

Learn to be more assertive

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START THE YEAR RIGHT by taking back your power and treating yourself with the respect you deserve

How are you doing with your goal-setting for this new year? Will you be one of the few to follow through on your goals, or will they join your lists of unmet ones like so many years before?

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It's okay to say no and not feel guilty when someone is taking advantage of you and crossing your boundaries.

One of the most common goals, often expressed by my clients, is learning how to be more assertive. Whether you want to assert yourself in order to be treated with respect, to be a positive role model for your children, to learn how to say "no" without feeling guilty or to take back your power, all are great reasons for learning assertiveness skills.

Many people confuse the terms regarding being assertive, aggressive or passive. Here are some examples for each type of behaviour: Aggressive: "You are always late. You never keep your word. I can't rely on you for anything." Passive: "It's okay – so what if you are an hour late? So what if the meal is cold and overcooked? That's fine." Assertive: "When you tell me that you will be coming home at 6 p.m. and show up at 7 p.m., I worry that something may have happened to you. I also feel hurt and angry that I am not important enough for you to call or keep your word. Do you think that in the future we can agree that you will call me if you will be coming home late?"

One of the first goals in becoming assertive is to be clear about your needs: ■ "I need you to keep your word." ■ "I need you to hear me." ■ "I need you to stop interrupting me when I am trying to tell you something." How to speak assertively:

Begin with, "When you (describe a behaviour), then I feel ..." You must be calm, own your feelings and not blame the other person. You want to explain how their behaviour affects you and how it makes you feel. No one can blame you for your feelings, but they can become defensive if they are feeling attacked or criticized. When not to be assertive:

It is just as important to know when not to be assertive as it is to be assertive. Don't try to be assertive:

- When you are angry. It will just come out as aggressive.
- On the spur of the moment. You need time to think about what you want and the best way to express it.
- If you are not in a safe situation or the person may become violent. If the other person is angry or aggressive, in which case it won't be effective.
- If you are feeling sad or hurt. Again, it won't be effective.

You need to be feeling strong, competent and powerful when you choose to assert yourself. This is the message you want to convey. You insist on being treated with respect and require the same of the other person. No threats, no yelling, just explaining that this is your need and you're entitled to be respected.

How do you know if you need to learn assertiveness training? Ask yourself these questions: ■ Are my needs being met? ■ Do I feel heard? ■ Am I feeling that I am being treated with respect and dignity? Am I proud of how I deal with disagreements and conflict? ■ Am I clear about my expectations? If you said no to two or more questions, you may have some work to do.

Being assertive is more than just using the right words and tone. Timing is also very important. If your partner just received some bad news, it's not the time to assertively ask him to clean the garage. Non-verbal communication is also important. You need to maintain eye contact and be standing up with your head held high. It all works together. Communication is multi-dimensional – more than the script, your attitude and non-verbal communication will go far toward whether you're successful or not.

Another common non-assertive, passive behaviour that many people use is avoiding saying "no" because it makes them feel guilty.

This is a very common occurrence with people who have been brought up to please and nurture others. They have not been taught that taking care of yourself is both healthy and positive; instead, they have been taught to feel guilty whenever taking care of their own needs.

It's okay to say no and not feel guilty when someone is taking advantage of you or not respecting your boundaries.

For example, if someone calls you unexpectedly and asks for a favour, you don't have to say "no" outright – you can ask them to give you a few minutes to check your schedule and then get back to them. This gives you the time to decide whether or not you really want to do this favour. You can also say, "Let me think about it and I will get back to you."

If a friend asks to borrow money from you and you are not comfortable with this, you can say, "I am sorry, but our family has made it a rule never to lend money to family or friends."

Start off this year on the right foot – taking back your power by treating yourself with respect, as well as treating others the same way. What better gift to give yourself than the gift of higher self-esteem? Rhonda Rabow is a psychotherapist in Montreal. Her website is helpmerhonda.ca. To receive her free monthly newsletter, go to rhondarabow.com, email her at info@rhondarabow.com or call 514626-4609.