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A Guide to:

Assertiveness Skills

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Assertiveness

Assertiveness is described as the art of confident communication. It's a collection of skills and behaviours that, when used correctly, can leave others that communicate with us with a feeling of confidence in what we have said or asked.

Many people look to developing their assertiveness skills to increase their levels of confidence. In fact, assertiveness in itself does not have this effect.

Confidence is a behavioural term that others will use to describe us and us describe them. When we look to increase our levels of confidence, what we are looking for is an increase in self-belief and trust in ourselves to be able to do things.

This assertiveness guide looks at a number of assertiveness principles as well as some key assertiveness skills, tools and techniques that you can use to appear and therefore become more assertive.

What's In This Guide?

Here is what you will find in this assertiveness guide:

- [What is Assertiveness](#)
- [Assertiveness Vs Passive, Aggressive and Passive-Aggressive Behaviours](#)
- [How to Demonstrate Assertiveness](#)
- [Dealing With People Who Are Not Assertive](#)
- [Assertiveness Tools and Techniques](#)
- [Your Next Actions](#)
- [Suggested Reading](#)

What is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is described as the "Art of Confident Communication". It's a method of communication whereby other people who see the communication have confidence in the person and in the message being delivered.



Assertiveness definition: Confident and direct when dealing with others

Let's break this down:

- **Confident** - the ability to deliver a message in a way that instils confidence in the person receiving it so it sounds like it's the right thing to do or the right decision has been made
- **Direct** - Not going from London to Newcastle via Liverpool! It's getting to the point and not adding in unnecessary language to dress up the message as this can weaken the message or the message gets lost. It's delivering the message in the most direct way.

For many people, assertiveness gets confused with aggression when they try to describe what assertiveness is. They understand that assertiveness is about being direct, but they can often get the description of how things are communicated wrong. This means they typically describe aggression and not assertiveness.

One important thing to understand is that assertiveness isn't natural. We may describe other people who are naturally assertive. It is probably more likely that we look at them as being confident and not necessarily assertive.

Assertiveness is a skill or a learnt way of communicating that takes real practice, thought and conscious effort to be able to do it correctly. You need to find a way to switch it on and off so you only use it when it's required.

Assertiveness Vs Other Behaviours

To help us understand what assertiveness is, it's a good idea to start looking at what it isn't.

When we consider behaviour, or in this case our responses to situations or asking for what we want or need, we can look at assertiveness alongside 3 other sets of behaviours:

- Passive
- Aggressive
- Passive-Aggressive

These types of behaviour are described as natural or gut reactions or unconscious reactions. This means we have little or no control over these responses. They come from the fight or flight response that we have.

Because they are emotional, we often don't realise that we are demonstrating them and this leads to us communicating without control. This is laid out in a common assertiveness model called the assertiveness choice triangle. You will see later that assertiveness is much more controlled and conscious.



Read more about the assertiveness choice triangle by reading our article [The Assertive Choice Triangle](#).

Passive Behaviour

Passive behaviour is normally a gut-based or natural reaction to an internal or external event that triggers an emotional feeling which results in passive behaviour being demonstrated. There is no 'fixed list' of traits that would define passive behaviour and therefore help us to ultimately answer the question of what is aggressive behaviour.

Passiveness means to not respond or react to situations but rather agree. It means not asking for what you want or need and just accepting situations for what they are.

This means that typically, other people get what they want and you don't

You can read more about passive behaviour and how to identify it by reading our article [What is Passive Behaviour](#).

Aggressive Behaviour

Like passive behaviour, aggressive behaviour is normally a gut-based or natural reaction too. This results in aggressive behaviour being demonstrated.

Aggression means to push for the things that you want and need or to not accept things as other people see them. You want people to accept what you have to say as being right.

As mentioned previously, many people think that this is being assertive, but when we are aggressive we have a tendency to damage relationships with others. People don't want to communicate with us or work with us. We may feel like we have won, but the reality is that we have made a massive loss.

If we were being assertive, people would buy into what we have to say or what we are asking rather than being forced. This means the relationship stays intact or is even strengthened.

You can read more about aggressive behaviour and how to identify it by reading our article [What is Aggressive Behaviour](#).

Aggressive Behaviour

Passive-aggressive behaviour can either be gut-based or very conscious. This really depends on whether it is an unconscious response that we are having or we are using the behaviour to be manipulative. There are 2 main types of passive-aggressive behaviour:

- We are passive with one person and agree or take on board what they are saying, even if we disagree with it. Then, we describe to someone else what we will do next time should they repeat the same behaviour. Rather than telling someone what we will do next time, we really should have done this when we had the opportunity
- We use words to say that we are happy or agree with something, but our body language and tone gives a whole different message.

You can read more about passive-aggressive behaviour and how to identify it by reading our article [What is Passive-Aggressive Behaviour](#).

How to Demonstrate Assertiveness

In a previous section, we talked about the assertiveness choice triangle and how assertiveness first and foremost needs to be a choice. This means that you need to make the decision to be assertive.

Assertiveness is conscious behaviour that we learn to do. The term used in assertiveness is engaging your brain. It means we need to think about responding or communicating before we respond or communicate.

If you don't do this, you will find it very difficult to be assertive.



Find out more about assertiveness and the skills and approaches behind assertiveness by attending our [assertiveness skills training course](#).

Assertiveness is about showing that we are in control of our emotions and we are thinking logically about what we are saying and doing. This means that assertiveness that being assertive is being:

- Calm
- Controlled
- Direct
- Conscious
- Respectful

Once we have made the decision to be assertive, then we can control the behaviour that we show people. This is typically done through 3 things:

- Body Language
- Voice
- Words

Assertive Body Language

Assertive people are described as using open and confident body language. There is a risk here though. If you have to force this behaviour on yourself it can come across as being forced and therefore uncomfortable and therefore not confident.

Assertive Voice

Calm tones, not shouting or even raising the voice. Assertive people tend to communicate using their current tone of voice

Assertive Words/Language

Positive language and the use of questions to understand the other persons or parties point of view. Assertive people are also known to be empathetic and use statements to this effect.

Assertive people want to understand other peoples points of view before letting other people know their own. This allows for a more considered response and allows the other person to think that you have an interest in their position. This goes a long way to building better relationships and lessens the likelihood of you being seen as aggressive.

Here are some behavioural descriptions of what assertiveness is:

- Confident
- Direct
- Calm and controlled
- Smooth, precise body movements
- Good eye contact
- Expressing what you want, what you feel and what you need
- Asking questions to understand others positions
- Being able to take responsibility and admit to mistakes
- Positive attitude and outlook
- Friendly and supportive

Dealing With Non-Assertive People

It's OK us being assertive, but what happens if someone is not being assertive with us. What if they are being passive, aggressive or passive-aggressive toward us?

The answer has already been stated in this guide - we need to remain assertive and encourage the other person to be assertive back. We don't do this by telling them. We do this through influence.

The more assertive we are, the more assertive they are likely to be. If we slip out of assertiveness and into one of the other behaviours, then we just encourage that behaviour in the other person.

Take a look at our blog post called [Dealing With Non-Assertive People](#) for more tips and ideas on this subject.

Assertiveness Tools and Techniques

Here are some of the common assertiveness techniques that we recommend and use in our assertiveness skills training courses:

- The Bill of Assertive Rights
- The Fogging Technique
- The Positive and Negative Enquiry Technique
- The Broken Record Technique

The Bill of Assertive Rights

The bill of assertive rights is 10 things that highlight the freedoms we have to be ourselves without disrespecting others. They help us to understand how and when we can all be more assertive and how we can respond to others who are not being assertive with us.

The 'Bill of Assertive Rights' reads as follows:

1. You have the right to judge your own behaviour, 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 excuses for justifying your behaviour.
3. You have the right to judge if 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 them.
6. You have the right to say, 'I don't know'.
7. You have the right to be independent of the goodwill of others before coping with them.
8. You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
9. You have the right to say, 'I don't understand'.
10. You have the right to say, 'I don't care'.

You can read more about the Bill of Assertive Rights and how to apply them by reading our article [The Bill of Assertive Rights](#).

The Fogging Technique

The fogging technique is an approach used to provide a calm response to someone who is being aggressive towards us. When used correctly, the fogging technique reduces further confrontation by quashing it and not providing more fuel to escalate it.

By using the fogging technique, we deliver a different response to what was expected. With no fuel, the other person begins to change their approach towards us and likely becomes calmer and more assertive themselves.

You can read more about the fogging technique and how to use it by reading our article [The Fogging Technique](#).

The Positive and Negative Enquiry Technique

The positive and negative enquiry technique is a skill used when someone provides us with a compliment or praise, or when someone provides us with negative feedback or criticism.

The positive and negative enquiry technique has 2 different responses - positive and negative which are more commonly known as positive enquiry and negative enquiry.

1. Positive Enquiry - used for handling positive comments, praise and compliments
2. Negative Enquiry - used for handling negative comments, feedback or criticism

Many of us don't know how to respond to positive feedback or compliments. It's important that when someone gives us a compliment or praise we test why they are doing this.

Negative enquiry follows the same process but we ask for more details of the negative feedback or criticism. Just like positive enquiry, we ask questions to have the person elaborate further on the feedback.

You can learn more about the positive and negative enquiry technique by reading our article [the Positive and Negative Enquiry Technique](#).

The Broken Record Technique

Much like the name suggests, when using the broken record technique, we act like a broken record - where the record gets stuck and keeps repeating the same thing over and over. You simply need to keep repeating yourself until the other person gives in or concedes to your position.

We pick a phrase that describes our current position and, no matter what the other person comes back to us with, we answer with the same phrase. This shows that we are unwavering from our position and that no matter how their responses are delivered or what they say, we will not move.

This technique should be used with caution and at the right time. You can learn more about the broken record technique and how to apply it by reading our article [the Broken Record Technique](#).

Your Next Actions

Find out what your development areas are when it comes to assertiveness and understand how assertive, passive, aggressive and passive-aggressive you are likely to be by completing our assertiveness profile questionnaire.

You can complete this on the [Assertiveness Profile page](#). Your results will give you some indication of how much of each behaviour you demonstrate.

You can also learn a lot more and also understand how to apply the skills from assertiveness by attending our assertiveness skills training course.

We run our assertiveness skills course as a scheduled open course at various locations and also as a live virtual online course. We can also deliver a course in-house just for your team or business.

Take a look at the information about our [Assertiveness Skills training course](#) for more details, the schedule and how to get in touch.

Suggested Reading

Here are some books on assertiveness that you might find useful:

- [When I Say No I Feel Guilty](#) - Manuel J Smith
- [The Art of Everyday Assertiveness](#) - Patrick King and Joe Hempel
- [The Essential Guide to Assertiveness](#) - James Turnbull
- [I'm OK, You're OK](#) - Thomas Harris

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