
How to Communicate Assertively and Respectfully

Assertiveness is the ability to honestly express your opinions, feelings, attitudes, and rights in a way that respects the rights of others.

Many of us are taught that we should always concede or defer to others. We learn that it is selfish to consider *our* needs above those of others and if someone does something we don't like, we should just be quiet and stay away from that person in the future. However, **assertive communication** is important because it helps us avoid:

- **Resentment.** Anger at others for manipulating or taking advantage of me.
- **Frustration.** How could I be such a wimp? Why did I let them walk all over me?
- **Anxiety and Avoidance.** If you begin to avoid situations or people that you know will make you uncomfortable, you may miss out on fun activities, job opportunities, relationships, and lots of other good stuff.

When planning your assertive behavior, remember that the other person is used to you behaving in a certain way and may be confused when you change your communication style. Tell the other person up front what you're trying to do. Choose a peaceful moment for this:

"I need to tell you something and I'd like you to hear me out before you comment. I've noticed lately that after we work on a project together, I find myself feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. I've been thinking about it and I've realized that I tend to go along with your ideas without insisting on consideration of my ideas as well, because I'm afraid of upsetting you. From now on, I'm going to try something different. When I start to feel frustrated, I'm going to ask that we stop before making a final decision and be sure we've considered all of our options. I know that will be a change for you, but I think it's fair and I know I'll do a better job and feel better about myself if I can tell you my ideas."

Assertive communication with others has three important components:

1. **empathy/validation:** Try to say something that shows your understanding of the other person's feelings. This shows the other person that you're not trying to pick a fight and it takes the wind out of their sails. For example:

"I know that you get anxious when you're ready to go and I'm not ..."

2. **statement of problem:** This piece describes your difficulty or dissatisfaction with the situation and tells why you need something to change. For example:

"... but when you do that, I get all flustered and take even more time. By the time we get in the car, we're mad at each other and not much in the mood to have a good time."

3. **statement of what you want:** This is a specific request for a specific change in the other person's behavior. For example:

"From now on, let's be sure we know what time we want to leave, and if you're ready before I am, will you please just go to another room and read the paper or watch TV?"

How to be effectively assertive:

- Use assertive body language. Face the other person, stand or sit straight, don't use dismissive gestures, be sure you have a pleasant, but serious, facial expression, keep your voice calm and soft, not whiney or abrasive.
- Use "I" statements. Focus on the problem you're having, not on accusing or blaming the other person. **Example:** *"I'd like to tell my stories without interruption."* instead of *"You're always interrupting my stories!"*
- Use facts, not judgments. **Example:** *"Your punctuation needs work and your formatting is inconsistent"* instead of *"This is sloppy work."* or *"Did you know that shirt has some spots?"* instead of *"You're not going out looking like THAT, are you?"*
- Express ownership of your thoughts, feelings, and opinions. **Example:** *"I get angry when he breaks his promises."* instead of *"He makes me angry."* or *"I believe the best policy is to..."* instead of *"The only sensible thing is to ..."*
- Make clear, direct requests. Don't invite the person to say "no." **Example:** *"Will you please ... ?"* instead of *"Would you mind ... ?"*