

A LINE ON LIFE

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Learning to be Assertive *

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We have discussed assertive behavior in contrast to aggressive or passive behavior. The last two are "win-lose" situations, either taking advantage of others or having others take advantage of you. In contrast, **assertiveness** is an attempt to promote a "win-win" outcome. In this way, all participants can maintain their own feelings of self-worth and self-respect with a good chance that everyone's goals will be obtained.

The "win-win" outcomes of assertive behavior can only emerge after much practice and effort.

To become assertive, we need to practice each assertive action, until it can be repeated even under stress. Have you ever upset when a clerk leaves you waiting while helping several people who arrived after you did? To act assertively, you first need to rehearse the dialogue, posture, and gestures you would use to confront the store clerk or the other customer. Doing this in front of a mirror can be very helpful. If possible, you can role play the scene with a friend several times. The friend should play the part of a really aggressive clerk as well as a cooperative one.

Rehearsal and role-playing can also be used when you expect a possible confrontation with someone. If you are going to ask for a raise, challenge a grade, or confront a landlord, these methods are effective.

Another important principle is **overlearning**. When you rehearse or role play assertive behavior, it is essential to practice it again and again and again. You should practice it so often that your responses become almost automatic. Overlearning anything helps you to perform well — even under stress.

Another helpful technique is the "**broken record**" **method**. You simply restate your request as many times and in as many ways as necessary. This method helps to prevent assertion from becoming aggression. Suppose you are returning a pair of shoes to a store. After two wearings, the shoes fell apart. But you bought them several months ago and no longer have a receipt. Your broken record method could sound something like this:

You: *"I would like to have these shoes replaced."*

Clerk: *"Do you have a receipt?"*

You: *"No, but I bought them here. Since they are defective, I would like you to replace them."*

Clerk: *"I can't do that without a receipt."*

You: *"I understand that, but I want them replaced."*

Clerk: *"Well, if you'll come back this afternoon and talk to the manager...."*

You: *"I've brought these shoes back because they are defective. You can see right here where they have fallen apart."*

Clerk: *"Well, I'm not authorized to replace them."*

You: *"Well, if you'll contact someone who can replace them, I'll be on my way."*

You have not attacked the clerk or created an angry confrontation. (When you don't give in easily, the clerk may become a little frustrated.) However, this type of simple persistence is often all that is necessary for successful self-assertion.

Some of you may worry, *"How do I respond to a put-down?"* When someone is verbally aggressive, responding assertively is a challenge. There is a strong tendency to respond aggressively — but that usually makes things worse. Psychologists Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons suggest four ways to respond assertively to verbal aggression:

1. If you are wrong, admit it.
2. Acknowledge the person's feelings.
3. Assert yourself about the other person's aggression.
4. Briskly end the interchange.

Suppose you accidentally bump into someone. The person responds angrily, *"Damn it! Why don't you watch where you are going? You fool, you could have hurt me!"* You can give a response that combines the first three ways of responding assertively to verbal aggression.

"I'm sorry I bumped into you. I didn't do it intentionally. It's obvious than you are upset, but I don't like your calling me names or yelling. I can get your point without that."

Don't get me wrong! Self-assertion is not instant poise, confidence, or self-assurance, but it is a way of reducing anxiety caused by living in an impersonal and sometimes intimidating society. However, the information in my short articles will not be enough to make you self-assertive. If you are interested in more information, you can read Alberti and Emmons' book, *Your Perfect Right*, (1986).

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, 1995, pages 654-655.