

“If you respect my need to have some quiet time, I’ll be much better able to spend some time with you afterward and to be a good companion.”

Sharon would like her boyfriend, Jim, to assist her in regaining the ability to drive on the freeway. Specifically, she would like him to accompany her for a one-hour practice session every Saturday. She has been reluctant to ask him for several months because of heavy demands he has had from his job.

1. *Evaluate your rights.*

“I have a right to ask Jim to help me, even if he is very busy.”

2. *Designate a time.*

“This Saturday morning I’ll ask him whether he has time to discuss my need for getting his help. If that’s not a good time, we’ll arrange another time that’s convenient for both of us.”

3. *State the problem situation in terms of its consequences.*

“My progress in overcoming my fear of driving freeways has been slow. I’ve had difficulty finding someone who will go with me on Saturdays, which is the time I can most easily practice. In order to make progress at this stage, I need someone to accompany me, although later I’ll be able to practice alone.”

4. *Express your feelings.*

“I’ve been feeling very frustrated that I haven’t had many opportunities to practice driving freeways. I feel very disappointed about my rate of progress.”

5. *Make your request.*

“I’d like you to go with me to practice driving on freeways for one hour every Saturday. I would really appreciate it if you would help me out with this.”

6. *State consequences of gaining cooperation.*

“If you help me with my practice sessions, I’m sure that I’ll be able to get over my phobia of freeways sooner. It’ll be great for us if I don’t have to ask you anymore to take me to all those places that are only accessible by freeway.”

### **Exercise: Developing an Assertive Response**

Now it's your turn.

Select one of the problem situations you previously described and write up an assertive response following the six steps outlined above. You may want to make copies of this exercise before filling it in. (If you need more room, use a separate sheet of paper.)

1. *Evaluate your rights.*
2. *Designate a time.*
3. *State the problem situation in terms of its consequences.*
4. *Express your feelings.*
5. *Make your request.*
6. *State the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) the other person's cooperation.*

Once you've written out in detail your assertive response to a problem situation, you'll find that you feel more prepared and confident when you confront that situation in real life. This process of methodically writing out a preview of your assertive response is especially helpful during the time when you're learning to be assertive. Later on, when you have a fair degree of mastery, you may not need to write out your response in advance every time. It's never a bad idea, though, to prepare your response, especially when a lot is at stake. Attorneys do so as a way of life because they typically assert the rights of their clients in high-stakes situations.

Finally, an important *intermediate step* between writing out an assertive response and confronting a problem in real life is to *role-play* your response with a friend or counselor. This can be an invaluable tool for developing the nonverbal aspects of assertiveness described earlier in this chapter. It will further increase your confidence and sense of being well-prepared when you come to deal with the actual situation. Assertiveness training, whether done in the context of psychotherapy or in a classroom situation, relies primarily on role-playing as a teaching tool.

### **Assertiveness on the Spot**

Many situations arise in the course of everyday life that challenge you to be assertive spontaneously. Someone smokes right next to you, making you uncomfortable. Someone blasts loud music while you're trying to go to sleep. Someone cuts in front of you in line. (Many of the situations listed in the *What's Your Style?* questionnaire at the beginning of this chapter fall into this category.) What do you do? Here are the steps you need to take to be assertive on the spot:

1. **Evaluate your rights.** Often you'll go through this step automatically, without the need to pause for reflection. The violation of your rights is obvious and perhaps flagrant. At other times, you may need to pause and think about which of your rights is at stake.
2. **Make your request.** This is the *key* step in on-the-spot assertiveness. In many cases your assertive response will consist *only* of this step. Someone interferes with your rights and you simply ask them, in a straightforward manner, for what you want or don't want. As discussed previously, your statement can begin with such words as

"I would like ..."

"I want ..."

"I would appreciate ..."

"Would you please ..."

Your statement needs to be

- Firm
- Simple and to the point
- Without apology
- Nonjudgmental, nonblaming
- Always a request, not a demand

If the person doesn't immediately cooperate or pretends not to notice, simply *repeat* your statement. Repeating your request in a monotonous fashion will work better in getting what you want than becoming angry or aggressive if the person you're dealing with is a stranger. Avoid monotonous repetition if you're dealing with family or close friends (with the exception of small children).

3. **State the problem in terms of its consequences.** This step is optional but can be helpful in on-the-spot assertiveness. If you feel that the person you're addressing might be puzzled by your request, you might want to explain why his or her behavior has an adverse effect on you. The other person may gain empathy for your position in this way, leading to a greater chance of cooperation. Here are some examples:

"Everyone here, including myself, has been waiting in line" (as a prelude to "Would you go to the back of the line, please?").

"I am allergic to cigarette smoke" (as a prelude to "Would you please smoke somewhere else?").

4. **Express your feelings.** If you're dealing with a stranger with whom you don't wish to have any further relationship, it's usually okay to omit this step. The only occasion for using it with a stranger is if the person involved doesn't cooperate after you've made your assertive request (for example, "I've told you twice that I'm not interested in your product and you're still trying to sell it to me. I'm starting to feel

really irritated"). On the other hand, it's often a good idea to express your feelings when you need to be assertive on the spot with your spouse, child, or close friend ("I'm really disappointed that you didn't call when you said you would" or "I'm feeling too tired to clean up the kitchen right now").

5. **State the consequences of gaining (or not gaining) cooperation.** In situations with strangers, this step usually won't be necessary. On rare occasions, with someone resistant, you may choose to state negative consequences, although it will be difficult to keep this from coming across as a threat (for example, "If you continue smoking, I may have an asthma attack"). With family and friends, a statement of positive consequences may be used to strengthen your request ("If you get in bed by eight-thirty, I'll read you a story").\*

The gist of being assertive on the spot is simply to *make your request* in as simple, specific, and straightforward a manner as possible. Whether you choose to mention your feelings or the consequences of the other person's behavior will largely depend on the situation. Mention consequences when you want the other person to better appreciate your position. Express your feelings when you want the other person to understand how strongly you feel about what they're doing (or not doing).

### *On-the-Spot Assertiveness Exercises*

The exercises below are designed to give you practice in responding assertively on the spot. The situations presented are common ones which you may have encountered before in your life. The task is to fill in the blank with an assertive response. Alternatively, you may wish to role-play these situations with a friend. This will give you direct practice with both the verbal and the nonverbal aspects of assertive communication. As you practice, remember to stay calm.

1. You take your car to the garage for an oil change and receive a bill for that plus wheel alignment and new spark plugs. You say,

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2. You arrange to take turns driving to work with a friend. Each day you drive, she has an errand to run on the way home. When she drives, there are no stops made. You say,

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\* Reproduced from the *TERRAP Program Manual* by permission of Dr. Arthur B. Hardy.

3. When you entertain your coworkers, the conversation always turns to shoptalk. You are planning a party and prefer to avoid the usual topics. You say,

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4. You're in the bank. The teller asks, "Who's next?" It's your turn. A woman who came in after you says, "I am." You say,

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5. You're in a taxi and you suspect that the driver is taking you by a roundabout route. You say,

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6. You're in a restaurant, which, like most restaurants these days, is nonsmoking (even though nonsmoking signs are not visible). A person at the bar nearby lights up a cigarette. You say,

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7. You've frequently had adverse reactions to medications in the past. Your doctor gives you a prescription without telling you what side effects to expect. You say,

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8. You're buying some new clothes. The saleswoman is pressuring you into buying something that makes you look ten pounds heavier. You say,

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9. You're playing miniature golf with your spouse. You're not doing very well but are having a good time. Your spouse is continually telling you how to do it "right." You say,

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10. You've settled in for a quiet Sunday at home, the first in a long time. Your parents call and invite you over for the day. You don't want to go. You say,

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11. You receive a notice informing you that your child has been placed in the classroom of a teacher whom you know to be notoriously incompetent. You call the principal and you say,

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12. Someone rings your doorbell, wanting to convert you to their religion. You're not interested. You say,

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13. A friend asks you to babysit for her, but you have other plans for the day. You say,

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14. You're feeling lonely and "left out." Your spouse is in the living room, reading. You say,

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15. You've been rushing about all day. It's very hot and you don't have air conditioning. You prepare a salad for dinner because you don't want to turn the oven on. Your spouse comes home hungry and wants a hot meal. You say,

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16. Some friends dropped by without an invitation at five o'clock. It is now seven and you want to serve dinner to your family. You don't have enough to include the guests. You say,

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## Learning to Say No

An important aspect of being assertive is your ability to say no to requests that you don't want to meet. Saying no means that you *set limits* on other people's demands for your time and energy when such demands conflict with your own needs and desires. It also means that you can do this without feeling guilty.

In some cases, especially if you're dealing with someone with whom you don't want to promote a relationship, just saying "No, thank you" or "No, I'm not interested" in a firm, polite manner should suffice. If the other person persists, just repeat your statement calmly without apologizing. If you need to make your statement stronger and more emphatic, you may want to 1) look the person directly in the eyes, 2) raise the level of your voice slightly, and 3) assert your position: "I said no thank you."

In many other instances—with acquaintances, friends, and family—you may want to give the other person some explanation for turning down their request. Here it's often useful to follow a three-step procedure:

1. Acknowledge the other person's request by repeating it.
2. Explain your reason for declining.
3. Say no.
4. (Optional). If appropriate, suggest an alternative proposal where both your and the other person's needs will be met.

Use step 4 only if you can easily see a way for both you and the other person to meet each other halfway.

### Examples

"I understand that you'd really like to get together tonight (*acknowledgment*). It turns out I've had a really long day and feel exhausted (*explanation*), so I need to pass on tonight (*saying no*). Would there be another night later this week when we could get together?" (*alternative option*)

"I hear that you need some help with moving (*acknowledgment*). I'd like to help out, but I promised my boyfriend we would go away for the weekend (*explanation*), so I'm not going to be available (*saying no*). I hope you can find someone else."

Note that in this example, the speaker not only acknowledges her friend's need, but indicates that she would have liked to help out if the circumstances had been different. Sometimes you may wish to let someone know that under different conditions you would have willingly responded to their request.

"I realize you would like to go out with me again (*acknowledgment*). I think you're a fine person, but it seems to me that we don't have enough in common to pursue a relationship (*explanation*), so I have to say no (*saying no*)."

"I know that you'd like me to take care of Johnny for the day (*acknowledgment*), but I have some important errands I have to attend to (*explanation*). So I can't babysit today (*saying no*)."

Are there any particular types of situations where you repeatedly have trouble saying no? Make a list of these situations in the space below:

Now take a sheet of paper and write a hypothetical assertive response for each of these situations where you say no, following the three-step procedure outlined above.

The following suggestions may also be helpful in learning to say no (adapted from Matthew McKay, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay's *When Anger Hurts*):

1. *Take your time.* If you're the type of person who has difficulty saying no, give yourself some time to think and clarify what you want to say before responding to someone's request (for example, "I'll let you know by the end of the week" or "I'll call you back tomorrow morning after sleeping on it").
2. *Don't overapologize.* When you apologize to others for saying no, you give them the message that you're "not sure" that your own needs are just as important as theirs. This opens the door for them to put more pressure on you to comply with what they want. In some cases, they may even try to play upon your guilt to obtain other things or to get you to "make it up to them" for having said no in the first place.
3. *Be specific.* It's important to be very specific in stating what you will and won't do. For example: "I'm willing to help you move, but because of my back I can only carry lightweight items" or "I can take you to work, but only if you can meet me by eight-fifteen."

4. *Use assertive body language.* Be sure to face the person you're talking to squarely and maintain good eye contact. Work on speaking in a calm but firm tone of voice. Avoid becoming emotional.
5. *Watch out for guilt.* You may feel the impulse to do something *else* for someone after turning down their request. Take your time before offering to do so. Make sure that your offer comes out of genuine desire rather than guilt. You'll have fully mastered the skill of saying no to others when you reach the point that you can do so without feeling guilty.

## Summary of Things to Do

Learning to be assertive will enable you to obtain more of what you want and will help minimize frustration and resentment in your relationships with partners, family, and friends. It will also help you to take more risks and to ask more of life, adding to your sense of autonomy and self-confidence.

Becoming assertive does, however, take *practice*. When you first attempt to act assertively with family and friends, be prepared to feel awkward. Also be prepared for them not to understand what you're doing and possibly even to take offense. If you explain as best you can and give them time to adjust to your new behavior, you may be pleasantly surprised when they come to respect you for your newfound directness and honesty.

To get the most out of this chapter, I suggest you do the following:

1. Determine your dominant behavior style (submissive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, manipulative, or assertive) by asking yourself how you'd respond to each of the thirty situations listed in the *What's Your Style?* questionnaire.
2. Clarify those situations and people with whom you'd like to be more assertive by completing *The Assertiveness Questionnaire*.
3. Make a copy of the *Personal Bill of Rights* and post it in a conspicuous place. Read it over a number of times until you feel thoroughly familiar with all of the rights listed.
4. Identify two or three problem situations in which you would like to be more assertive. Write them up under the exercise *Specifying Your Problem Situations*. Make your description of each situation specific, by indicating *who* it involves, *when* it occurs, *what* bothers you, *how* you'd normally deal with it, your *fears* about being assertive, and, finally, your particular *goal*.
5. Write out an assertive response to each of your problem situations. Your narrative for each assertive response should contain the six steps listed in the exercise *Developing an Assertive Response*.
6. Become thoroughly familiar with the guidelines for making an assertive request: using assertive nonverbal behaviors, keeping your request simple, being specific,

- using first-person statements, objecting to behaviors (not personalities), not apologizing for being assertive, and making requests instead of demands.
7. Review the guidelines for being assertive on the spot and complete the *On-the-Spot Assertiveness Exercises*.
  8. Role-play with a friend or counselor your assertive responses to your problem situations and/or the *On-the-Spot Assertiveness Exercises*.
  9. Review the section "Learning to Say No" and, with a friend or counselor, role-play saying no to unreasonable requests.
  10. Consult the books listed below under "Assertiveness Skills" for a more thorough coverage of the topic. If you feel the need to seek extra help beyond this workbook, you'll find that most adult education programs through local colleges or high schools offer workshops and classes in assertiveness training.
  11. Consult the books listed below under "Communication Skills" or take a class in communication to back up your assertiveness training with other important interpersonal skills such as listening, self-disclosure, and negotiating.

## Further Reading

### *Assertiveness Skills*

- Alberti, Robert E., and Michael Emmons. *Your Perfect Right*. Ninth edition. Atascadero, CA: Impact Press, 2008.
- Bower, Sharon, and Gordon Bower. *Asserting Yourself*. Updated edition. Reading, MA: Perseus, 2004.
- Davis, Martha, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay. *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. Sixth edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2008.
- McKay, Matthew, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay. *When Anger Hurts*. Second edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2003.
- Smith, Manuel J. *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*. New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

### *Communication Skills*

- Fisher, Roger, and William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. Second edition. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- McKay, Matthew, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. *Messages: The Communication Skills Book*. Third edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009.