

# HOW TO...

*assent yourself*



Mental  
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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 always have done what they want, if I started saying 'No' I'd feel like someone else. Other people can do it, perhaps, but not me.



Asserting yourself isn't about being aggressive or always getting your own way. It's about standing up for yourself constructively. This booklet explains what assertiveness is, and how you can learn to be more assertive.

Assertiveness is an attitude of mind and a way of relating to others. It is an attitude that says, in essence: '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 oneself and others, seeking respectful communication with others yet at the same time able to set boundaries, to protect oneself 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 do not let 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 for Sunday lunch. Bob does not 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 finding the weekly visits increasingly an ordeal, but she doesn't mention this for fear of hurting Bob's feelings, or of 'failing' 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 is likely that everybody will end up feeling resentful.

In a situation like this, deadlock can be broken when someone – and it may well be one of the children – says, '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 organizing their Sundays can be found that gives more pleasure to more family members. There is more satisfaction and less resentment, all round.

## How to... *assert yourself*

What's the  
difference  
between  
aggression &  
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: an assertive person claims her own space, sets her own boundaries to it, and is prepared to defend it, but does not seek to invade anybody else's. She does not try to control others, nor allow others to control her: she claims the right to exercise her 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.

Freda 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 – and 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. If she lets Annie know how strongly she feels about the housework issue, and makes a space for talking about it, stating her point of view and being prepared to listen to Annie's, then 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 both of 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

Feeling the  
difference for  
yourself

you. Everybody matters – starting with us, but not ending with us'. It is a truly moral attitude, and the opposite of selfishness.

Here is an exercise to 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, 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? 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 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 – with your stance, your feet, your hands, the way you make eye contact.

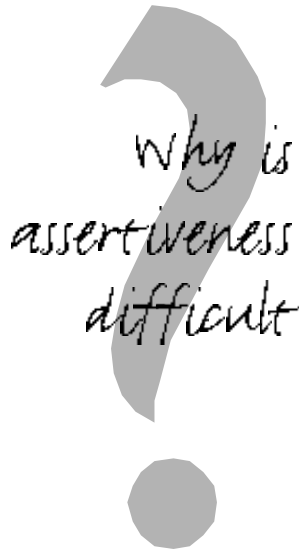
You will probably find that in the aggressive position you make yourself quite big, clench your hands or put your hands on your hips, and generally look invasive. In the victim position you will probably look small and pathetic, with hunched shoulders and a furtive expression. An assertive stance, however,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

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 her ground, or yields ground in an argument – with their body!

If you have a sympathetic friend, you can have fun playing with these roles – aggressive, victim and assertive – 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 then swap over, each trying the opposite role. Then both try out the assertive stance to each other, and notice how that feels. Then 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; how much more comfortable the assertive stance is. It is also clear that it is 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.

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



The attitude 'I matter and you matter and everybody matters' is not a familiar one for most people in contemporary British society. It is not the way most of us have been brought up, and it is not the way most of our 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 which 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: but you are as entitled to your bit of road space as the larger, faster, more powerful vehicles that whizz past. Some of the other drivers may think that you should not 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 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 change has started with one person deciding not to put up with something any more. For example, a tired black woman, Rosa Parks, decided to take a seat supposedly reserved for white people on a bus in Alabama, and launched the campaign that has ended segregation on buses in the US South.

Women political prisoners in Chile have successfully protested to the camp authorities at rapes by camp guards; mothers of disappeared prisoners in Argentina powerfully asserted their grief and rage at those responsible in the centre of Buenos Aires. 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'.

## How to... *assert yourself*

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

Changing the way you behave in the world is a risky business – the results are not guaranteed! When you assert yourself, it is 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. For example, we have seen the once-illegal ANC become part of the Government of South Africa, and the Church of England ordain women as priests.

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. 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. Assertion, like aggression, can be catching! You will also feel better about yourself, even when you do not end up getting exactly what you want.

*How can I  
become more  
assertive*

The most obvious way is to join a group or class (see Useful organisations, page 10). Classes vary enormously; it is best to try and find out from the institution running them how experienced the teacher is before you start. You may want 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.

### Joining a group

It is 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 is particularly important to go to a class run by a trained and experienced counsellor or therapist.

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



Improving your  
self-esteem

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 Star of David or a labrys) especially if that cultural identity is a minority one. Self-esteem can be improved by validation from the outside: other people's approval, earning more money, 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 love relationship. But we can also boost it 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?

Counselling or  
psychotherapy

Considering these questions may bring 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 which you have not fully grieved for. A trained and experienced practitioner can greatly help you here. (For further details, see Useful organisations on page 10).

Having fun!

Anything that boosts our self-esteem should make us automatically 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 on the common, a meal out with a friend or a long, scented bath by candlelight with the phone unplugged.

To find local assertiveness classes, ask at your local library. Most adult education institutions offer them, as do some universities and colleges of further education. Mind runs assertiveness courses, tel. 020 8221 9672 for details.

## How to... *assert yourself*

Here are some quotes from people after assertiveness training groups:

I liked the peace, and the talk, looking back on my childhood days.  
I feel I am beginning to live again, a new woman at 75 years old.



I felt I was hearing my own voice for the first time.

I have been able to communicate with my partner more - this could be because the course has shown me how to take time for myself.

I have just seen L (a man who had been harassing her at work) and it was a big improvement. His bigness still frightens me but I felt more in control... The strange thing was that I suddenly wanted to laugh at him - he's really quite thick and he fancies himself so much!



### Useful organisations

Association for Neuro-linguistic Programming UK Ltd (ANLP)  
PO Box 10, Porthmadog LL48 6ZB, tel. 0870 8704970, e-mail:  
admin@anlp.org, website: www.anlp.org

British Association for Counselling (BAC)  
1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 2PJ,  
tel. 01788 5508999, fax: 01788 562189, minicom: 01788 572838, e-mail: bac@bac.co.uk, website: www.counselling.co.uk Information and advice about counselling and psychotherapy. Send an SAE for details of practitioners in your locality.

British Autogenic Society  
c/o Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, Great Ormond St, London WC1N 3HR, e-mail: autosoc@lineone.net  
website: www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk. Send an SAE for further information

#### Qty

- A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies (Mind 2000) £3
- Asserting Your Self C. Birch (How to Books 1999) £9.99
- Essential Help for your Nerves C. Weekes (Thorsons 2000) £8.99

Further reading  
and order form

- How to Accept Yourself Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon 1999) £6.99
- How to Cope with Loneliness (Mind 1997) £1
- How to Cope with Relationship Breakdown (Mind 1999) £1
- How to Look After Yourself (Mind 1997) £1
- How to Survive Family Life (Mind 1998) £1
- Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness G. Butler (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Mind Guide to Managing Stress (Mind 1998) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments (Mind 1997) £1
- Factsheet: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (Mind 1999) 35p

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Mind Cymru	Third Floor, Quebec House, Castlebridge, Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff CF11 9AB
Northern Mind	Pinetree Centre, Durham Road, Birtley, Chester-le-Street, County Durham DH3 2TD
North West Mind	21 Ribblesdale Place, Preston PR1 3NA
South East Mind	First Floor, Kemp House, 152-160 City Road, London EC1V 2NP
South & West Mind	Pembroke House, 7 Brunswick Square, Bristol BS2 8PE
Trent & Yorkshire Mind	44 Howard Street, Sheffield S1 2LX
West Midlands Mind	20/21 Cleveland Street, Wolverhampton WV1 3HT

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health  
Central Office, Beacon House, 80 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HE  
tel. 02890 328474

Scottish Association for Mental Health  
Cumbrae House, 15 Carlton Court, Glasgow G5 9JP, tel. 0141 568 7000

Mind (National Association for Mental Health), 15-19 Broadway,  
London E15 4BQ, tel. 020 8519 2122, fax. 020 8522 1725

ISBN 1 874690 28 6. First published by Mind 1994. Revised edition © Mind 2000  
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**Mind**  
Publications