

# The Quick Guide to Assertiveness: Become Direct, F

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Assertiveness is a type of behavior which is used to express one's needs in a healthy, prosocial manner.



Being assertive can be beneficial in a variety of social settings, and there can also be consequences to being excessively assertive. While some people are naturally more assertive than others, you can learn to be assertive fairly easily. This article will cover assertiveness and its benefits, as well as how to best teach yourself to be assertive, particularly at work.

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## Assertiveness Seeks Equality

According to the Oxford Dictionary, assertiveness can be defined as “[c]onfident and forceful behavior”. In the context of Psychology, “[a]ssertive self-expression is direct, firm, positive – and, when necessary, persistent – action intended to promote equality in person-to-person **relationships**” (Alberti & Emmons, 2008). This last point about equality is key, as being assertive is about securing what is fair, not simply about manipulating people into giving one what they want.

Assertiveness is a “stable and distinctive individual characteristic which healthy and unhealthy persons may be distinguished” (Vasquez & Pereira, 2016). Assertive behaviors can be proactive or reactive, verbal or nonverbal, so one can assert themselves in many ways (Flynn, 2007). Some examples of exercising assertiveness at work include asking one’s boss for a raise, asking a coworker to do their part of a project, or simply not allowing someone to interrupt.

## Aggression Limits the Rights of Others

Assertiveness is similar to aggression, but there is a significant difference. That is,

*“[a]ssertiveness involves standing up for one’s rights without in upon those of others, whereas aggression involves the use of no stimuli to maintain rights” (Richins & Verhage, 1987).*

The difference is that assertive people seek to gain rights to put on an equal footing with others, while aggressive people simply gain rights. This distinction shows why assertiveness is considered healthy, prosocial behavior while aggression is not.

Some literature considers aggressive behaviors to be a subset of assertiveness rather than a distinct behavior



(Ames et al., 2017). In these cases, though, aggression is considered “over-assertiveness”, so even this literature marks a distinction between aggression and the optimal amount of assertiveness. This difference has also been defined as “aggressive assertiveness” and “adaptive assertiveness” (Thompson & Berenbaum, 2011).

## The Benefits of Assertiveness

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Nursing students who are more assertive scored higher on a “psychological empowerment” measure which is “defined in terms of **sense of meaning**, competence, self determination and impact” (Ibrahim, 2011). There has also been a demonstrated positive relationship between assertiveness and **self-esteem** in nursing students (Ilh, 2016). These benefits do not just come from constantly acting assertively, though.

It is important to be assertive “in situations where the issue [is] important and when confrontation [is] agreeable”, but it is also important to be less assertive “in situations where the issue [is] unimportant and confrontation [is] not appropriate” (Kammrath, 2015). In a **work setting**, low assertiveness can lead to low achievement while high assertiveness can hurt social relationships (Ames & F, 2007). In other words, the greatest benefits from assertiveness come from knowing when to be assertive rather than always being assertive, as well as knowing how assertive one should be.

Assertiveness can also serve as a protective factor. In some women who had just given birth, having higher levels of assertiveness meant they were less likely to develop postpartum depressive symptoms (S, et al., 2014). While these findings were also based on the participants' level of “cognitive flexibility”, they still show that being assertive not only helps one during the moment of a negotiation, but can also be a valuable trait to have in general.

## **Learning to Be Assertive**

Two single 90-minute assertiveness training sessions separated by a month have been shown to significantly increase assertiveness (Nakamura et al., 2017). These sessions were made up of a lecture

assertiveness and small-group roleplaying to practice assertive. This procedure has also been used with success on International students in the United States (Tavakoli et al., 2009).

Based on these findings, one way to train oneself to be assertive is to learn how to be assertive, then practice being assertive or as a family member in a no-stakes roleplaying situation. Of course, based on the Nakamura (2017) and Tavakoli (2009) studies, trained professionals delivered the lectures on assertiveness, which most people reach will not have access to. The roleplaying aspect, however, can be performed by anyone and practiced as many times as necessary.

A cognitive-based model of assertiveness training has been proposed by Vagos & Pereira (2016), which begins with these steps:

- Teach the difference between assertiveness and aggression
- Teach how to recognize the “cognitive and emotional products that lead to aggression
- Teach how to change these **cognitive** and emotional factors into factors that will encourage assertive behaviors instead of aggression

For example, an office worker might often get upset with their coworker for being



rude in the mornings, and might aggressively respond with anger towards that coworker. Once the office worker knows the difference between aggression and assertiveness, though, they can change the way they think about the situation to lead to an assertive response rather than an aggressive response. In this case, they might remember that their coworker has just had a baby and may not be sleeping well.

the office worker to offer their coworker coffee and ask if they need anything.

## **Choosing When to Be Assertive**

The above research on training assertiveness can easily be adapted for someone who wants to teach themselves to be more assertive. The first step is learning what assertiveness is and what it looks like, as well as the difference between assertiveness and aggression. After that, as the cognitive model above explains, it is a matter of changing one's thoughts from thoughts that lead to aggression to thoughts that lead to assertiveness. Roleplaying assertiveness can also go a long way in training oneself to be more assertive.

It is not just a matter of being assertive at work, it is a matter of being assertive at the right amount of assertive. That means understanding the difference between important times to stand up for oneself and less-important issues that one can concede. For example, it would be important to be assertive when asking for vacation time or a raise, but it is not necessarily important to be assertive when someone is picking up lunch.

## **How to Be More Assertive at Work**

1. Turn aggression into assertiveness: instead of yelling at a coworker for being rude, remind your coworker that you also have responsibilities you need to focus on.
2. Keep the focus on yourself, instead of on your coworker: use sentences like "I work better when..." instead of "You need..."

stop...".

3. Declare your needs unapologetically: Do not provide multiple excuses when declaring your needs, just declare them. When asking for time off, do not provide multiple reasons such as the fact that you have been really busy with family issues, and you have been having headaches, and one of your coworkers recently got sick. Instead, just firmly ask for time off and say you will be ready to resume working hard when you get back to work.
4. Declare your needs, then stick to them: if you had previously asked for a day off and are asked to come into work the day after, politely but firmly decline.
5. Only be assertive when you need to: if you assert yourself for unimportant issues, being assertive is less likely to be effective when you really need it to.

## Assertiveness Values Everyone

While being assertive generally leads to better outcomes in many aspects of life, being overly assertive can also hurt **relationships**. The key is being “adaptively assertive” rather than “aggressively assertive” and finding the right situations in which to be assertive. In other words, one should use assertiveness simply to secure equality for themselves and never to take away from someone else.

This last part is an important aspect of **positive psychology**. The teachings of positive psychology are not meant to simply benefit the individual who studies positive psychology, but are meant to benefit society as a whole. Learning about assertiveness and how it can benefit not only yourself but also the people around you is just one step towards a more equal world.



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