

## TO SUCCEED AT ANYTHING IN LIFE YOU MUST KNOW HOW AND WHEN TO BE ASSERTIVE

When you are assertive, you honor your desires, needs and values ... without throwing your weight around. Being assertive requires strength—not belligerence or inappropriate aggressive behavior.

Here's how to develop a healthy level of self-assertiveness without offending other people ...

### WHAT IS SELF-ASSERTIVENESS?

Self-assertiveness is the ability to be aggressive while being intimately aware of your behavior and its appropriate limits. It is a balancing act between two extremes ...

Mindless rebellion—action without insight—is not self-assertiveness but rather irresponsible recklessness.

On the other hand, if you are aware of your needs and values but fail to express them, each act of suppression chips away at your self-esteem, thus eroding your sense of who you really are.

Self-assertiveness is also linked to self-respect. When you stand up for what you think and feel ... when you clearly voice your opinions and reactions ... when you openly reveal who you are—you treat yourself as worthy of respect and as someone who matters.

### WHY BEING SELF-ASSERTIVE IS HARD

When we were children, most of us were criticized when we expressed opinions or desires that differed from the opinions of our parents or peers. We were taught, What you want is not important. What is important is what other people want.

As a result, some of us have come to fear that openly revealing our true thoughts and feelings will lead to rejection. In fact, we may have become so intent on pleasing others that we have forgotten how to think for ourselves ... and can no longer identify our own thoughts and feelings.

There is nothing wrong with tailoring the way we express ourselves out of consideration for others' feelings. But too often, we fail to share our true selves—not because of thoughtfulness but because of fear. We surrender to timidity in order to please or placate others ... to avoid confrontation ... to feel we belong. If we do this all the time, we may lose touch with what we want and who we are.

### APPROPRIATE SELF-EXPRESSION

An essential key to understanding self-assertiveness is the word appropriate. When we express ourselves, it is important to pay attention to our surroundings and circumstances. Particularly in business situations—and sometimes among intimates—we can sabotage ourselves or hurt others needlessly by being bluntly self-expressive.

Curbing self-expression in certain situations doesn't have to mean being false to oneself. You can be authentic in your manner and yet choose not to announce everything you're thinking and feeling.

Example: Suppose I have a troublesome argument with my wife a few minutes before a client arrives for a psychotherapy session. It would not be appropriate for me to say to my client, You think you've got problems? Let me tell you what just happened to me.

I would keep quiet about my own problems—not to placate my client but out of respect for the nature of our relationship and to live up to my

agreement as a professional and provide the service for which he hired me.

### HOW TO BECOME SELF-ASSERTIVE

Recognize your right to exist. Simply contemplating the idea that as a human being you deserve self-respect—and reminding yourself of this daily—is a valuable first step.

When in doubt—speak up. Most of us experience moments when we think to ourselves, Should I say something? Maybe it's not worth it. Learn to recognize those moments—and instead of keeping quiet, say to yourself, It is worth it. Then speak up, and see what happens.

You might say something inappropriate—but this is part of learning to be yourself. The results are rarely disastrous or irreversible. Be willing to make—and learn from—your mistakes.

Demystify rejection. Rejection is more than a possibility—it is an inevitable part of life. If we are honest about who we are and what we think and feel, people will sometimes disagree with us. In some cases, they may even dislike us. People who fear speaking up may view any rejection as a disaster—but it doesn't have to be that way.

Learn to take rejection in stride. Instead of assuming that it would be unbearable and must be avoided at all costs, learn to see it as a normal bump on the road of life ... and think about how you might creatively deal with the rejection if it happens.

Rehearse new ways of expressing yourself. As with any other new behavior, speaking up may feel awkward at first. When spontaneous reactions have been bottled up for a long time, they may come out in rude, angry or hysterical ways when we finally do express them.

Alternately, timidity may cause us to be unnecessarily wordy or to state our message in such an obscure or convoluted way that the other person can't figure out what we want.

Role-playing assertive responses can be helpful in both overcoming fears of speaking up and finding the most effective way of expressing oneself.

Example: One of my clients had trouble giving instructions to subordinates. She made requests in a whiny voice, as though she were asking for special favors. As a result, her co-workers didn't take her orders seriously.

In therapy, she tried various ways of communicating with her staff ... and rehearsed assertive phrases, her tones of voice and her body language until they felt more comfortable. As she learned to do this, she found herself eliciting the responses she wanted from her staff.

Strategy: Enlist a counselor or a trusted, assertive friend to help you practice self-expression and give positive feedback.

Do sentence-completion exercises. One of the best ways to examine your beliefs about self-assertiveness and to encourage change in this area is to practice sentence-completion exercises.

I developed these exercises for my clients and have used them in my psychotherapy practice for many years. They are powerful tools for change.

How the exercise works: Each morning for three weeks, write six to 10 endings for each of the following sentence stems:

If someone had told me my wants were important ...

If I were willing to voice my thoughts and opinions more often ...

If I am willing to ask for what I want ...

When I ignore my deepest yearnings ...

If I lived 5% more assertively today ...

If I am willing to let myself hear the music inside me ...

Write as quickly as possible, without stopping to think about your endings—and without worrying about whether they are good enough.

Each weekend, reread the previous week's sentences and write six to 10 endings for the following stem:

If any of what I have been writing is true, it might be helpful if I ...

This sentence-completion exercise stimulates unconscious integration of new ideas. It helps bring fears out into the open where they can be examined and challenged ... and it helps us tap into levels of awareness, knowledge and readiness to action that we may not have realized we possessed.