Assertiveness: saying "yes" and saying "no"

Many of us have difficulty saying what we think. We find it hard to speak directly or to ask for help and sometimes we go along with what other people want, simply because we're afraid to say "No".



In part, this may be due to the rules we were taught as children about always being nice and not hurting others' feelings. However, being assertive doesn't mean you have to be unkind. In truth, assertiveness is merely the ability to express thoughts and feelings while allowing others to do the same. The good news is that assertiveness can be learnt.

Tips and Tools You Can Use

Recognize that assertiveness doesn't happen overnight or all at once. Like any new skill, it is learned in small steps. Here are some tips to get you going:

Confront old fears.

- Recognize that you may be misinterpreting rules you learnt as a child.
- Understand that you are now an adult and know what is appropriate behaviour—there is no longer any need to silence your natural honesty.
- Recognize that there are situations in which you really must communicate honestly.
- Remember that fear of hurting others' feelings or of being rejected or of making mistakes is no justification for dishonesty.

Enjoy clearer communication.

- Accept that some people are highly skilled at getting what they want by manipulation.
- These people may try to place blame or try to induce guilt feelings in others.
- Once you begin to communicate clearly, such people often realize that manipulative communication will not work with you and will change their approach.
- Assertiveness makes your interaction with others more honest and more satisfying.

Keep to the point.

Don't allow feelings of guilt to distract you from the point of a conversation. Check the example below to see how you can stay focused:

- Sarah: "I'm sorry, but I can't take you shopping today, Joan, as arranged. My husband has to go to work today and he has to take my car."
- Joan tries to make Sarah feel guilty: Joan: "But you promised me! Now what am I going to do?"
- Sarah acknowledges Joan's disappointment, then restates the situation. Sarah: "I understand that you're disappointed and I'm sorry there's been a change in plans, but I won't be able to take you."
- Joan, surprised by Sarah's firmness, realizes that she has no alternative. Joan: "Oh, okay. Maybe some other time."

- Sarah would like to go with Joan some other time so she gives Joan a specific action. Sarah: "Sure, Joan. Give me a call next week and we'll arrange another time."

Learn other communication skills.

- Use confident body language and a clear voice and tone.
- Be a good listener.
- Ask questions if you're not sure you understand.
- Use common courtesy. Remember that others have the right to disagree.

Take the first small steps.

- Accept that assertiveness takes time to learn.
- Try rehearsing new situations.
- As you gain confidence, gradually add new skills.
- Over time, your self-respect will shine through and those around you will respect you for saying what you mean.

By standing up for what you want and stating your needs clearly, you'll garner the respect of your friends and peers. Displaying this renewed self-confidence will enhance your relationships, reduce stress and allow you to feel more in control of your life.