



Assertiveness



Assertiveness means standing up for yourself and your rights without feeling guilty. It means taking responsibility for getting your needs met while maintaining respect and consideration for others.

The goal of assertive communication in interpersonal relationships is to increase your ability to have as much control over your life as possible by:

- Successfully influencing the behavior of others.
- Setting limits or saying “No” to invitations, requests, or demands that you believe are not in your best interests.

Assertive Efforts to Influence the Behavior of Others

The most basic truth with regard to influencing the behavior of others is this: ***If you don't tell others what you actually want, you probably won't get it.***

This concept leads directly to these four basics of assertive behavior:

- Communicate what you want or expect from the other person
- Communicate how you feel
- Say what you mean
- Mean what you say



This having been said, there are two major misconceptions about efforts to use assertive behavior to influence the behavior of others:

- The belief that *if our assertive communication is sufficiently skillful*, people will always respond in the way we would like them to.
- The belief that if others don't respond positively to our assertive communication, we have somehow delivered our message in an unskilled manner.

What is actually true is that influencing the behavior of other people is difficult. Assertive skills are designed to increase your success rate influencing the behavior of others. However, even the most *skilled assertive behavior on your part does not guarantee success in getting someone to do as you ask, or in solving interpersonal problems.*

On the other hand, simply making a polite, firm request of others is often times remarkably successful.

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Maintaining Control over Your Own Behavior: Saying “No” to Invitations, Requests, and Demands

Learning to decline invitations to do something you don’t want to do (saying “No”) is the most basic assertive skill. It does not require that you influence the behavior of other people, only that you maintain control over your own behavior.

We use the term “Invitation” to include all requests or demands that others make of you. The use of the term “Invitation” makes it clear that you can accept or decline.

Saying “No” doesn’t have to be rude, curt, or unpleasant. As a matter of fact, the more confidence you have in yourself, the easier it is to be polite and firm.

Remind yourself that people are capable of handling a little disappointment in their lives. Give them the credit they deserve in this regard. Are you really being respectful of other people by assuming they can’t cope with you declining their invitation?

NO

The Many Ways to Say “No”

Memorize these five statements. They tend to be useful in almost any situation where you want to say “No.” These aren’t the only ways to say “No,” of course, but it’s a good place to start.

1. “I’m sorry, but I really have too much on my plate right now.”
2. “Normally, I’d love to help, but I’ve promised myself I’m going to limit my commitments for the time being.”
3. “Thanks for asking, but I really need to focus on my personal life right now. I’ve been feeling a little overwhelmed.”
4. “I’d like to help you but I really have to stand my ground on this.”
5. “No, I’m afraid I won’t be able to help with that.”



The Many Ways to Say “No” (cont.)

When you do say “No,” you have to be prepared for the fact that the other person will try to persuade you to change your mind.

- **Prepare for disappointment (theirs, not yours).** No matter how nice you are when you decline an invitation, you are going to disappoint the person asking. This is just a fact of life and one of the biggest stumbling blocks to self care. Most of us don't want to be the cause of discomfort, so we agree to things that make us uncomfortable rather than have the other person deal with their disappointment.

- **Self care requires us to tolerate the discomfort of others** — not like, but tolerate — discomfort in another person. The most effective way of handling this situation is to believe in the other person's ability to deal with disappointment. This is a kind of respect for others. Remind yourself that people are capable of handling a little disappointment in their lives.



- **Plan for the “Why Not?” questions.**

You: *“No, I'm not going to be able to help you with that.”*

Them: *“Why not? It will only take an hour or two.”*

“Why not?” is actually not a question at all, but a statement challenging your right to say “No.” Since it's not really a question, it doesn't deserve or require an answer. The best strategy is to simply repeat your original message.

- Avoid giving reasons or excuses when declining the other person's invitation. This opens the door for the other person to challenge your reason or to begin an argument.
- Memorize the Magic Assertiveness Response. If you are confronted with someone who continues to argue with you, try this:

“I've said “No” as nicely as I know how. I'm going to have to ask you to respect my answer. Can you do that?”

This is difficult for even the most argumentative person to ignore.



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Practice

1. As you go through your day, look for opportunities to decline invitations that you might have agreed to in the past at work, at home, with children, and with friends.
2. Catch yourself feeling bad or guilty about disappointing the person asking and remind yourself to respect their ability to tolerate a little disappointment in their lives.
3. Pay attention to how much your sense of control over your life increases and how well others actually handle disappointment.
4. Since you know it's coming, always have a plan for how you will respond to the inevitable challenge to your decision.

