



Mental Health Association of Northern Kentucky

LEADER IN PROVIDING ADVOCACY, EDUCATION, AND SERVICES THAT PROMOTE MENTAL WELLNESS

EDUCATION AND SCREENING OUTREACH PARTNER FOR THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

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ARE YOU ASSERTIVE ?

Ask Yourself :

- Has anyone ever cut in front of you in a line ? Do you say anything ?
- Do you have difficulty saying “no” to persuasive salespeople ?
- Can you comfortably begin a conversation with strangers ?
- Have you ever regretted “stepping on” someone else to get what you want ?

Are You the Kind of Person Who :

- Does most of the work & gets the least amount of credit for it ?
- Feels guilty when anything goes wrong - whether or not it's your fault ?
- Is afraid to ask a question ?
- Is always speaking before you think ?
- Gives in when someone make demands or argues with you ?
- Keeps your opinions, feelings, ambitions, talents, needs or disagreements to yourself ?

Most of us have found these or similar situations uncomfortable or irritating, yet we're often at a loss for just the “right” response. **Assertive behavior** helps you act in your own best interest, to stand up for yourself without a lot of fear or anxiety. It allows you to exercise your rights without denying the rights of others.

Learning to assert your rights as a human being is an important issue in your life for many reasons. If you must go through life inhibited (giving in to the wishes of others or holding your thoughts, feelings, needs, etc.) or if you tend to destroy others in order to get your way, you probably have low self esteem. Even physical complaints such as headaches, fatigue, stomach problems, rashes and asthma have often been attributed to failing to develop assertive behavior.

Non-assertive persons are likely to think of the best response after the situation has passed. Aggressive persons may not even give it another thought, but have made deep, negative impressions on others & may regret it later.

People commonly mistake aggression for assertion, but **assertive people do not** :

- put others down
- deny others' rights
- use others or walk all over people

Because it can be difficult to tell the difference between assertive, aggressive & non-assertive (passive) behavior, the following pages provide definitions & examples to help illustrate the difference.

DEFINITIONS

ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR : behavior that allows a person to stand up for his / her legitimate rights without violating the rights of others. It is an honest, direct & appropriate type of behavior that shows respect for the other person, although not necessarily for the person's behavior.

NON - ASSERTIVE / PASSIVE BEHAVIOR : behavior that enables a person's rights to be violated by another person. It prevents honest, spontaneous reactions & often leaves the non-assertive person feeling hurt, anxious & / or angry.

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR : behavior in which a person stand up for his / her legitimate rights in a way that violates the rights of others. It is often viewed as an attack on the other person rather than just an expression of ideas.

	Non - Assertive Behavior	Assertive Behavior	Aggressive Behavior
Characteristics of the Behavior	Emotionally dishonest, indirect, self-denying, inhibited.	(appropriately) Emotionally honest, direct, self-enhancing, expressive	(inappropriately) emotionally honest, self-enhancing at the expense of another
How You Feel When You Act This Way	Hurt, anxious & possibly angry later	Confident, you respect yourself at the time & later	Superior at the time & possibly guilty later
How the Other Person Feels	Superior or guilty	Valued, he / she respects you	Hurt, humiliated
What the Other Person Thinks about You	Irritated, pity, disgusted	Generally he / she will respect you	Angry, he / she may think about getting back at you

Think about a situation you have been in that upset you. Now think about how you responded, were you passive, assertive or aggressive ? How could you have handled the situation differently ?

IRRATIONAL BELIEFS / FEARS ABOUT BEING ASSERTIVE

Many of us are inhibited, afraid to behave as assertively as we would like. This is partly because we have so many anxieties about the supposedly negative results of being direct. These anxieties stem from irrational beliefs which distort reality by focusing on & anticipating the “disastrous”, “awful” & “worst possible” outcomes of being assertive. When we accept these irrational beliefs, we are overly concerned with how we think others will react & we usually end up giving in.

Irrational beliefs are not based on reality but rather on fantasy - we imagine the most negative results of acting assertively. When you find the belief that is preventing you from being assertive, decide whether it is rational or not. Even if some people get mad at you, what are the real consequences ?

Irrational Belief # 1 : *If I assert myself, others will get mad at me.*

But in Fact : If I assert myself the effects may be positive, neutral or negative.

And : Since I am asserting my legitimate rights, the odds are in my favor that I will have a positive result.

Plus : If I assert myself, people may or may not get mad at me. They may feel closer to me, they might like what I say & help me to solve the problem.

Irrational Belief # 2 : *If I assert myself & people do become angry with me, I'll be devastated. I won't be able to handle it, I'll feel horrible.*

But in Fact : Even if others do become angry & unpleasant, I am capable of handling it without falling apart.

And : If I assert myself when it is appropriate, I don't have to feel responsible for the other person's feelings. That is his / her responsibility.

Irrational Belief # 3 : *Although I prefer others to be honest with me, I'm afraid that if I am open with others & tell them "No", I will hurt them..*

But in Fact : People may or may not feel hurt by me.

And : Most people are not as fragile as I think they are & they will probably appreciate my honesty.

Irrational Belief # 4 : *If I hurt others by being assertive, it's all my fault.*

But in Fact : Even if others do feel hurt by my assertive behavior, I can let them know that I care for them while also being direct about what I need and want.

And : Although at times others will be taken back by my assertive behavior, most people will not be shattered by it.

Irrational Belief # 5 : *It is wrong & selfish to turn down legitimate requests. Other people will think I'm terrible & won't like me.*

But in Fact : Even legitimate requests can be refused assertively.

And : It is okay to sometimes put my needs before the needs of others.

Plus : I can't please all people all the time.

Irrational Belief # 6 : *At all costs I must avoid making statements & asking questions that might make me look stupid.*

But in Fact : I can't expect to know everything & no else thinks I do. It's okay to ask questions & to make mistakes.

And : Everyone makes mistakes, it just shows we're human.

Irrational Belief # 7 : *Assertive people are cold & mean. If I'm assertive, people will think I'm cold & mean. They won't like me.*

But in Fact : Assertive people are direct & honest & act appropriately. They show a genuine concern for other people's rights & feelings as well as their own.

And : Being assertive makes our relationships closer & more meaningful.

BEHAVIORS THAT ARE OFTEN DIFFICULT TO PERFORM

- A. Praising yourself, finding your strengths.
- B. Expressing positive feedback.
- C. Sending a clear message.
- D. Making a request, asking for what you need or want.
- E. Refusing a request, saying no.
- F. Asking someone to change his / her behavior.
- G. Contradicting & confronting others.
- H. Initiating a conversation with strangers.
- I. Accepting positive feedback, taking compliments.
- J. Accepting negative feedback, even "constructive criticism".

Below, rank from 1 to 5 the behaviors that you want to improve. (With 1 being the most important to you.) Then write down your normal response to the situation & in the third column describe the response you would like to give.

Behavior	Usual Response	New Response
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____

HOMEWORK : Choose 2 of the behaviors that you want to work on this week & make a contract with yourself. For example, “this week I will ask for what I want / need at least once a day”.

NON - VERBAL COMPONENTS OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

- I. Eye Contact** : look people straight in the eye, maintain a fair amount of eye contact but don't stare at them. They might think you're trying to intimidate them.
- II. Body Posture** : stand up straight, keep your shoulders back & your head up. You want your body posture to appear serious but not tense or closed. Try to remember not to fold your arms or turn away from people.
- III. Gestures** : watch for nervous, non-assertive gestures such as biting nails, twisting hair, tapping fingers, swinging foot, etc. Use firm, straightforward gestures.
- IV. Facial Expression** : watch out for the perpetual nervous smile, furious frowns, silly grins, gritting your teeth or clenching your jaw.
- V. Voice** : Speak loudly enough so you are easily heard, speak clearly & distinctly, don't talk too fast & don't be threatened of silences, try to eliminate whiny voice tones.

List 3 areas of non-verbal behaviors that you want to work on :

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

List some of your habits Do you bite your nails or have poor eye contact ?

What new & assertive habits can you use instead ?

EXERCISES - What Would You Do ?

Write in an assertive response to each of the following situations.

A sibling or close friend asks if they can borrow money from you. You're barely able to pay your own bills & he / she has borrowed money in the past without paying it back.

You are riding in a car with a friend or family member. His / her quick movements in & out of traffic at a high rate of speed are making you extremely nervous.

You bought a small appliance from a local store but when you got it home it wasn't working. You get up the courage to go to the store & ask for a new one but the store employee refuses.
