



THE TOP 5 TIPS FOR BECOMING MORE ASSERTIVE

Being Assertive is not just using a certain set of communication skills or behaviours. Assertiveness is, first and foremost an attitude of mind with an accompanying set of beliefs about yourself and the world around you.

Many people go on assertiveness training courses expecting an instant personality transplant. You cannot change the message without changing the messenger, so assertiveness begins by examining the hidden beliefs we have about our worth and the worth of other people.

In the 70's Dr Eric Berne wrote a book called "*Games People Play*" which sparked a whole new way of thinking about people and relationships, and spawned the now well known saying "*I'm OK, you're OK*". This, in its simplest terms, is the premise behind an assertive mindset.

When you have the belief that you are equal to every other person, not better or worse, you can communicate from a position of equality.

Being assertive is not a natural response in human beings. Over years of evolutionary growth based on the need to survive, we have learnt to respond to threats with an instinctive “*Fight or Flight*” reaction. We have a specific part of our brain that enables us to perceive danger so we can protect ourselves from that perceived danger. Imagine yourself as a primitive caveman from years gone by. You are walking through the plains, and there in the distance you spy a stranger, coming towards you holding a large stick. What would you do?

At the top of your spinal cord is the brain stem, and it is from here that the ‘panic button’ is pressed and signals are sent to say ‘danger!’. This releases a concoction of chemicals and hormones into the bloodstream, the most famous of which being adrenaline. You can sometimes feel the effects of adrenaline surging around your body in an extremely stressful (or exciting) situation. It literally gives you a ‘natural’ high, and enables you to see clearer, run faster, and fight harder. The brain stem is not complex enough to discern ‘real’ dangers from the perceived dangers of modern living or the difficult situations and associated conflict we find ourselves in, and responds in the same way it always has done. And what

this part of the brain lacks in complexity, it makes up in speed. Your caveman brain has perceived danger and triggered the adrenalin before the rest of your brain has even noticed.

The effect on your emotional reactions is apparent too. In modern days when you are faced with a variety of types of conflict, your brain responds as though this was a physical threat to your survival and the panic button is pressed. Sometimes you feel compelled to run or hide while at other times you find your fists and jaws clenched while you experience a strong desire to lash out and attack. The flight or flight mechanism becomes the enemy of assertiveness as it encourages submissive or aggressive behaviour.

So, how can we break this habitual, instinctive response?

Although you can't lose that sudden surge of adrenaline and the immediate physical symptoms it produces, you can learn to control the behaviour that follows.

The following five tips will help you remain assertive so you can act in a way that is effective and respectful to yourself and to others.

Tip 1: Breathe!

Notice how in moments of stress / conflict you may hold your breath.

This reaction tells the ‘caveman brain’ that something really must be wrong, and more adrenaline is released which only adds to the problem.

Taking a few deep regular breaths in such moments of crisis helps to reverse the effect, and you will find yourself feeling much calmer. By being calmer what you say next will then **sound** more assertive. When communicating, 38% of your message comes from your tone of voice, so this is a big area to take control of when being assertive.

With each breath relax the muscles around your jaw, as these tend to tighten which again adversely affects the way we sound.

Slow down the speed at which you talk, talking too quickly tends to go with submissive and aggressive behaviour. Don’t shout or whisper, deliver an even, normal-paced message at a normal pitch. Nervousness often shows in a rising pitch. When we talk in a high-pitched manner we often lose the other person’s respect, as a high-pitched delivery is often associated with a child’s voice.

Normal breathing counteracts many of the nervous reactions that can be detected in our voice.

Tip no. 2: Think before you react

Your caveman reaction is urging you to take urgent action. This is useful in some dangerous situations, for instance if you've walked in front of a bus and need to move very quickly out of the way. In most situations where assertiveness is called for, you need to take more time to assess the situation before you respond. How many times do you wish, after the event, that you'd said or done something different? When you need to be assertive, pause for thought before you say or do anything. Give the other areas of your brain a chance to catch up with what is actually happening rather than what you think may be happening.

Tip 3 Talk to yourself

What you say to yourself feeds your beliefs and therefore your perception of the world around you. Your brain hears the mental chatter, believes it to be statements of fact and will adjust your behaviour accordingly.

If you are telling yourself that you are afraid, or the other person is wrong, or bad, or that ‘this is always happening to you’, the chain reaction is set up so your behaviour supports your beliefs, which probably lead to what is called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Use this amazing ability you have to your own advantage and plant wonderful, calming, confident thoughts in moments of conflict and anxiety. Tell yourself you are safe. Tell yourself you are capable and strong. Tell yourself the other person needs your support and understanding. Be careful how you communicate these messages: don’t say “*I’m not angry*”, the brain will hear ‘angry’ and react accordingly. Don’t say, “*I will be confident*” The brain picks up the future tense and thinks “*OK, but for now I’ll carry on panicking!*”.

Try these three actions right now. Breathe deeply, think about a stressful or difficult situation, and tell yourself how you want to feel, as though you really felt it. Practice this regularly and when you really need to be assertive, you will be in a good position to use these techniques to your benefit.

Tip 4: Mind your Language

Remember that if you can have your caveman brain triggered so can other people. The language you use is important if you want to defuse rather than escalate a situation.

The language of aggression is insulting, bossy and argumentative, sometimes in subtle ways. Patronising terms can be insulting. Telling people to calm down can be bossy, and the often used expression, “*I understand, but....*” is the perfect way to start an argument. Many aggressive statements start with the word “*You*”. Such as: “*You should...*”, “*You must...*”, and “*You can't*”. Take the ‘*You's*’ and ‘*Buts*’ out of your vocabulary and change to words such as “*I*” or “*And*”.

“*I appreciate how you feel. And, this is how I feel.*” is an assertive communication. Using the word “*I*” is honest as it shows that you are own your thoughts and feelings rather than putting them on the other person. While “*And*” builds co-operation and understanding. Non-assertive people will ‘hint’ at how they feel by saying such things as “*Don't you think...*” or “*People say...*”

The language of submission is self-effacing. *“Don’t mind me…”* *“Sorry to interrupt”* *“Can I ask a question?”*. There are also filler words like, *“Well, actually, um… I’m not sure”*. These avoid you having to say what you think and thereby strip you of your ownership of your thoughts and feelings. By learning to pause and think before you speak, many of these habitual phrases will disappear.

Tip 5: Stay aware of your whole body

Your body is communicating 55% of your message, and it is the part of the message the caveman brain reads and reacts to most strongly. The aggressive reaction shows in clenched fists, finger pointing, staring and rising above the other person. The submissive reaction is to shrink, avoid eye contact, move away and to cover yourself with your hands and/or arms.

When you know you need to look assertive, consciously limit your hand movements to soft, flowing gestures that support your words. Look people in the eye, especially when they are talking to you. When you break eye contact, do it to look at something the other person can look at too. Aim to be on the same physical level as the other person, sometimes

the easiest way to achieve this is to invite the other person to sit down, as standing up might be seen as aggressive.

Remember the fight or flight response is there to protect you as your first response to a dangerous situation. Use the rest of your brain to decide on the message you want to communicate, and communicate with your voice and body, as well as your words.

Working with a coach is an extremely useful way to develop assertiveness techniques, and to examine and adjust the beliefs that may be influencing your behaviour.

Angela Dunbar

Angela is an accredited AC coach, specialising in assertiveness, communication, creativity and marketing. Visit www.angeladunbar.co.uk for more information.

Visit www.associationforcoaching.com to find the details of other coaches who can help you to become more assertive.

If you have found this self-help guide helpful then please let us know by emailing media@associationforcoaching.com

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