

1.3

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is viewed as the open and appropriate expression of thoughts and feelings, with due regard to the rights of others. Being assertive means understanding your rights and sticking up for them without being aggressive.

Have you ever:

- Hesitated to question a mistake on a restaurant bill because you were afraid of making a scene?
- Backed out of telling a shopkeeper that he short-changed you because there were a lot of people in the shop waiting to be served?
- Said 'yes' when you wanted to say 'no'?

Do you have trouble being assertive? - You're not alone

A term which is well known, especially to consumers, is compliance. Complying with requests is a normal part of daily social life. But there are some times when a willingness to comply can exceed what is reasonable. A researcher by the name of Thomas Moriarty became interested in the personal insults, rebuffs and sacrifices of dignity that are common in life. Moriarty observed that many people are non-assertive to the point where they put up with almost anything to avoid a confrontation. He decided to put this non-assertive, non-hassle attitude to the test.

In one experiment, two subjects (one an accomplice of Moriarty's) were given a difficult test in a small room. As soon as Moriarty left the room the phoney subject turned on a portable cassette player at full volume, giving the other person a 17 minute blast of rock music. Incredibly, 80 percent of subjects said nothing, although they glared, cupped their ears, stopped work and so forth. At later interviews the subjects indicated they were angry or annoyed but were afraid to tell the other person to be quiet (Moriarty, 1975).

To show that this non-assertive nature of people also exists outside of the controlled experiment setting, Moriarty and his students staged loud conversations behind theatre patrons and people studying in a library. Very few people protested. In another setting, people in telephone boxes were confronted and asked if they had found a ring that had been left in there. When they replied that they hadn't, they were demanded to empty their pockets. Most people emptied their pockets.

In these and similar situations, people passively accepted having their personal rights trampled, even when objecting presented no threat to their safety.

Most of us have been rewarded, first as children and later as adults, for compliant, obedient, or 'good' behaviour. Perhaps this is why so many people find it difficult to assert themselves. Or perhaps non-assertion is related to the anxiety that accompanies 'making a scene' or feeling disliked by others.

Every human being has three basic rights:

The right to refuse,

The right to request,

The right to right a wrong.

Self-assertion involves standing up for these rights by speaking out on your own behalf. Self-assertiveness is not just about getting things your own way. A basic distinction can be made between self-assertiveness and aggressive behaviour. Assertiveness is a direct, honest expression of feelings and desires. It is not exclusively self-serving, since pent-up anger can be very destructive to relationships. People who are non-assertive are usually patient to a fault. In contrast, aggression does not take into account the feelings or rights of others. Aggression is an attempt to get one's own way, no matter what.

Comparison of Assertive, Aggressive and Non-assertive behaviour

	Initiator	Receiver of behaviour
Non-assertive behaviour	Self-denying, inhibited, hurt and anxious; lets others make choices; goals not achieved	Feels sympathy, guilt or contempt for initiator; achieves goals at initiator's expense
Aggressive behaviour	Achieves goals at others' expense; expresses feelings but hurts others; chooses on behalf of others or puts them down	Feels hurt, defensive, humiliated or taken advantage of; does not meet own needs
Assertive behaviour	Self-enhancing; acts in own best interest; expresses feelings; respects rights of others; goals usually achieved; self-respect maintained	Needs respected and feelings expressed; may achieve goal; self-worth maintained

Adapted from Alberti and Emmons, 1978