Stand Up For Yourself: Be Assertive

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself only, what am I?
If not now, when?

Babylonian Talmud

What exactly is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is the ability to express your thoughts and feelings in a way that clearly states your needs and keeps the line of communication open with others. Some think that becoming assertive means that you stop being nice and become complaining or rude. They confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness, which is standing up for yourself in a way that violates the rights of others. Assertiveness is actually about recognizing that we are all created equal.

Everyday, many of us find ourselves in situations where we feel we are being asked to do something that does not seem reasonable, we feel like our requests are being ignored, or we feel that we have to agree with someone or justify our opinion if we disagree. Being assertive can help you to more effectively deal with such situations.

Are you Assertive?

Read the following scenario and answer the subsequent question. Then look at the following descriptions to determine where you fall with regard to assertive behavior. You would like your roommate to help clean the apartment once a week. Keeping the apartment clean is important to you, but does not seem to be important to your roommate. You walk in one day to a messy apartment. Your roommate is lying on the couch listening to the radio. Which of the following scenarios sounds the most like you?

A. You: “Uh, I was wondering if you would be willing to take the time to decide about the house cleaning?”
RM: “Not now, I’m busy.”
You: “Oh, Okay.” (You probably end up cleaning later by yourself.)

B. You: “Listen, I’ve had it with you not even talking to me about cleaning this apartment. Are you going to help me?”
RM: “Not now, I’m busy.”
You: “Why can’t you even look at me when I’m talking to you? You don’t care about the housework or about me! You only care about yourself!”
RM: “That’s not true!”
You: “You never pay any attention to the apartment. I have to do everything around here!”
C. You: “This place is a mess.”
RM: “Don’t start in now, I’m busy!”
You: “Fine! I guess I won’t bother myself about the mess either.”
(You leave the place messy, thinking your roommate will reach a point where she’ll get tired of the mess and will start cleaning it up.)
C. You: “This place is a mess.”
   RM: “Don’t start in now, I’m busy!”
   You: “Fine! I guess I won’t bother myself about the mess either.” (You leave the place
   messy, thinking your roommate will reach a point where she’ll get tired of the mess and
   will start cleaning it up.)

D. You: “I know that housework isn’t the most fascinating subject, but it has to be done. Let’s
plan when we’ll do it.”
   RM: “Oh c’mon, not now, I’m busy!”
   You: “This won’t take long. If we make a schedule it will be easier to keep up with the
chores.”
   RM: “I have to do this now??”
   You: “Is there some other time that’s better for you?”
   RM: “Oh, I don’t know.”
   You: “Then let’s discuss plans after supper for fifteen minutes. OK?”
   RM: “I guess so.”

(adapted from Bower and Bower, Asserting Your-Self: A Practical Guide For Positive Change. 1991, 9-11)

What is your interaction style?

**Scenario A** represents a passive style of interacting. This is when you give up your rights and, either directly or
indirectly, defer to the rights of another person. The problem with this reaction is that you now have not dealt with the
problem that you wanted to deal with; moreover, it is probable that you will also lose a little self-esteem in the process.
Passive reactors typically repeat this type of scenario over and over, becoming more and more angry or upset with
themselves as it continues.

**Scenario B** represents an aggressive style of interacting. You’re frustrated, your voice is loud and demanding, and you
begin to attack your roommate’s self esteem. Your roommate naturally resists, and an argument ensues. There are no
winners in this scenario as both of you leave the interaction feeling hurt and angry.

**Scenario C** represents a passive-aggressive style of interacting. This is when people attempt to get what they need or
want indirectly or manipulatively. Sarcasm, gossip, and at times even humor, can be an indirect means of expressing
hostility and an attempt to control and punish.

**Scenario D** represents an assertive style of interacting. You negotiate with your roommate, even though he or she tries
to avoid the talk. You are persistent and give your roommate choices. Often, it is easier for someone to agree to a small
request before a big one, and you use this to reach your ultimate goal. You leave the interaction with a feeling of
success, and your roommate does not feel he or she has been attacked. This scenario represents a goal for effective
communication. However, it should be noted that this is only one example of a way to approach this situation and that it
may be necessary to have repeated interactions until change takes place.
Assertiveness Tips

Assertiveness is more than standing up for your rights and not violating others’ rights. It means expressing your personal likes and interests spontaneously, talking about yourself without being self-conscious, accepting compliments comfortably, disagreeing with someone openly, asking for clarification, and saying no. In short, it means being more relaxed in interpersonal situations and being able to take time for yourself.

Here are some other tips for effective communication:

1. Identify your rights, wants, needs, and feelings.
2. Define your goal and keep it in mind when you negotiate for change.
3. If possible, arrange a time and place to discuss the situation that is convenient for you and the other person.
4. Describe your feelings calmly and directly so that the other person has a better understanding of how important an issue is to you.
5. Use “I” statements and avoid sentences beginning with “why” and “you.”
6. Define the problem situation as clearly and specifically as possible, without judging or devaluing. Try not to make assumptions about what the other person is thinking or feeling, or about what their motives are.
7. Listen and acknowledge that you have heard the speaker’s position. “I know that you’re trying to relax and that cleaning the apartment is one of the last things you want to think about right now.”
8. Ask for one or two specific changes that are reasonably possible. And express your request in a direct way, i.e. “I would really like to work out a plan for cleaning the apartment.”
9. Point out how it will be helpful to both of you, i.e. “Then we’ll be able to enjoy our time together at home.”
10. Be willing to compromise.

There are many methods and activities that can be used in assertiveness training. Most people find it easier to be assertive in some situations than in others. It takes time and practice.