



For better  
mental health

## How to... assert yourself



# How to... assert yourself

“  
*‘If my family and friends knew what I’m really like, they’d all hate me.’*

*‘I have asthma, so when my partner smokes at home I have difficulty breathing. But I don’t like to ask him to stop – after all, it is his home too!’*

*‘I bottle up my anger until it all bursts out in one big explosion, and then I feel awful.’*

*‘I can’t imagine myself saying ‘No’ to their demands. I have always done what they want, and if I started saying ‘No’ I’d feel like someone else. Other people can do it, perhaps, but not me.’*

**Assertiveness isn’t about being aggressive, or always getting your own way. It’s about standing up for yourself, constructively. This booklet explains what it means to assert yourself, and how you can learn to do it.**

## What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is an attitude of mind and a way of relating to others. It's an attitude that says, in short: 'Here I am, a person with unique gifts to give to the world. Who are you? What do you bring?' It is a positive, optimistic attitude, valuing yourself and others, seeking respectful communication with others, yet at the same time able to set boundaries, to protect yourself from exploitation, attack and hostility.



### Asserting yourself means:

- You can say 'Yes' when you mean 'Yes', and 'No' when you mean 'No'. You don't agree to things you don't like, or give up things you do like, in order to please someone else.
- You can communicate clearly to others what you are feeling and what you want from them, in a calm way.
- You don't let a fear of conflict silence you. You are prepared to take the consequences of communicating your feelings and wants.
- You can do this because you feel good about yourself. You feel entitled to be here, to be who you are, and to express what you feel. And because you assert yourself, you feel good about yourself.
- You can set clear boundaries, and feel entitled to defend them if they are attacked.
- You enjoy life and have no difficulty in taking pleasure. You can give and receive both compliments and criticisms, learning from both.

### Say what you feel

Bob and Jenny have two young teenage children. Every Sunday for as long as they have been a family, they have gone round to Bob's mother's home for Sunday lunch.

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Bob doesn't really want to, but thinks it's a way of saving Jenny from cooking on Sundays. Jenny doesn't want to, but is afraid of hurting Bob's feelings by saying so. The children don't want to go, either, but feel their parents won't listen if they say so. Bob's mother is getting old, and increasingly finding the weekly visits an ordeal, but she doesn't mention this for fear of hurting Bob's feelings, or of falling in her own eyes as a mother and grandmother. In this situation, nobody is doing what they really want to do, and nobody is talking about it. It's likely that everybody will end up feeling resentful. In a situation like this, deadlock can be broken when someone says (and it may well be one of the children), 'I don't want to go to Gran's on Sunday'. This can open up the possibility of others saying what they want and feel about how Sundays are in this family. New negotiations can take place, and there is the possibility that a different way of organising their Sundays can be found that gives more pleasure to more family members. There is more satisfaction and less resentment, all round.



## **What's the difference between aggression and assertiveness?**

Aggression is the desire to invade another person's space and exercise power over them. Its mirror image is passivity, or victim behaviour: a willingness to allow others to control you, or to invade your space. Assertiveness is an entirely different attitude. Assertive people claim their own space, set their own boundaries to it, and are prepared to defend it. But they don't seek to invade anybody else's. They don't try to control others, nor allow others to control them. They claim the right to exercise their own inner authority.

### **I matter and so do you**

Annie and Freda are sharing a flat. Annie has a busy, well-paid job and is hardly ever in. She doesn't do much housework or cooking, and never washes up. Freda spends more time at home, and is angry with Annie for always leaving the kitchen in a mess. She may well feel so fed up that one day she becomes directly aggressive, taking all the dirty crockery and dumping it on Annie's bed. If she were to be passively aggressive, instead, she might just sulk and stop doing any housework at all, to punish Annie. She might get crosser and crosser the longer it takes Annie to notice. Either way, Annie will eventually get cross, too, and may well retaliate. An explosive confrontation is likely.

If Freda does nothing, she is behaving like a victim. If she is aggressive, she is likely to provoke more aggression, in return. To be assertive is a third way. She could catch Annie at home one day, at a time when both are calm and neither is just rushing off, and suggest that they set a time to talk about it. She could let Annie know how strongly she feels about the housework issue, and make a space for talking about it, stating her point of view and being prepared to listen to Annie's. If Freda does this, the chances are that the two of them will be able to negotiate a good solution to the housework problem that will be more satisfactory for them. It might be to organise a rota, or hire a cleaner, but it will be a solution that suits them both.

Both passive and aggressive people relate to others as though only one person counts. A passive attitude says to the world, 'I don't matter, but you do'. An aggressive attitude says, 'I am the only one that matters'. But an assertive attitude says, 'I matter, and so do you. Everybody matters, and this starts but doesn't end with us'. It's a truly moral attitude, and the opposite of selfishness.

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## Trying it out

This exercise can help you to experience, for yourself, the difference between assertive, aggressive and passive behaviour. Find a time when you can be alone and uninterrupted for half an hour, in a room with a full-length mirror. Stand in front of it and observe your usual way of standing. What do you do with your feet, hands, and head? Now close your eyes, and imagine you are an aggressive person, saying to the world, without words, 'Here I am! I am big and important, and I'm going to invade your space and take you over!' Let yourself really feel it in your body, then open your eyes, look in the mirror and notice how you are expressing this attitude. How are you standing? How are you holding your head? What sort of expression is on your face? What are your hands and feet doing? How do you feel about the person looking back at you from the mirror?

Now relax, close your eyes, and imagine you are a victim, saying to the world, 'I don't count – you can walk all over me'. Let yourself really get into it, then open your eyes and notice how you express this attitude with your body, as before.

Relax, then try again, saying this time with your body, 'Hello! This is who I am and this is how much space I take up'. As before, notice how you express this attitude; in your stance, with your feet and your hands, and in the way you make eye contact.

You will probably find that in the aggressive position you make yourself quite big, clench your hands or put your hands on your hips, and generally look invasive. In the victim position you will probably look small and pathetic, with hunched shoulders and a furtive expression. An assertive stance, however, will usually involve a relaxation of shoulders and neck, an upright, well-balanced body position, and open hands.

### **The power of body language**

Body language is a very powerful means of communicating to others how we expect to be treated. Many people find that to adopt an assertive stance makes them feel more comfortable with themselves and confident, even though it may be unfamiliar at first. All those metaphors about standing up for yourself, putting your foot down, standing your ground, can be taken literally. If you watch people around you or on television, especially when they are arguing, you may well notice how one of them bends over backwards to accommodate the other, or stands their ground, or yields ground in an argument – with their body!

If you have a sympathetic friend, you can have fun trying out the different roles in a pair. Practise the aggressive, victim and assertive stances without words, as if you are playing statues. Then let one of you be aggressive, and the other victim. Take a moment to notice how you feel about each other in these roles, and swap over, each trying the opposite role. Then both try out the assertive stance to each other, and notice how that feels. Try having one of you as aggressive, one as victim, and let the victim move from that posture into an assertive one, and see what happens.

When people do this, they realise how much fear there is around both the aggressive and the victim position, and how much more comfortable the assertive stance is. It's also clear that it's quite hard to maintain an aggressive posture in front of someone who refuses to adopt the victim stance. The aggressor either relaxes into an assertive stance, or collapses into a victim. When both parties are assertive, eye contact tends to be easy; an aggressor glares around, while a victim tends to look down and avoid eye contact. This is one of the ways in which assertiveness makes communication easier.

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Body language can vary between cultures. For example, in some cultures, avoiding eye-contact can be understood to demonstrate untrustworthiness, dishonesty or fear, but in other cultures the opposite is true and it's seen as a sign of respect. This is why it's important to be clear how you express an aggressive, assertive or victim attitude in your own individual way.



## **Why is assertiveness difficult?**

The attitude 'I matter; you matter; everybody matters' is not familiar enough in contemporary British society. It's not the way many people have been brought up, and it's not the way most of the institutions are run. The know-your-place attitude, which controls so much of both private and public life, may cause some people to experience a sense of worthlessness that makes them feel guilty about taking care of their own needs and asserting themselves. Your upbringing, relationship difficulties and past losses may cause you to feel you are not able to take control of your life.

Asserting yourself from a position of apparent inferiority is like riding a bicycle or driving a small car on a main road. You have to be realistic about the size and power of your vehicle in relation to the others on the road. However, you are just as entitled to your bit of road space as the larger, faster, more powerful vehicles that shoot past. Some of the other drivers may think that you shouldn't be there at all on a bicycle, or in that make of car, or at your age, or whatever, but that is their opinion. They may express it by aggressive hooting, or by refusing to give way when you indicate that you want to turn right, but you can insist that they observe the Highway Code!

Many a major social and political change has started with one person deciding not to put up with something any more. For example, a tired Black woman, called Rosa Parks, decided to take a seat supposedly reserved for white people on a bus in Alabama, and launched the campaign that ended segregation between white people and Black people on buses in the southern USA. After witnessing the deaths of three children, Betty Williams began publicly demonstrating for peace with Mairead Maguire, the children's aunt. The two created the Peace People Organisation, a movement of Catholics and Protestants dedicated to ending sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. They were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. There are many other examples from all over the contemporary world of apparently powerless people succeeding in confronting the powerful with the simple message: 'We matter. Hear what we have to say'.

### **Will my relationships get better when I become more assertive?**



Changing the way you behave in the world is a risky business, and the results are not guaranteed. When you assert yourself, it's quite possible that others will perceive you as aggressive. This is especially likely if you belong to a group that has, traditionally, not been allowed to claim power, if you are a woman, Black, homosexual, working class, disabled or a patient in a hospital. But people who persist in asserting themselves bring about change. The Church of England now has women as priests, and the pressure is still on to allow them further power. In South Africa, the once-illegal ANC became part of the Government under the leadership of Nelson Mandela.

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If you are used to thinking of yourself as a victim, and to behaving passively, it can be very frightening to imagine yourself as assertive. In general, if you behave like a victim you are likely to provoke an attack. If you are aggressive, you will be resented and are likely to be attacked back. You are unlikely to feel good about yourself or other people. But if you behave assertively, communication will improve, levels of aggression will go down and you make a space for the other person to be assertive back.



## How can I become more assertive?

The most obvious way is to join a group or class. Ask at your local library about courses. Most adult education institutions offer them, as do some universities and colleges of further education. It's well worth checking out the internet for local organisations offering them. You could also ask your local Citizens Advice if they know of any classes. (See *Useful Organisations*, on p. 13.)

Classes vary enormously, but do be careful to check these out thoroughly before committing yourself. It's best to try and find out from the institution running them how experienced the teacher is, before you start. You may like to consider whether you want a general mixed group, or whether you would prefer a special interest group, say for survivors of the mental health system, for Black women, or for gay men.

It's also important to be aware that the work may bring up painful memories. In particular, the emphasis on personal boundaries may remind you of an experience you may have had of assault or rape. Assertiveness teachers vary in their skill at dealing with the feelings stimulated by this kind of memory. If this might be relevant to you, it's particularly important to go to a class run by a trained, experienced counsellor or therapist.

### Speaking up for yourself

Listen to the way you express yourself. People often generalise their feelings by saying 'you' in conversation when they mean 'I', as in: 'Sometimes, you feel you want to have a break, but you can't'. Try switching it to, 'I feel I want...' and add, 'and I will arrange it'. You may be surprised by the difference such a small change can make to the way you see yourself. Remember you have choices, too: avoid 'I must' or 'I should' in favour of 'I could' and 'I might'.

Anything which improves your self-esteem will help you to be more assertive. This may be something quite simple, like wearing a special item of clothing that makes you feel good; or a symbol of your religious or cultural identity (a hijab, a Star of David, or a labrys, for instance) especially if that cultural identity is a minority one. Self-esteem can be improved by validation from the outside, through other people's approval, earning more money, a promotion at work or a new love affair. It can also be badly damaged by experiences, such as being made redundant or the end of a relationship. You can also boost your self-esteem from the inside. What do you take pride in about yourself? What are you good at? What do you like about yourself? How often do you let yourself have some pleasure?

### Talking treatments

Considering these questions may bring about the realisation that you have low self-esteem, and that you often find yourself adopting a passive or victim attitude to others. In this case, you could benefit from having someone to talk to, in depth, about your life and relationships, to help you understand how you have learned these attitudes and how to build more positive ones. This may mean facing up to painful and difficult memories from your past, especially old losses that haven't been properly grieved over.

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Talking to a trained and experienced psychotherapist or counsellor can help you to identify and understand these problems, and to change the way you think and feel.

Cognitive-behaviour therapy is increasingly popular as a way of helping people to change long-standing, but unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaving. (To find out more about talking treatments, see *Useful organisations*, on p. 13, and *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

Similarly, if you have problems managing your anger, you need to get to the roots of the problem, which are also likely to be connected to experiences in your past. (See Mind's booklets, *How to Deal with Anger* and *How to Restrain Your Violent Impulses*; details under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

## Treating yourself well

If you can boost your self-esteem, this should automatically make you more assertive. Part of victim consciousness is a sense that 'I don't deserve to have anything good'. But giving yourself a treat every day can do wonders for your self-esteem. It doesn't have to be expensive, but it does have to be something that gives you pleasure, whether it's watching a comedy programme that makes you laugh, a walk in the park or common, a meal out with a friend or a long, scented bath by candlelight with the phone unplugged. (See Mind's booklet *How to Increase your Self-esteem*; details under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

## **Useful organisations**

### **British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)**

The Globe Centre

PO Box 9

Accrington BB5 0XB

tel. 01254 875 277

fax: 01254 239 114

email: [babcp@babcp.com](mailto:babcp@babcp.com)

web: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

A full directory of psychotherapists is available via the website

### **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

BACP House

35–37 Albert Street

Rugby CV21 2SG

tel. 0870 443 5252

fax: 0870 443 5161

minicom: 0870 443 5162

email: [bacp@bacp.co.uk](mailto:bacp@bacp.co.uk)

web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

For practitioners in your area, see the website or send an  
A5 SAE

### **Citizens Advice**

Myddelton House

115–123 Pentonville Road

London N1 9LZ

web: [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

For details of your local office, see the telephone directory

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## Further reading

- The Anger Control Workbook: Simple, innovative techniques for managing anger and developing healthier ways of relating*  
M. McKay, P. Rogers (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- The Assertiveness Workbook: How to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson  
(New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- Confidence Works: Learn to be your own life coach*  
G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- How to Accept Yourself* Dr. W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to Cope with Relationship Problems* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Deal with Anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to Deal with Bullying at Work* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Improve your Mental Wellbeing* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Increase your Self-esteem* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Look after Yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Restrain your Violent Impulses* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Survive Family Life* (Mind 2002) £1
- Making Sense of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making Sense of Herbal Remedies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Making Sense of Homeopathy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making Sense of Traditional Chinese Medicine* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Manage your Mind: The mental health fitness guide*  
G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £12.99
- Managing Anger: Dealing positively with hurt and frustration*  
G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- The Mind Guide to Food and Mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind Guide to Relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Secrets of Self-esteem* P. Cleghorn (Vega 2002) £7.99
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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Mind does this by:

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- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

**autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.**

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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