



# ASSERTIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE AND AT HOME

## EXPRESSING ANGER ASSERTIVELY

### You have the right to express your feelings, including anger:

You have a responsibility not to humiliate or abuse other people in the process of expressing your negative feelings. Many people have been taught that they should not express anger, that they should not let other people know that they feel it, and even that they should not feel angry. It is almost impossible not to feel some anger at some time, and we believe that it is healthy and even helpful for an individual or a relationship to express anger appropriately and with respect for other person's feelings.

### Anger can be expressed assertively:

People are taught not to express anger because they are likely to become aggressive in expressing it. However, expressions of anger need not involve aggressive behaviour. You can raise your voice, keep a firm expression, and indicate your anger clearly without threatening the other person, without insulting, without being punitive or sarcastic. By using "I" statements and the three-part message described below, you will reduce the likelihood that aggressive content will creep into your verbal behaviour.

### Guidelines for expressing anger assertively:

1. Choose the time and place to express your feelings - not in front of others, but as soon as possible.
2. Keep it brief. Say exactly what you want to say initially. Once the other person has received the message, don't belabour the point. (That runs the risk of rubbing it in or of escalating the exchange).
3. Use assertive repetition only to emphasise your point if the other person does not appear to "hear" you - but don't rub it in.
4. Use specific, objective language. Avoid words like "always" and "never". Describe (don't label) the behaviour you are angry about. Not "You're always rude and inconsiderate" but "You've just interrupted me twice".
5. Incorporate "I" statements and "feeling talk" into the following three-part message framework:

<b>I FEEL.....</b>	(your feeling)
<b>WHEN/BECAUSE.....</b>	(behaviour you dislike)
<b>NEXT TIME, I WOULD PREFER.....</b>	(behaviour you want)

Indicate in your message that you feel a certain way because of a specific behaviour on the part of the other person. You may also wish to communicate to the other person how you would like him/her to behave in the future.

For example: **I FEEL** really annoyed, **BECAUSE** you didn't ask my opinion before you made that decision. **NEXT TIME, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO** consult me before making a decision that affects us both.

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## SAYING NO

### Remember:

- It's OK to say NO
- You can learn to say it
- It takes practice
- It gets easier with practice
- Don't say NO when there's a valid reason to say YES
- Don't say NO when you want to say YES

### Guidelines:

1. **Start your answer with the word NO**

At least say it in the first sentence. If you don't, you'll end up saying "maybe" or "yes".

2. **Speak in a firm (not loud) voice:**

If you say a whispered, hesitant NO, your words say one thing and your manner another. The other person will listen to your manner.

3. **Keep your answer short and clear:**

If you give long explanations you'll become apologetic, defensive or fall into "traps".

If you need time to rehearse your NO then say "I need to think about it. I'll tell you tomorrow." Then PRACTICE.

### Examples:

- No, I've too much to do
- No, I can't
- No, thank you. I don't drink/smoke
- No, I've done my share
- No, I'm not interested
- No, that's not right for me.

## GIVING COMPLIMENTS

1. First decide what you want to compliment. Be specific.

"Jill, I was very impressed with the way you handled the meeting yesterday. Your chairperson ensured that nothing got out of hand."

"Jack, I like your tie. The colour compliments your shirt beautifully."

2. Be direct. Give the compliment to the person concerned, not a mutual friend.

3. It is tempting to give people compliments to cheer them up; however giving insincere or token compliments often has the opposite effect.

In the case of a depressed neighbour, something "nice" to say could be:

"I think you seem rather sad today. Would you like to talk about it?"

"You don't seem very bright today and it worries me. Is there anything I can do to help?"

## RECEIVING COMPLIMENTS

### Possible reasons for discounting compliments:

1. modesty
2. feelings of inadequacy
3. embarrassment at the attention given
4. feelings of mistrust

### Ways of discounting compliments:

1. By saying "Yes, but....."  
"It was nothing really....."  
"Oh, anyone could have done it"
2. By thinking You must want something  
You felt you had to say it
3. By doing Blushing  
Giving a compliment in return  
Being sarcastic

All of these above responses communicate to the complimenter, that you are uncomfortable about receiving compliments.

### Assertive ways of receiving compliments:

1. Accepting compliments in a way to protect yourself from your own self criticism  
Thank you; I appreciate that  
Thank you; I'm glad you think so  
Thank you; that's nice to hear
2. Accepting compliments in a way to comment on the content of the compliment  
Thank you; it's an old family heirloom  
Thank you; it's from Fiji  
Thank you; it was fun doing it
3. Dealing with confusing or insincere compliments  
If you disagree with a compliment, it may be best to keep it to yourself. After all, it's the complimenter's opinion which is being expressed. If you decide that the compliment contains an important issue, you may decide to deal with it.

Two steps are suggested:

- i) Encourage the complimenter to define what is meant by "good" job or "nice" dress.
- ii) Encourage the complimenter to describe what s/he likes or feels about what is being complimented eg:  
"Thank you Mary, what was it about the report that interested you in particular?"

## DEFINITION OF ASSERTION

A way of being in the world which confirms ones own individual worth and dignity while confirming and maintaining the worth of others.

Assertive verbal and non-verbal behaviours enable you to maintain respect, satisfy your needs and defend your rights without dominating, manipulating, abusing or controlling others.

List some results assertive behaviours could have on you and your relationships.

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## EFFECTS OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR

- Open, honest communication
- Learning how to relax and reduce anxiety
- Getting your needs met
- Closer interpersonal relationships
- Communication of positive and negative feelings without anxiety or guilt and without violating other people's dignity.
- Making more decisions and free choices
- Self respect
- Self worth: recognition of your rights and value system
- Self-protection from others
- Knowing when assertive behaviour will have negative or positive consequences.

**Passive:** Say or do nothing

**Indirect:** Make oblique / manipulative comment

**Assertive:** Express feelings persistently

**Aggressive:** Lose their cool

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### **Submissive People (Passive Behaviour)**

People who demonstrate a lack of respect for their own needs and rights. They do not express honest feelings, needs, values and concerns.

List possible short term and long term effects of passive behaviour.

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### **Assertive People**

People who utilise methods of communication that maintain self-respect without abusing or dominating other people.

List possible short-term and long-term effects of assertive behaviour.

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### **Aggressive People**

People who express needs, feelings, ideas at expense of others. May speak loudly and may be abusive, rude and sarcastic. They attempt to win by overpowering others.

List possible short-term and long-term effects of aggressive behaviour.

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## ASSERTIVE SKILLS CHECKLIST

Rate your ability to respond assertively to the situations mentioned below:

	Assertiveness ability				
	Low	2	3	4	High
<b>Compliments:</b>					
1. Receiving a compliment about your physical appearance	1	2	3	4	5
2. Receiving a compliment about something you've done well	1	2	3	4	5
3. Complimenting someone about his/her physical appearance	1	2	3	4	5
4. Complimenting someone about his/her accomplishments	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Requests:</b>					
5. Saying "no" to a request when you have a reason	1	2	3	4	5
6. Saying "no" when you don't have a definite reason	1	2	3	4	5
7. Turning down a meeting or date	1	2	3	4	5
8. Declining to give a donation	1	2	3	4	5
9. Resisting sexual advances	1	2	3	4	5
10. Making sexual advances	1	2	3	4	5
11. Asking someone to do something for you	1	2	3	4	5
12. Asking a professional (doctor, solicitor, etc) for information	1	2	3	4	5
13. Requesting a service in a store or restaurant	1	2	3	4	5
14. Asking someone who is talking loudly in a movie to stop	1	2	3	4	5
15. Requesting the return of a borrowed item	1	2	3	4	5
16. Returning defective merchandise	1	2	3	4	5
17. Returning merchandise when you've changed your mind	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Criticism:</b>					
18. Discussing someone's criticism of you with that person	1	2	3	4	5
19. Ignoring or agreeing with someone's criticism of you	1	2	3	4	5
20. Telling someone that he/she is doing something that bothers you	1	2	3	4	5
21. Making a complaint about service or cost of service	1	2	3	4	5
22. Starting conversations with new acquaintances or strangers	1	2	3	4	5
23. Introducing yourself to a group of people (in a meeting).	1	2	3	4	5
24. Introducing yourself to another person or small group	1	2	3	4	5
25. Maintaining eye contact with those you are talking to	1	2	3	4	5
26. Speaking up, asking questions at a meeting or a class	1	2	3	4	5
27. Giving your views to a person in authority (parent, teacher, doctor)	1	2	3	4	5
28. Expressing anger	1	2	3	4	5
29. Expressing different viewpoint to an aggressive customer	1	2	3	4	5
30. Expressing hurt or disappointment	1	2	3	4	5

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## SEX STEREOTYPES

### (FROM A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE)

He's aggressive	She's Pushy
He's good on details	She's Picky
He loses his temper because he's so involved	She's bitchy
He stands firm	She's hard
He isn't afraid to say what he thinks	She's mouthy
He exercises authority	She's power mad
He's confident	She's not feminine
He makes quick decisions	She's rash
He considers the whole picture	She drags her heels

As a group discuss the following questions:

1. In your experience, how many people would describe men and women as different as those above?
2. Do you find yourself using a "double standard" to judge men and women? In what areas are you most likely to do so?
3. Become aware of how differently books, television and the newspapers treat men and women.

## TRANSFORMING NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

### A formula:

1. Ask yourself - is it true?
2. Answer the question using this continuum.  
Hardly ever.... Some of the time..... Often..... Most of the time.....  
No, hardly ever.... Most of the time.... I am.....  
Yes, some of the time I am..... however, often I am.....  
Yes, most of the time I am..... however, some of the time I am.....  
Yes, most of the time I am..... and that's OK.

### Two examples:

1. I am thoughtless.  
It is true  
No, I am hardly ever thoughtless, most of the time I consider other people's needs very carefully.
2. I am untidy.  
Yes, I am often untidy, however some of the time I am tidy and organised and it's an area I'm working on.  
Yes, I am often untidy, and that's OK. At the moment I am choosing to change but I know I am still an OK person.

Think of a negative message you tend to give yourself and apply the formula above.

## DESC SCRIPT A FORM OF ASSERTIVE MESSAGE

The DESC SCRIPT is a formula for clarifying, organising and presenting a position which includes a request for a change in somebody else's behaviour.

<b>D</b> Describe	the behaviour in non-blameful terms	When you...
<b>E</b> Express	your feeling	I feel...
<b>S</b> Specify	the change you would like	I'd prefer/I'd like
<b>C</b> Consequences	(how it could be)	Then

For example, Donna frequently found herself interrupted mid sentence by her husband, who had the habit of finishing her statements when she was talking to other people. Donna prepared the following DESC script.

- 1. Describe the behaviour objectively:**  
Jack, this evening when I was telling Barbara about my job you interrupted me four times and finished my sentence for me.
- 2. Express how you feel:**  
When you interrupt me in the middle of a sentence I feel angry and hurt. I don't like being interrupted.
- 3. Specify the behaviour you want:**  
I'd appreciate your waiting until I finish what I am saying and pause, before you start to say something.
- 4. State the Consequences:**  
If you let me have my say before you say things, I'll enjoy our conversations with friends much more than I do now.

Donna's goal was to request her husband change his behaviour.

### Note that:

- Behaviour should be described in neutral terms. If you use loaded words like "rudely" you will end up discussing/arguing over whether the interruption was rude. You should refer to a specific, discreet item of recent behaviour. Avoid words like "always", "never".
- Feeling should be expressed in "I" statements. Keep them simple.
- You must specify what you want. Not, for example, "I wish you would be more considerate" but the behaviours which, in your mind, would be considerate in the situation.
- Consequences can be stated positively or negatively. Be positive whenever possible. Negative consequences sound like - and are - threats. In referring to consequences, it is necessary to consider what, if any, are the favourable consequences of someone acting in a way that is different from the way she/he has behaved.

The DESC formula can be used for several purposes, first, as a clarifying technique when you are unhappy about a situation but unsure what it is that you want to change. Try writing out the four steps. Secondly, you can write out a script that forms the basis for a letter, a telephone conversation, or a face to face confrontation.

### In groups discuss the following situation and produce a DESC script to present your position.

Christmas is a busy time for your workplace, and few employees are allowed a holiday between Christmas and New Year. Applications for a full break need to be in early. You have worked there for four years. You are unmarried without children. You have not been granted a Christmas break yet. You sense that people with families get priority and you suspect that you may not get a Christmas break for a long time, if ever. You are frustrated and think this situation is unfair.

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## IMPORTANT NONVERBAL COMPONENTS OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR

### **Body Posture:**

The "weight" of your messages to others will be increased if you are standing or sitting relaxed but upright, with your body weight evenly distributed, facing the person, with your head erect. Be aware of your physical distance from the other person; it should be appropriate to the relationship between you. If you are inappropriately close, you may feel uncomfortable.

### **Gestures and Movement:**

A gesture can be effective to emphasise a point; vague movements will undermine or detract from the effectiveness of a statement. Frequent shifts of position or nervous gesture will distract attention from what you are saying.

### **Eye Contact:**

Looking directly and steadily at the person with whom you are talking is assertive; it is a way of communicating that you are both sincere and confident. You will need to break eye contact frequently and briefly, especially if you are considering how to answer a particular question, for example. Maintaining eye contact while listening is equally important and less difficult.

### **Facial Expressions:**

You cannot express serious concern while smiling or laughing. We are socialised to smile or laugh to conceal discomfort or nervousness; instead try expressing nervousness verbally to get it out of the way. Practice making confident statements about your qualifications, skills, interest in the job, with a straight face. Smile to express pleasure, appreciation and humour.

### **Voice Volume:**

Neither a whisper nor shouting is convincing. A level, well-modulated statement is firm without being intimidating.

### **Timing:**

Don't be rushed into responding to a question. Pauses are effective, as is asking for time to think about your answer before giving it. Frequent, unexplained hesitation may diminish your effectiveness. Try to vary the speed of your speech.

## RECEIVING CRITICISM

**Criticism that is specific and direct does not destroy me as a person. I have the skills to handle direct and specific criticism assertively.**

Direct and specific criticism is usually constructive. Non-constructive or destructive criticism often:

- Labels the person instead of describing her behaviour
- "She's useless." "You're thoughtless and inconsiderate."
- Is expressed in generalities or global terms.
- "You never think of me." "You're totally disorganised" (Watch always, never, everyone, nobody).
- Imposes another person's value judgement.

### Your questions:

When someone criticises you, ask yourself:

1. Is the criticism focused on a specific behaviour in a specific situation?
2. Is there enough (too much?) information for me to respond to?
3. What are the value judgements behind this criticism? Do I accept them?
4. Whose standards of behaviour am I being measured against and
5. How do I want to react to this criticism?

## GUIDELINES FOR CRITICISING SOMEONE

- Consider how you would feel on receiving the criticism you plan to make (see your questions above).
- Be specific (Not "I wish you'd stop bothering me" but "I don't like it when you...")
- Don't save it up. Express negative feelings as soon as appropriate, first considering time and place.
- Don't dump it. It may be the first time you've mentioned it, but just refer to most recent, specific occurrence of behaviour you are criticising.
- Include positive statements when appropriate.
- Keep you goal in mind. What do you hope to achieve by criticising?

In pairs discuss a time when you needed to give criticism. Reply the situation applying these guidelines.

## OPTIONS IN RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

1. Completely agree/accept it
2. Totally disagree/reject it
3. Request further or more specific information
4. Modify or redefine it and partially agree or disagree
5. Fog (counter manipulate, not assertive)
6. Delay response.

### Examples of these options in response to two different criticisms

#### A. You women should leave the jobs

1. Yes, I agree. Women should leave the jobs for men
2. I disagree with you. Many women must work to support themselves and their families
3. Are you saying that no women should have a job? (response) How do you feel about women who are single or widowed and have dependent children?
4. Well, I agree that men may need jobs to support their families. I also believe that women have the same right to work as men. also take other people into consideration.
5. Mmm..... you may be right
6. I don't want to discuss that right now. I want to have time to think through my response. in the morning.

#### B. I think you're selfish

1. You're right, I am. I always put myself first.
2. I disagree
3. I find it hard to accept such a broad statement. What have I done recently that you think is selfish?
4. I am selfish in that I think of myself and my needs before making a decision. I believe I
5. You could be right. I can see how you might think that.
6. I don't want to react to that right now. I'd rather discuss it

In pairs discuss a time when you were criticised and your reactions/response to the criticism. Replay the situation with your partner offering the criticism and apply one of the six options offered. Reverse process.

## MAKING REQUESTS

1. I have a right to make my wants known to others.
2. I deny my own importance when I do not ask for what I want.
3. The best way to get what I want is to ask for it directly, and specifically.
4. Indirect ways of asking may not be understood - eg complaining of a sore back instead of asking for a back rub.
5. Asking for what I want is a skill that I can, with practice, begin to use spontaneously.
6. In making any request, I will keep in mind that the other person has a right to say no.

You work for an organisation going through a process of restructuring. You have seen what the new structure will be, and can't quite see where you will fit in. You realise you are becoming anxious about your future and your place in the organisation. You don't know the new manager very well and this makes you nervous about approaching him.

In groups think of an assertive as well as indirect, aggressive and passive responses to each situation.

## REFUSING REQUESTS

1. I have a right to say no. The other person has a right to ask.
2. I deny my own importance when I say yes and I really mean no.
3. Saying no does not imply that I reject another person - I am simply refusing a request.
4. When saying no, it is important to be direct, concise and to the point.
5. If I really mean to say no, I must not be swayed by cajoling, begging, compliments, or other forms of manipulation.
6. I may offer reasons for my refusal, but I won't make "excuses".
7. I won't be overly apologetic; this can be offensive.
8. Saying no is a skill that can be learned.
9. Saying no and not feeling guilty can become a habit, a growth enhancing one.

**In both making and refusing requests, remember the non-verbal aspects of your communication. Are they assertive?**

You have always been generous with your belongings, especially tools/books etc. Lately you feel that you are being taken advantage of since several neighbours have borrowed things and not returned them. One of them has just asked if he/she can borrow your sewing machine/power tool.

Decide on an assertive response as well as indirect, aggressive and passive responses to each situation.

## CHOOSING YOUR BEHAVIOUR

Consider the following question in five different contexts. How would you reply in each situation?

**Question:** How are you today?

**Context:**

1. A casual acquaintance met at the shops.
2. Your doctor visiting you after a convalescence from an accident.
3. Your dentist during a routine check-up
4. Your partner during dinner.
5. A stranger at the bus stop, at night, with no-one else around.

The relevance of context to assertiveness is simple: **choose** when to be assertive. There will be times when you feel it is not appropriate to assert yourself. Trust those feelings, **provided they are not an excuse** used to rationalise your reluctance to stand up for yourself.

**Make a list of people you have the most contact with.**

**Answer the following questions:**

1. Who do you feel is dominant in each relationship?
2. How easy is it for you to express your opinions? Feelings?
3. Are you or do you feel you are easily taken advantage of?
4. Do you or do you think you hurt others easily?

Your answers should give you a clearer picture of your passive, assertive and aggressive behaviour, and the contexts in which these occur.

## SITUATIONS FOR ASSERTION

Below are situations for you to discuss. Decide upon an assertive response as well as indirect, aggressive and passive response to each situation.

1. You have a house guest for a few days. On the first night he/she offers to do the dishes immediately after finishing tea. You and your spouse prefer to relax before cleaning up. Your guest insists, and you feel you could not let him/her do the entire job alone.
2. It is Sunday morning and you usually get up and get a cup of tea for you and your spouse. You have begun to resent the fact that you are always one who gets up and not your spouse. You don't get up and you say something to your spouse.

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