



ASSERTING YOURSELF

**Some ideas to help you stand up
for yourself with other people**

**This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service,
Northampton Healthcare Community [NHS] Trust. It forms part of
a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure,
advise and encourage them.**

CONTENTS:

PAGE:

RECOGNISING THAT YOU HAVE RIGHTS	3
HOW TO BECOME MORE ASSERTIVE	4
BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR NEEDS AND COMMUNICATE THEM CLEARLY	4
HOW TO SAY “NO”	5
SUMMARY TABLE	6

ASSERTING YOURSELF:

How are you treated by people ? Are you used and abused ? Do you find others taking advantage of you, or not respecting you as a person ? Do people make plans without asking you and just assume that you will go along ? Do you find yourself in roles you dislike because everyone else in your life expects you to behave as you do ? Maybe you find it difficult to say “no” when friends ask you for time or for help. Maybe you are the employee who always gets landed with the extra duties, filling in at lunchtime and skipping holidays, or maybe you are a boss who is always open to your employee’s needs and gets taken for a ride and becomes inefficient.

If you recognise yourself here, you may find the following ideas on how to be more assertive and how to achieve greater control of your life, helpful !

So how do you get the consideration you deserve from friends, colleagues and family ?

Recognising that you have Rights:

Although assertiveness is often confused with selfishness and aggression, it is nothing to do with being strident or demanding and always having your own way.

The first step in becoming assertive is to **recognise that you have rights and that being assertive means standing up for yourself, while taking the interests and feelings of others into account.** You have the right to live your life as you choose as long as you don’t interfere with the rights of others. That includes the right to say no and the right to have your opinion heard, but it doesn’t include the right to trample all over other people’s feelings or to get your own way every time.

Automatically always putting other people before yourself and allowing their needs to control one’s life, creates problems. No-one ever got what they wanted, or got other people to do what they wanted by being unclear about their needs, afraid to stand up for themselves, or easily swayed by the needs and wishes of others. Just count the cost of not being assertive: a lack of choice, a lack of confidence, a lack of respect from others, which in turn means you are not getting what you should out of your job, your family life. Your quality of life is poor. You may take on a “childlike” role, seeing others as the “adult” or “controller” and resentment builds: “Don’t my children realise how hard I work to keep this home nice ?” or “My staff don’t realise the pressure I am under”. The built up resentment you feel when you are not assertive may come out as aggression.

There is no such thing as an unassertive person; we can all be assertive if we’re pushed. But why wait until your health, your family life or your job are at stake. Why suffer in the meantime ? You can make the change now.

So, **BEING ASSERTIVE MEANS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE.**

Being assertive is responsible; being unassertive is more likely to result in resentment and aggression.

She's taken
assertiveness
classes
those

HOW TO BECOME MORE ASSERTIVE:

1. Recognise that you have rights: Practice saying to yourself: "I have rights ..." [that is, make a positive self-statement]. Maybe write it down on a card and put it somewhere where you will often see it and until it becomes a habit to think this way.
2. Be clear about your needs and communicate them clearly:

- Often we fail to get what we want because other people do not KNOW what we want, not because they don't want to give it to us. Suppose you are hungry and would like to eat early, you could be direct and say: "I am hungry, would you mind if we ate early?" Or you could be indirect: "Are you hungry? Do you want to eat early?" In either case, the person may disagree, but by using the direct approach at least they will know what you want. If you are indirect and disguise your thoughts and feelings, you are setting the other person a difficult task, and you may well be misunderstood. You may not wish to be direct all the time, but it is important to be aware that you have a choice.
- Losing sight of your original goal/need is a common reason for failing to achieve it. Consider the following example:

A: "I bought this kettle yesterday and it doesn't work. I'd like a refund"
B: "*The manager isn't here at present*"
A: "I'm not asking for the manager. I want you to take this kettle back"
B: "*But I've got a lot of customers to serve*"
A: "It's disgraceful how customers are treated these days"

Person A has lost sight of his goal to get a refund and changed his goal to that of expressing anger at customer relations. If A had stuck to his original goal, the conversation might have gone like this:

A: "I bought this kettle yesterday and it doesn't work. I'd like a refund"
B: "*The manager isn't here now*".
A: "Is it only the manager who deals with refunds?"
B: "*Yes. I've got a lot of customers to serve*"
A: "When will the manager be available to arrange the refund?"

- When communicating your needs try to avoid "you" statements. For example: "You are so unreliable". The person may resent being blamed. Use "I" statements: "I feel angry when you say you will do something and you don't do it". This expresses your feelings without blaming the other person.
- Also try to avoid using emotional words like "lazy", "Useless" or "selfish". These usually arouse feelings of resentment in the other person and make them less likely to listen to you. You may find it helpful to break down what you want to say into the following 4 parts:

- i. **Explanation:** State the problem or request clearly as you see it

- ii. **Feelings:** Acknowledge your own feelings using “I” [not “you”] statements.
- iii. **Needs:** Outline clearly what you want out of the situation. Make as few demands as possible.
- iv. **Results:** Say what will happen as a result: the results if your needs are met and the disadvantages if they are not

For example: if you want your son or daughter’s help around the house:

Explanation: “I seem to be taking on more of my fair share of the housework”

Feelings: “It’s upsetting me because I don’t get enough time to myself anymore”

Needs: “I’d like us to sit down and decide on a fairer system”

Results: “I’d be much more relaxed and my mood would be better if I had some help with the housework”

3. How to say “no”:

Requests are often made vaguely or indirectly [“I’m looking for someone to help out ...” or “I hear you’re very good at”] You have to think quickly: “What is it that I am being asked to do here ?” How do you know whether you want to say “no”. So the first step is to clear the nature of the request. You must also decide how much you are prepared to compromise: [“No, I can’t help next week” or “I never lend my records, but you’re welcome to play them here”]. Having decided on this, there is still the problem of remaining firm and not getting side-tracked. There is a simple way of doing this; Manuel Smith, a Los Angeles Clinical Psychologist calls it the:

“BROKEN RECORD TECHNIQUE”

Keep repeating your refusal in a relaxed but firm way, over and over again, until the other person accepts it

It's nearer than I thought ...

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

You could of course use the “broken record technique” for making requests too, not just for saying “no”. You could decide in advance what you are going to say and then you can relax. You have nothing to worry about because you know just what you’re going to say, no matter how manipulative or abusive the other person becomes.

Broken Record Technique:

- A: “Could you stay tonight and finish this work ?”
- B: “I’m sorry but I won’t be able to stay”
- A: “But it’s important and you are the only one who can do it”
- B: “I’m sorry about that, but I can’t work late”
- A: “But you’re usually so reliable”
- B: “Yes, but tonight I just can’t stay”

Compare this with a conversation where the “broken record technique is not used:

- A: “Can you stay tonight and finish this work ?”
- B: “I’m sorry, but I can’t”
- A: “But it’s important and you’re the only one who can do it”
- B: “I’d like to but I have guests coming”
- A: “Couldn’t you ring them and say you’ll be late ?”

B: "Well, I don't like to do that"

A: "I'm sure they don't mind if you say how important it is. You can have the morning off instead"

B: "Well"

A: "Great. I'm glad you can stay"

Of course, in the first conversation, you could have qualified your refusal by adding, "I have guests coming", or "I'll do it first thing tomorrow". But these explanations must not hide your repeated refusal, otherwise you will lose sight of your goal, to say "no" and end up saying "yes".

Often people's reason for not saying "no" is that they are afraid that other people will stop liking them, or that they will hurt or disappoint someone.

HOW you say "no" is obviously important:

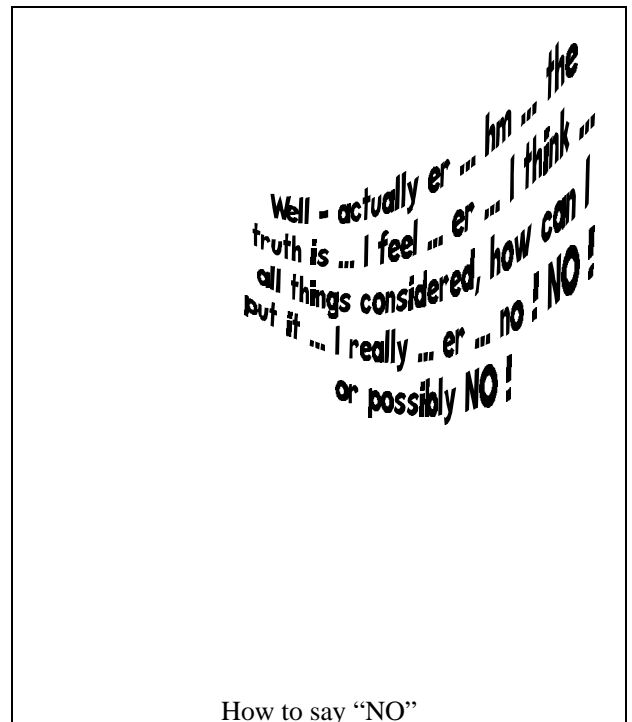
If you say "no" with a smile, and you express some understanding of the other person's problem, and you have a good reason for refusing, there is not much chance of your offending them. If, however, you refuse abruptly or make the other person feel guilty for asking ["I helped last year isn't it someone else's turn ?" or "I don't let other people borrow my books, they never return them"] they may dislike you, not for saying "no", but because you made them feel bad.

If you do not wish to share the reason for saying "no, you can still refuse firmly, but politely: "I'm sorry, but it's a personal rule of mine never to lend books".

Sometimes we fall prey to the manipulations of others: "If you loved me you would" or "I know you're really busy, and I really don't want to be a burden, but could you come and keep me company tomorrow ?" when you have different plans. Your boss might say: "The pressure's really on at the moment. Can you cancel your holiday ?" when what she really means is: "If you don't, you'll be letting us all down".

Don't be manipulated into saying "yes when you mean "no. Inevitably, there are times when other people will be annoyed because your saying "no" does not fit in with their needs and plans. But those are **THERE FEELINGS AND THEIR PROBLEM, AND YOU CANNOT TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S FEELINGS. DON'T LET GUILT GET IN THE WAY OF YOUR OWN NEEDS.**

Reassure them that you still want to be their friend/loving daughter/loyal employee etc., but that this time you have to say "no".



**You're boss, I said - but
don't tell me what to do**

Of course, there will be certain situations where saying “no” is not in ***your best interests***. As each situation arises, you need to decide how far you are prepared to compromise and to weight up the pros and cons of saying “no” for you. If the situation is such that saying “no” to your boss may well mean that you will get the sack, it is almost certainly not in your best interests to say “no” ! However, in the extreme situation of being asked to do something which is strictly against your values, you might find being sacked preferable to saying “yes”.

The important thing is to act in YOUR best interests, and this involves anticipating the CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR WORDS AND ACTIONS.

Finally, here is a table which summarises some of the ideas contained in this booklet:

MORE EFFECTIVE	LESS EFFECTIVE
<p>Make a distinction between assertiveness and aggression or selfishness</p> <p><i>Recognise that exerting and resisting influence demands a clear idea of what you want to achieve.</i></p> <p>State clearly what you want</p> <p><i>Always make requests politely</i></p> <p>Avoid criticism, threats and sulking as methods of exerting or resisting influence</p> <p><i>Recognise quickly when others are trying to influence you and clarify what is being asked of you</i></p> <p>Know exactly how much you are willing to give/do</p> <p><i>Don't allow yourself to be side-tracked into granting requests you really want to refuse</i></p> <p>Recognise that saying "no" and meaning "no" will reduce pressure from others in the future</p> <p><i>Accept that everyone has the right to say "no"; saying "no" is not a crime</i></p> <p>Refuse requests as politely as possible</p>	<p>Think that your wants and needs always come second to everyone else's</p> <p><i>Continually modify your goals in response to other people's demands</i></p> <p>Beat about the bush, make indirect requests</p> <p><i>Make demands not requests</i></p> <p>Rely on negative techniques - criticism, threats, getting angry - to influence others</p> <p><i>Comply with vague general requests and then feel resentful and used afterwards</i></p> <p>Have no clear idea about how far you are prepared to fall in with other's suggestions or requests</p> <p><i>Allow refusals to become weaker and weaker</i></p> <p>Blame other people for not taking "no" for an answer</p> <p><i>Feel guilty about saying "no"</i></p> <p>Make others feel bad about making requests.</p>

August 2001