

How To Say *Yes*, How To Say *No*

Herb Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist

Current contact: John DeFrain, Extension Family and Community Development Specialist

This NebGuide discusses how becoming more assertive can help you express yourself with increased confidence.

When you get angry with someone, are you afraid to say anything because you don't want to create hurt feelings?

When the meat you ordered at a restaurant is overcooked, do you eat it anyway?

When your partner does something you don't like, do you get angry and yell?

When someone pays you a compliment, do you say, "I didn't really do anything?"

If so, consider expressing yourself in a more positive, confident and straightforward way. Being assertive is based on the idea that changing your actions leads to changing your attitudes and feelings, which produces greater feelings of self-esteem. When you are assertive, you make your own choices, you are usually more confident, and you feel good about yourself as a person. Assertiveness training is one form of self-improvement designed to help you be a stronger, more self-sufficient person.

Why is assertion important? First, being able to express yourself is a desirable and, at times, necessary skill for human survival. Second, being able to communicate your feelings, wants and needs is an important component of positive mental health. Third, those who have difficulty expressing themselves to other individuals report feelings of low self-esteem, depression, and undue anxiety in interpersonal situations. They often report physical complaints such as headaches, backaches and stomach problems.

People who have learned to be assertive report increased feelings of self-confidence and receive more positive reactions from others. They experience less anxiety in social situations, as well as decreases in physical complaints.

Some of what has been recently said and written about assertiveness and techniques for being assertive has been thoughtful and good. Some has been an attempt to cash in on public interest. This confusion, has caused some *myths* to form. It is important to differentiate between what assertiveness actually **is** and what it is **not**.

Myths About Assertiveness

"I will get what I want." This myth results from the belief that being assertive is a form of manipulation. But, if manipulation occurs, there can be no mutual respect. Being more assertive does not mean that you embark upon a win/lose game. Assertiveness is based on the concepts of communication, negotiation, and compromise.

"There is a need to be assertive in all situations." Not true! You may choose to be non-assertive when dealing with oversensitive individuals who become threatened when faced with open communication, or when unusual circumstances call for special understanding and compassion. Assertive behavior may not work because it can be misinterpreted or the assertive behavior comes across in an offensive manner.

"Others will be assertive if you are assertive." Not necessarily. Others may respond with confusion, passiveness, or open aggression, or they may withdraw from you completely.

Why be assertive then? The biblical admonition of "love your neighbor as well as yourself" still holds true. It is a matter of self-respect. It is hard to love yourself when you are feeling used, abused, or disrespected.

Assertiveness is:

- having an alternative to passive or aggressive behavior;
- being open and direct, with both your positive and negative feelings;
- standing up for your legitimate rights, while being considerate of the needs and rights of others;
- insisting on being treated with respect; and
- gracefully accepting compliments.

Assertiveness is not:

- aggressiveness or an attack;
- making excuses;
- demanding more than you deserve;
- being self-centered or selfish;
- being inconsiderate of others' feelings or wishes; or blaming others for your problems.

Examples of assertive behavior are: "I really want to go to the movie, because I want to laugh and relax this evening."

"John, I feel irritated when you stay on the computer after I've announced dinner is on the table. It makes me feel my time isn't valuable."

What's in it for you by being assertive?

Assertiveness means standing up for your personal rights, and not letting someone else take them from you.

You are less dependent on others and more in control of your own life. You are better able to cooperate with another so both can achieve your own goals. You can better say "Yes" to the things you want and "No" to the things you don't want to do. By being assertive, you are saying, "I'M OK, YOU ARE OK."

Aggressiveness

Assertive behavior often becomes confused with aggressive behavior. While the intent of assertive behavior is to communicate more effectively, the intent of aggressive behavior is to dominate. Aggressive behavior often involves strong language or action in an attempt to control others while minimizing their worth.

As a result, the aggressor values self above others and ignores or violates the rights of others. Aggressive behavior usually encourages an aggressive response. An example of aggressive behavior would be, "Hey, stupid, get upstairs and clean the bathroom!" or "If you don't pick up your toys, you are going to get a spanking."

When you aggressively try to make choices for others as well as for yourself, you often end up feeling angry, self-righteous, and later, you may feel guilty.

Why do people act aggressively? First, they may achieve their goals by doing so. Second, it is a way of venting anger and frustration. Third, they may **choose** to do so, to safeguard a small child who runs out into the street. The problem is that when a people are continually aggressive, it alienates them from other people. They often end up feeling bitter and alone. They are taking an "I'M OK, YOU'RE NOT OK" position.

Passiveness

When you are too passive or submissive, you may lose your rights, because you allow others to infringe on them. The intent of passive or other non-assertive behavior is to avoid conflict. Passive behavior denies expression of your own wishes for fear of offending others. Therefore, other people often make decisions and choices for you.

If you continually respond passively, you may often feel misunderstood, taken for granted, and used. In addition, you may feel angry about the outcome of the situation, or become hostile or annoyed at the other person. You may find yourself *blowing up* in a given situation, because there is a limit to how much frustration you can bottle up without having it affect you in some way. You may develop such physical complaints such as headaches, sleep problems, stomach ailments, and other difficulties due to the suppression of angry or hurt feelings. You accept an "I'M NOT OK, YOU'RE OK" posture.

An example of passive behavior might be:

"Oh, I really couldn't do that!"

"Well if you want to stay home and play golf for our vacation, that's okay, I guess."

These statements do not express clearly the speaker's feelings, needs or opinions. As a result, all the responsibility for undertaking and decision making is placed on the listener.

Passive behavior can be costly when an overwhelmingly persuasive salesman convinces you to sit through a sales pitch or try a product you don't need or want. It can work against you in a job interview when you don't volunteer enough information about your abilities. Finally, it is a heavy burden for another person to have the responsibility of making decisions only to find out that you are not satisfied with the choices he or she has made.

Yet, you may choose to be silent and passive at a committee meeting you hope will end quickly, knowing that if you spoke up, it would last much longer. Or, you may passively let another make a decision if it seems to be very important at the moment. Whether or not you are assertive in any situation is a decision which you alone must make, because passive and aggressive behavior have a place, too.

A note of caution. Assertive behavior changes relationships. In standing up for yourself you may risk ending a relationship. Therefore, it may be desirable to include your spouse, family, or close friends in any assertiveness training you receive and have them learn the skills with you. Then, everyone will benefit. And, of course, you always have a choice – to be or not to be – assertive. That is the question, and only you can answer it.

How Do I Recognize How Assertive I Am?

A number of situations will be described. For each situation, mark each response as either **passive**, **aggressive** or **assertive**. Check your responses with the answers found on the last page of this guide.

Situation 1: You and your partner are dining out at a moderately expensive restaurant. You have ordered a medium-rare steak. When the steak is served, it is well done. You:

- Grumble to yourself but eat the steak and say nothing to the waitress. When you pay the bill and the cashier asks, "How was everything?," you say, "Fine."
____ Assertive ____ Aggressive ____ Passive
- Say to the waitress, "I ordered my steak to be cooked medium-rare. This steak is well-done. Please bring me one cooked medium-rare."
____ Assertive ____ Aggressive ____ Passive
- Get up and walk out. Complain to the cashier about the poor service. "If people can't cook what I order, I am not going to eat here!"
____ Assertive ____ Aggressive ____ Passive

Situation 2: Your friend has just complimented you on how well dressed you are and how nice you look. You feel pleased, and you say:

- a. "Oh come on now, you're just saying that to be nice. You probably say that to everybody."
 Assertive Aggressive Passive
- b. "Thank you."
 Assertive Aggressive Passive
- c. "Oh, I bought this on sale."
 Assertive Aggressive Passive

Situation 3: You are returning a faulty item to the department store. You bought a shirt/blouse and when you got it home, you found it to have a flaw in it. You do not want the item as it is. The clerk has just said, "It's a sale piece of merchandise, and besides no one will ever notice it." You say:

- a. "Well, I still want to return this one and either get my money refunded, or exchange it for one that is not defective. I do not want this one!"
 Assertive Aggressive Passive
- b. "Look, give me my money back. I don't have all day for you to waste my time."
 Assertive Aggressive Passive
- c. "Well, I suppose I can keep it, if you're sure it won't show."
 Assertive Aggressive Passive

Situation 4: You have just been criticized by your family because they didn't like what you prepared for the evening meal. You feel the criticism is unjustified. You say:

- a. (nothing)
 Assertive Aggressive Passive
- b. "Shut up! If you don't like what I cook, you cook it yourself!"
 Assertive Aggressive Passive
- c. "I think your criticism is unfair. Tell me what you like that I can cook next time."
 Assertive Aggressive Passive

If you had difficulty marking the responses to these situations, reread the discussion on the distinction between assertive, aggressive or passive behavior at the beginning of this article.

Evaluating Your Assertiveness

In assessing how assertive you presently are and just how assertive you should be, it might be helpful to consider the following questions:

1. Am I saying what I really wanted to say? Am I clear and understandable?
2. Am I being direct and unapologetic in what I say?
3. Do I have good eye contact and do I look directly at the person I am addressing?
4. Do I make appropriate use of gestures and facial expressions? Do they agree with the verbal message I send?
5. Do I use a level, well-regulated, non-threatening voice? Do I avoid whining, pleading, or sarcasm?

6. Do I express myself honestly and accept responsibility for my expression.
7. Do I feel pleased with myself and feel rewarded by being able to express my thoughts and feelings?
8. Do I select the appropriate time to be assertive with others? Spontaneity is important if an immediate controlled response is necessary.

A key factor in changing your actions is practice with the kind of behavior you wish to implement. Saying the words, hearing your voice, seeing your facial expressions, feeling your emotions will ease your anxiety as you strengthen your ability to stand up for your legitimate rights.

How Can I Be More Assertive?

I language is particularly useful as a guide for helping you to assertively express difficult negative feelings.

An *I* message has three parts: a feeling or want; a non-blameful description of the situation; and the effect the situation has on you. An *I* message is sent in this form: I feel _____, when _____, because _____. Some examples of *I* messages are:

"I feel angry when you suggest that I don't drive very well because it makes me feel incompetent."

"I feel hurt when you don't express your affection for me, because it seems you are ignoring me."

In addition, the principles in *I* language can help you determine when another's feelings stem from some violation of his or her rights, or whether your negative feelings are due to others trying to impose their own values and expectations on you. *I* messages are straightforward and pertain directly to your response, not to another person.

Practice Your Skill

If you **choose** to become more assertive, the way to do it is to **practice** being more assertive. Pick a safe situation (not one where your job or marriage is at stake) and give it a try. Here are some assignments you might practice on.

1. Go into two stores where you don't usually shop and ask for change for a dollar. Don't buy anything, just ask for change. Go into another store and ask about the credit policy. Can you buy an item and pay for it over a period of time? If so, what are the terms of the payment? If you receive what you asked for, politely thank the person (don't give a reason as to why you are making the request) and leave. If not, say a polite "thanks anyway" and leave.
2. Go into three stores and try on items of clothing. Don't buy anything. This strengthens your ability to say *no*.
3. When you buy something that you decide you don't want, return it without an apology or explanation. Just say "I would like to return this." The intent of the task is to be able to return things, not to practice being apologetic.

4. Make up assertive responses to the following situations:

- “You don’t really want your family to be left without insurance protection in case an accident happens, now do you?”
- “Mom, bake some of those cookies I really like: you do such a good job of making them. I need to take some to 4-H meeting and I haven’t got that time.”
- “This is Energy Save Corporation. We will have a person in your neighborhood this week to check the efficiency of your heating and air conditioning systems. What time is most convenient for you?”

5. Make up assertive responses to the following situations:

- After waiting in a checkout line for 20 minutes, someone comes up and asks to get in front of you because she or he is in a hurry.
- Your neighbor calls you three or four times a day and talks for 45 minutes at a time, and you’d rather be getting some work done.
- You are working full-time outside the home, yet none of your family members offer to help with meal preparation, housecleaning, laundry, or other household chores.
- A friend asks you for moving help the weekend you’ve planned an important family trip.

Summary

Assertiveness is the ability to express wishes in ways that are both appropriate and effective. We are being assertive when we courteously and firmly:

- ask for what we want;
- refuse what we don’t want without infringing on the rights of others; and
- insist on being treated with respect as a person.

Assertive behavior can make life more satisfying for you; but in some circumstances it can get you into trouble. Use it wisely. Remember, it’s your choice.

Answers:

Situation 1: a. passive, b. assertive, c. aggressive
Situation 2: a. passive, b. assertive, c. passive
Situation 3: a. assertive, b. aggressive, c. passive
Situation 4: a. passive, b. aggressive, c. assertive

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

**Index: Families
Relationships**
Issued June 2007

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2007, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.