

Being assertive: How to stand up for yourself, what it looks like and how to do it

Assertiveness is an important life skill that benefits all of us when used. My previous article on assertiveness explained what it is and why it's important. This article is focused on giving the "how to" pieces and can be used for self-practice and to teach this skill to kids.

One important note... some pieces of assertiveness are culture specific (eye contact, language structure). You may adapt to fit your cultural norms as long as you maintain the strength of body and message.

The stance: Practice an assertive body by pretending you are wearing a cape and a crown. Shoulders and head are held in a strong, confident position with the shoulders up and back (a slight puffing of the chest), while the head is held high and proud. Lowering of the head in a submissive gesture will result in the crown toppling to the ground, while raising the nose to suggest superiority will cause it to slip backwards. Hands are relaxed at the sides as clenched fists suggest anger and send a message to both your brain and the other person's that a fight might follow. Crossed arms can indicate defensiveness, fear or close-mindedness, and while hands in your pockets are okay, be sure to keep nice strong shoulders if you do this.

The face: Becoming aware of your facial expressions when you are angry, afraid, embarrassed and confident is an important part of being assertive. This is best practiced in front of a mirror so you can see what confidence looks and feels like and rehearse using that face in private. If you look aggressive (angry) or submissive (afraid) when you are standing up for yourself things are not likely to go the way you had planned. Your eyes are an important part of assertiveness. Be sure to look yourself in the mirror during practice and get used to how that feels. In real situations you can shift your gaze to the other's forehead or nose if looking them in the eye is too much for you. It is not easy to look at the floor or up at the ceiling and still appear confident so be sure to get a grip on those eyes.

The voice: Being assertive means standing up for something important to you and that needs to be reflected in your voice. You do not need to sound friendly, but you don't want to sound angry or afraid either. To deal with this take a deep cleansing breathe before you begin talking and ensure your voice comes out strong and true. Remember you are royalty at this moment, use a voice that matches that confident authority.

The words: What you say when you are being assertive makes a huge difference. If you use attacking words your opponent will often attack you back. Your goal is to get your message across and stand up for what you believe in without causing a battle or putting the other person down. This means you will have to know what you are standing up for (your message) and practice saying

things in ways that support your message. Starting a statement off using the pronoun “I” can be a helpful way to stay on track. Examples:

I don't like it when you speak rudely to me.

I believe what I have to say is important, please let me finish...

I can see you guys are pumped about the party so go... I'm staying here.

I can't concentrate when you are yelling. Please stop so we can talk.

I see you're angry, I'll give you time to calm down before we talk.

Polite words (please, thank you, excuse me) are not required in assertive statements, but sometimes they just feel right. If you choose to add them in, make sure they don't come out in a pleading way or make you feel angrier if the offender refuses to comply after you were so polite.

Assertiveness is about saying what you need to say rather than keeping it bottled up inside. If the person doesn't do as you ask you might leave the situation, go for help or turn your attention to something else. Whatever you decide, remember to respond with your crown and cape firmly in place so your body language is supporting your message and you can feel good about how you stood up for yourself.

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