

# Exercise

Professional Version | US English

# Assertive Responses



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## Description

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Acting assertively is an interpersonal skill that helps people to maintain healthy relationships, resolve interpersonal conflict, and prevent their needs from being stifled or repressed. Examples of assertive behavior include saying “no”, refusing unreasonable requests, asking another person to behave differently, communicating clearly how an event or situation has made you feel (positive and negative), expressing an opinion, or pursuing one’s personal goals.

Assertiveness can be understood as relational style that treads a middle path between being passive and being aggressive (Linehan, 2014; Butler & Hope, 1995). To strike the correct balance between passivity and aggression, assertiveness uses fairness as a guiding principle (Butler & Hope, 1995) both in terms of being fair to yourself and toward other people. During the 1960s, assertiveness was seen as a way for individuals to state and access their individual rights without infringing on the rights of others: “the protection of individual rights as a means of self-assertion” (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013). Examples of such rights include the right to say “no”, to change your mind, to express your opinion or feelings, or to say “I don’t know”.

### Theories of assertiveness

Psychological theory has typically sought to account for a lack of assertiveness, or to explain why individuals are not able to be assertive.

Behavioral theories propose that unassertive responses are learned during development and carried into adulthood: shaped by negative consequences following assertive behavior. Such negative consequences might include punishment, thwarted goals, or rejection (Salter, 2002; Wolpe, 1990). Behavioral approaches propose that the deficit can be addressed with specific behavioral training (Heimberg & Becker, 1981) and that behaviors including eye-contact, posture, tone of voice, or specific verbal responses can be trained. These behaviors require targeted training because they are independent from one another. For example, research broadly supports the observation that training eye-contact will not automatically generalize to posture or vocal tone (Heimberg & Becker, 1981). Once these behaviors have been trained it is expected that they will be positively reinforced in the natural environment and therefore maintained (Heimberg & Becker, 1981).

Cognitive theories propose that unassertive behavior arises from unhelpful beliefs that prevent an individual from being assertive during specific situations (Heimberg & Becker, 1981), and that social situations may trigger unhelpful beliefs and appraisals. Non-assertive individuals might hold negative self-beliefs (e.g. “I am unlovable”, “I am not good enough”) and dysfunctional assumptions (e.g. “If I say no I won’t be liked”, “If I say what I want then I’ll be punished”). Such beliefs affect how the individual appraises situations, leading to negative automatic thoughts such as “They’re going to leave” or “He’s mad with me”, which would result in feelings of anxiety, uncertainty in how to act, and the inhibition of assertive responses.

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## Assertiveness training

Assertiveness training has a long history as a transdiagnostic psychological intervention. It can be highly useful during clinical work, due to the relationship between assertiveness (or unassertiveness) and self-esteem, social relationships and achieving personal goals across a wide spectrum of clinical presentations.

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*"The skills taught are intended to maximise the chances that a person's goals in a specific situation will be met, while at the same time not damaging either the relationship or the person's self-respect"*

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Speed, Goldstein & Goldfried (2017)

Interventions can take the form of social skills training that directly modifies assertive behaviors. Therapist modeling and rehearsal of passive and aggressive behaviors can help to consolidate what a balanced, assertive response should look like. Behavioral rehearsal during roleplays can be audio and video recorded, in order to provide direct feedback.

Specific physical behaviors can be targeted (Linehan, Goldfried & Goldfried, 1979). Assertive non-verbal communication includes adopting an upright and confident posture, a clear and calm tone of voice, and use of direct eye contact especially when requesting or refusing. Adopting these behaviors makes a clear demonstration that a person is not submissive. The use of specific verbal responses can also be trained, such as "I" statements (Salter, 2002), saying "no" (Linehan, 2014) and not apologizing unnecessarily. When using assertive verbal communication, an individual is able to describe the current situation, express what they need and want, explicitly consider the other person's perspective, re-assert their own goals and consider mutually agreeable compromises that may lead to a resolution. To complement this, active listening behaviors prevent the relational style from becoming aggressive. At a minimum, active listening combines feedback to show that the other person is being heard (head nodding, minimal verbalizations such as "mm hmm" and "yep") as well as summarizing and reflecting back what the other person has said without passing judgment ("so you feel that...", "you explained that...", "you told me...").

Cognitive restructuring approaches address underlying distorted cognitions (e.g. social anxiety, low self-esteem, high self-criticism) and the negative beliefs an individual may hold about asserting themselves (Speed, Goldstein & Goldfried, 2018). Thought monitoring and recording can be used to uncover the underlying cognitions and 'hot thoughts' that are triggered by problematic social interactions. Behavioral and cognitive approaches can be combined, using behavioral skill training that employs rehearsal and role-play as exposure therapy to test underlying cognitions (e.g. avoidance of social situations and worry about the social consequences of being assertive).

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## When to use assertiveness training

Individuals experiencing emotional difficulties often struggle to act assertively, and low levels of assertive behavior may reinforce such problems. People who experience anxiety may be submissive during social interactions, perhaps fearing the consequences of trying to express their needs or pursue personal goals. An unintended consequence of such behavior can be the suppression or minimization of their own needs. Being unable to act in one's own self-interest has an impact on social situations and relationships (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013). Low levels of assertiveness are associated with low relationship satisfaction and low self-esteem (Speed, Goldstein & Goldfried, 2018). An individual may express that they cannot interact in a satisfactory way with other people, and that they avoid social situations. They may struggle to begin and maintain fulfilling relationships, and report a pattern of problematic or damaging interactions with other people.

Social anxiety can also be associated with anger, aggression, and hostility. The individual may report frustration at not being able to get their needs met, a buildup of resentment against the other person, and explosive outbursts or arguments. Adopting an assertive communication style can help to reduce aggression in social situations. It has been shown to improve self-esteem, internal locus of control and to decrease hostility (Speed, Goldstein & Goldfried, 2018).

Being able to communicate assertively is an essential skill for developing and maintaining healthy relationships and positive self-esteem. Individuals with anxiety may find it particularly difficult to be assertive when interacting with people who are dominant or aggressive. A key skill is to be able to respond to the style of an aggressor's message, not its content. This *Assertive Responses* exercise worksheet guides clients through the practice of responding assertively to aggressive statement.

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# Instructions

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A critical skill in responding assertively is to avoid being drawn into responding to an aggressor's argument. An assertive response draws a boundary which says "I will not tolerate being spoken to in that way".

Assertiveness training requires the rehearsal and role-play of social interactions. In this exercise the therapist and client (or client and friend) practice in a pair. The therapist or friend says one of the aggressive statements, the client then responds with an assertive statement.

"You are going to practice responding assertively to someone who is being aggressive toward you. The exercise sheet here has a list of unpleasant and aggressive things that people might say to you, or have said to you in the past. I am going to pretend to be aggressive and say one of these. You should then choose one of the assertive responses as a reply."

## Additional suggestions

- After a few practice runs, ask the client to reflect on how it felt to be assertive.
- Encourage the client to try all of the different assertive statements.
- Ask the client to try out statements in different tones of voice that are more or less assertive, and to reflect on how it made them feel.
- Ask the client to try out statements with different body postures. An assertive posture is upright, with the chin slightly raised and relaxed shoulders.
- Ask the client to come up with their own variants of the assertive responses. There may be a specific, recurring situation that they want to address. They can reflect upon and choose which of the assertive responses is the most suitable.

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## Assertive Responses

Aggressiveness is disrespectful. People are being verbally aggressive when they express opinions, feelings, or desires in ways that disrespect or violate the rights of others.

Assertiveness is the opposite of aggression. Assertive responses are ones which express our opinions, feelings, or desires in ways which respect the rights and opinions of others. Assertiveness is a way of getting your needs satisfied, not tolerating disrespect, and becoming empowered.

If someone talks to you in an aggressive way it is better to focus on the style of their message, not its content:

- **Do** let the speaker know that they are talking to you disrespectfully
- **Do not** enter into a conversation about the issue they are raising



### Assertive responses exercise

For this exercise find someone you can practice with – a friend, partner, or relative. Take it in turns to say aggressive statements to one another and practice responding assertively. You can start with the statements below and then practice making up your own.

#### Aggressive statements

- *"You don't know what you're talking about"*
- *"Why are you being so defensive?"*
- *"Why are you being such a coward?"*
- *"You're being so manipulative"*
- *"That's so stupid, why don't you do it this way?"*
- *"It's almost as if you don't want to get over it"*
- *"Don't be such an idiot"*
- *"What's wrong with you?"*
- *"You're such a <swear word>"*

#### Assertive statements

- *"That's a really hurtful thing to say"*
- *"It hurts me when you say that"*
- *"I would appreciate it if you didn't speak to me like that"*
- *"I would appreciate it if you would lower your voice"*
- *"Could you please try asking me that another way?"*
- *"I don't appreciate being spoken to that way"*
- *"I don't deserve to be spoken to that way"*
- *"I think your intentions are good, but saying that does not help me"*
- *"I don't like to be labeled"*

#### Assertive "If ... then ..." statements

- *"If you are going to keep saying unkind things then I'm going to end this conversation"*
- *"If you are going to continue speaking to me like that then I'm going to walk away"*
- *"If you will not change the subject then I would prefer that you leave me alone"*
- *"If you stop saying things like that then we will have a better relationship"*

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