

A LINE ON LIFE

5/29/95

Standing Up for Your Rights *

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Have you ever:

- Hesitated to question an error on a restaurant bill because you were afraid of making a scene?
- Backed out of asking for a raise or change in working conditions?
- Said, "Yes," when you really wanted to say, "No"?
- Been afraid to question a grade or rating that seemed unfair?

If this seems to describe you, do not feel as if you are alone. Many people have these problems. Why do so many people allow others to take advantage of them? Most of us have been rewarded — first as children and later as adults — for compliant, obedient or "good" behavior. This is probably why so many people find it difficult to assert themselves. Another possibility is that being assertive may cause anxiety — because you may feel temporarily disliked by others, or you may see yourself as "*making a scene*."

Whatever the reason, some people feel so inhibited that they suffer tremendous agony in any situation that requires poise, self-confidence or self-assertion. Fortunately, psychologists have developed a method to deal with these problems called **assertive training**. You can be taught assertive behavior by using group exercises, staged conflicts, mirrors and even videotapes. You can learn to practice honesty, disagreeing, questioning authority, and assertive postures and gestures. As your self-confidence improves, you may go on "*field trips*" to shops and restaurants where you can practice what you have learned.

Typically, nonassertion is not severe enough to require psychotherapy. However, many people become tense or upset in at least some situations where they need to stand up for their rights. For this reason, many people have found the methods and exercises of assertive training very helpful. If you have ever eaten carbonized steak when you ordered it rare or stood in silent rage as a clerk ignored you — you will gain something from assertive training.

The first step in assertive training is to convince yourself that you have three basic rights:

- 1. The right to refuse.**
- 2. The right to request.**
- 3. The right to correct a wrong.**

Self-assertion involves standing up for these rights by speaking out in your own behalf. Some people think that being assertive is just selfishly getting things your own way. This is not true! There is a big difference between being assertive and being aggressive.

Aggression is an attempt to get your own way no matter what. With aggressive behavior, you achieve your goals by keeping others from satisfying their needs. You get your way by either choosing for others or putting them down. You take advantage of others, leading them to feel hurt, defensive or humiliated. When others do gain power, they are very likely to reverse roles — becoming aggressive and taking advantage of you.

At the other extreme, if you are **passive (nonassertive)**, you are usually patient to a fault, letting others take advantage of you. Passive behavior is self-denying and inhibited, leaving you typically hurt, anxious and angry. You allow others to make the choices. Since you do not indicate what you want, your goals are not achieved. Others achieve their goals at your expense. You can become a storehouse of pent-up anger that — when you reach your limits — can explode into violent behavior. (Remember the case of Lorena Bobbitt?)

In contrast to these two extremes, assertive methods emphasize firmness, not attack. **Assertiveness** is a direct, honest expression of feelings and desires. Like aggressive behavior, assertive behavior acts in your own best interests, usually achieving your goals. However, you also respect the rights of others. While you maintain your self-respect, you allow others to express their feelings, and you respect their needs. In this way, others also achieve their goals, and their feelings of self-worth are maintained. In addition, when you have the decision-making power, you are modeling a respect for others. When these others gain positions of power, they are more likely to consider your needs along with their own goals.

**In contrast to a "win-lose" situation,
a "win-win" solution benefits everyone.**

Essentially, both aggressive and passive behaviors are "win-lose" situations. The aggressive person wins, while everyone else loses. On the other hand, the passive person loses, while everyone else wins. In contrast, assertive behavior attempts to promote a "win-win" outcome — where both parties have a good chance of getting their goals while still maintaining their self-respect.

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