

## GUIDELINES FOR ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR

Summarized by James J. Crist, Ph.D.

**Definition:** Assertiveness is congruence between what you feel and what you say and do about it. It is a way of getting what you want without feeling guilty and without manipulating others. It is a set of verbal skills that can be learned. Being assertive involves being able to identify when others are trying to manipulate you (e.g. by making you feel guilty) and not allowing them to do so. Not being assertive makes it difficult to be respected as an individual and allows others to dictate who you are and what you do. Being assertive is essential to building and maintaining healthy boundaries and self-respect.

Babies are naturally assertive and persistent about stating their needs. We all start out naturally expressing ourselves and trying to do and get what we want. However, this is not always convenient for your parents, nor is it always safe for us. As babies, our parents physically restrain us to both protect and to control us. Later, as we learn to walk and are not so easily controlled, our parents resort to psychological control. We are made to feel ignorant, stupid, guilty, foolish, and to fear punishment or loss of our parents' love as ways of controlling us. Once these methods take effect and we are subject to these unpleasant feelings, we will go to great lengths to avoid these feelings. Unfortunately, these feelings are retained as we grow up, which allows others to manipulate us. By understanding these feelings, and by learning assertiveness skills, we can again become assertive.

Many people will be threatened by assertive people. They may have a need to control you to feel safe and to feel OK. Once they learn they cannot control you, they may feel powerless. People who try to use guilt to manipulate you may also be subject to manipulation by guilt--seeing others who are not similarly motivated can threaten their whole way of being.

### **The Assertive Bill of Rights**

1. You have the right to judge your own behavior, thoughts, and emotions and to take the responsibility for their initiation and consequences upon yourself.
2. You have the right to offer no reasons or justify your behavior. People don't have the right to manipulate you or put you on the defensive if you do not choose to explain your behavior.
3. You have the right to judge when you are responsible for finding solutions to other people's problems.
4. You have the right to change your mind.
5. You have the right to make mistakes and be responsible for yourself. Your errors are simply errors, nothing more and nothing less. They can be admitted and forgotten without feeling guilty.
6. You have the right to say "I don't know." You don't need to have all the answers to all the possible consequences of your actions.
7. You have the right to be independent of the good will of others before coping with them. You don't need the good will of everyone all the time to cope with them or to maintain relationships with them.
8. You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
9. You have the right to say "I don't understand." People often try to get you to change your behavior by invoking reasons without directly telling you what their feelings are.
10. You have the right to say "I don't care." You don't need to want to strive to be perfect in all things at all times just because others think you should.

## General notes:

Use eye contact whenever possible. If necessary, look in one eye instead of both. Give your opinions on things more freely with less regard for how this will be perceived. The more you share of yourself in an assertive manner, the less likely people will be to take advantage of you and perceived you according to their own fantasies, rather than the reality of who you are. This technique is sometimes called self-disclosure.

Remember these points: Disagreement is a part of life. Allow others to disagree or disapprove of you--that is their right. Even when you explain why you must say no, don't expect that their anger at you will vanish--allow them their anger and disappointment. In fact, you can sympathize with it. But be careful that any guilt you feel about saying no does not result in backing off or making promises or saying things that are not sincere.

## Techniques For Being Assertive

1. Ask for favors directly. Being turned down does not mean you are being rejected--"nothing ventured, nothing gained." (e. g. "Joe, will you/could you do X for me?" "Joe, I'd like you to do a favor for me by doing X." "I would really appreciate it if you could help me by doing X. Thanks, I really appreciate it.") Don't get into how you will owe them favor for life, giving long drawn out explanations of why you need the favor, i.e. justifying that you have a need. A brief explanation will do.
2. If you must turn down a request (e.g. for a favor, for buying something from a salesperson) do so gently and in an accepting way, without going overboard in rationalizing why you cannot or criticizing the person for asking because you feel guilty saying no. (e.g. "Sorry, I can't. I'm feeling overwhelmed. I have other plans. But thanks for asking." "No, I'm not interested.") Again, be careful that your guilt about saying no does not cause you to give in against your wishes. You can also say "Maybe you're right, but that's the way I feel."
3. Use feeling statements whenever possible, rather than attempting character assassinations. Focus on your feelings, rather than on what the person did or why you think the person did what s/he did. Basic format is: When you do X, I feel Y, because Z. For example, "I feel angry when you do X." "I felt upset when you said Y because of Z." "It upsets me when we don't keep our plans because I worry that you don't value our friendship." "I really felt mad at you when X happened because Z.")
4. It is important to respect the other person's feelings when communicating your feelings. Can say "I had some feelings about what happened that I'd like to share with you--when would be a good time for us to talk about this?" It is often helpful to explicitly own your feelings and reactions. Emphasize that these are simply your feelings or your perceptions, implying that the other person may have had other feelings or motives which influenced his/her actions as well.
5. When disagreeing, always respect the other person's right to his/her feelings and opinions. (e.g. "Hmm, I don't see it that way. I see it differently." "I don't agree with you on that point. This is my opinion on this.") Be careful not to be dogmatic when doing so, for this may close you to considering other points of view. It helps to be genuinely curious and interested in how and why a person thinks/feels differently from you. View it as a challenge to understand, rather than a threat to the "correctness" of your own view.

## Assertive Techniques to Counter Manipulative Attempts

1. Broken Record. This is useful when a person refuses to take no for an answer, either in terms of asking you for something or asking you to engage in behavior that is against your wishes. Keep repeating what you want, over and over, without changing your tone of voice or the basic content of what you want. Object is to be more persistent than your opponent/partner. May not get what you want, but you will preserve self-respect. You can compromise or bargain for what you want, as long as you feel comfortable doing so and feel that you're not being manipulated. Use of the word "no" may be helpful, e.g. "No, I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that."
2. Fogging. If a person attacks you by being critical such that it is difficult to respond, use fogging, such that you make it constructive even if it is not offered as such, or you deflate them if it was intended as destructive. Like fog, the idea is to offer no resistance or to fight back. Agree with any valid criticisms or actual truthful statements people use to criticize you. Also, agree with any possible truth or even a general truth related to the situation. The basic message to convey is that you heard the person's criticism, that you agree that there is probably some truth to it, but that you can go on with your life nevertheless. You may also want to consider making a change when you feel it is warranted. You can: a) listen to the complaint; b) parrot it back; c) reflect the feeling behind the content and sympathize if indicated; d) ask for specific clarification on exactly what bothers the other person. e) ask what he/she would like you to do differently or offer an alternative. (e.g. "Hmm, so you think I'm being stubborn when I do Y. And that makes you angry. Tell me again, was it the way I said it? What would you suggest I do differently?" "I understand you are angry at me for doing X. I did not realize I was doing that. How about, if next time, we try Y?" However, you can also respond more directly if you prefer to deter continued criticism. (e.g. Maybe you're trying to be helpful, but I don't appreciate your comments. If I want your feedback, I'll be sure to ask you for it.)
3. Negative Assertion. Admit to any mistakes, without apologizing profusely or engaging in self-criticism. This helps you reduce your own guilt feelings as well. Examples: "Yes, I really goofed."
4. Negative Inquiry. Ask for clarification, without counterattacking, to discover the person's actual feelings behind the criticism. Can say "I don't understand--why is that bad? What is it about my behavior that is so bad?"

Reference: *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*. M. Smith.