

**Strategy: *Speak up and stand up for yourself.***

One important part of self regard is feeling that you have a “voice” — that you have the right to be listened to and heard in a way that helps you have some control over what happens in your life. When you can speak up and stand up for yourself, you are, in effect, saying to yourself and the world, “I am a significant person whose ideas and words are worthy of respect.”

The ability to clearly and assertively communicate ideas, needs and wants also helps people build and maintain strong personal relationships. It helps you get what you need in various situations and can also protect you from being taken advantage of by others. Therefore, being able to speak up and stand up for yourself are very important life skills.

**“Assertive” Versus “Aggressive”**

Being assertive means standing up for our rights and expressing what we think, feel and believe in a manner that is direct and appropriate, and does not infringe on the rights of others. *(See the sub-article at the end for various types and examples of assertion.)*

When people are non-assertive, they risk violating their own self-respect and rights. For example, it is important that we don't say ‘yes’ unless we mean it. When we say yes to the requests of others simply because we can't say ‘no’, we put ourselves at risk for feeling guilty, exploited, or unappreciated.

Aggressive behaviour often involves expressing ourselves or pursuing goals and rights at the expense of others, or in a way that violates other people's rights or dignity. Striving to be “assertive,” as opposed to “aggressive” is a much more effective way to stand up for ourselves.

**The Benefits of Being Assertive:**

- Improved self-respect and respect from others
- Increased ability to control our lives and the outcomes of interactions with others
- More confidence
- Helps ensure our needs are met
- Enables closer and more meaningful relationships

If you have always been socially reserved, chances are you may stay that way throughout your life. It doesn't mean you are incapable of standing up and speaking up for yourself. However, it does mean that, in order to speak up for yourself effectively, you will probably have to acknowledge this challenge and work harder at becoming comfortable expressing your ideas confidently.

**Ways to Increase Your Own Assertiveness**

- Identify and be aware of your rights, both in society at large and in the various roles you have with family, at work and within your social network.
- Practice being assertive (e.g., try role-playing with a friend).
- Make more conscious attempts to reach out to others.
- Make sure you clearly demonstrate signs of approval and recognition towards others (nodding your head, making eye contact, offering supportive comments).

- Identify situations where you have trouble being assertive, think about why, and try to improve.
- Challenge your critical “inner voice” that tells you to be passive, when you really need to be more assertive.
- Learn more about different types of assertion (click here to read more – see end of article).

### **Activities That Can Help**

Becoming involved in certain kinds of activities and educational experiences can also help people to express themselves and develop the confidence to speak up for themselves more often:

- Practice public speaking: e.g., join an organization that teaches public speaking, such as Toastmasters: <http://www.toastmasters.org/>.
- Take drama, improvisation or dance lessons, or get involved in an amateur theatre, choir, or other performance group.
- Join a discussion group, such as a book club, where you will have regular opportunities to express your ideas in a supportive atmosphere.
- Assertiveness training has helped some people learn how to express ideas, needs and wants more confidently and clearly. If considering this type of training, do your homework and make sure to find out about the trainer’s qualifications and what the training is based on.

### **Summing Up**

Being able to stand up for yourself does not mean you will always get your way. However, if you’ve been able to assertively express what you needed and wanted to say, you may sometimes get part of what you want, even if you don’t get it all. Similarly, even if you lose an argument, it sometimes feels a little better to know that at least your voice was heard.

### **Resources**

*Don’t Say Yes When You Want to Say No*, Herbert Fensterheim & Jean Baer, Time Warner Books, 1991. (One of the original bestsellers on assertiveness training. First published in 1975 and still widely read today.)

*Develop Your Assertiveness*, Sue Bishop, Kogan Page, 2010 (originally published in 1996).

Alberti, R.E., & Emmons, M.L. (1982). *Your perfect right: A guide to assertive living* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), San Luis Obispo, CA, Impact. (paperback)

Rimm, D. C., & Masters, J.C. *Behavior therapy: Techniques and empirical findings*. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

Jakubowski, P. "Assertive behavior and clinical problems of women". In E. Rawlings & D. Carter (Eds.), *Psychotherapy for women: Treatment towards equality*. Springfield, ILL.: Charles C Thomas, 1977. (a)

## **Different Types of Assertion (Sub-Article to Main Article)**

### **1. Basic Assertion**

Basic assertion is expressing yourself in a way that stands up for beliefs, feelings and opinions. It does not involve empathy, confrontation or persuasion, but can include expressions of affection and appreciation towards other people.

Examples of basic assertions:

"I'd like to have some time to think that over."

"I don't need any advice thanks."

"I like you."

"I'd like you to arrive by 5:30pm."

### **2. Empathic Assertion**

Empathic assertion involves assertive statements that also convey some sensitivity or sympathy towards others.

Examples of empathic assertion:

"You may not realize it, but your talking is making it very hard for me to hear what the speaker has said. Could you keep it down please?"

"I realize that you know a lot about this topic, but I'd prefer to work this out myself."

### **3. Escalating Assertion**

According to psychologists, David L. Rimm and John C. Masters, escalating assertion starts off with a mild expression of negative emotion. If the other person fails to respond, the speaker gradually escalates the assertion and becomes more firm in the delivery.

Example of escalating assertion:

Two people are out for the evening when repeatedly approached by a man who is trying to sell them something.

"Nice of you to offer, but we are here to catch up with one another. Thanks anyway."

"No. Thank you. We really would like to just speak with one another."

“This is the third and last time I am going to tell you that we do not want to purchase anything. Please leave us alone!”

#### **4. Confrontive Assertion**

Psychologist Patricia Jakubowski, one of the pioneers in the area of assertiveness, notes that confrontive assertion is used when the other person's words do not match their behaviour. It is to be delivered in a matter-of-fact, non-evaluative way.

Example of confrontive assertion:

“I said it was all right to borrow my CD's as long as you asked me first. Now you're playing them without asking. I'd like to know why you did that.”

#### **5. I-Language Assertion:**

I-Language Assertion is useful when people need to express difficult negative feelings. It is based on the work of psychologist, Thomas Gordon and involves a four-part statement:

1. The speaker describes the other person's behaviour objectively: “When you play my CD's without asking,”
2. The speaker describes how the person's behaviour affects them: “I often can't find a CD when I want to play it...”
3. The speaker then describes how the other person's behaviour makes them feel: “I feel frustrated and angry,”
4. *I'd prefer ...* (speaker describes what he or she wants): “I need you to ask me if you can borrow them and put them back when you are finished.”

Another Example of I-Language Assertion:

“When I'm constantly interrupted, I lose my train of thought and begin to feel that my ideas aren't important to you. I start feeling hurt and angry. I'd like you to make an effort to be patient until I'm finished speaking.”