

## **How to Gain Assertiveness to Empower Your Recovery**

### **By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Alcoholics and addicts are called upon to learn new living skills to replace the roles that chemicals played in their lives. Some of the most important skills to be acquired in early recovery are effective communication and relationship skills.

Assertiveness is necessary for communication and relationship skills. This self-assured style not only involves being able to stand up for one's own rights without trampling on the rights of others, it also involves being able to say "no" without feeling guilty. It encompasses taking responsibility for one's own feelings, behaviors, decisions, actions, and reactions, while giving up responsibility for those same things in others. It includes being able to appropriately express a full range of emotions to others.

Self-confident, firm behavior involves being able to openly, honestly, and directly communicate one's wants and needs. Firm boundary setting does not involve building impenetrable walls. It tells others where you stand, and outlines a range of appropriate behavior in regard to you.

Passivity denotes an absence of self-confidence and firmness. It generally involves abandoning one's own rights, wants, needs, to the wants or needs of others. An absence of appropriate boundaries allows others to pretty much treat you as they want, regardless of what you want.

Aggression involves trespassing others' boundaries to get your own wants or needs met. It can involve verbal, emotional, sexual, spiritual, or intellectual abuse. This could involve manipulation and dirty fight tactics. People can also be passive-aggressive, which is about being aggressive in sneaky, covert way. More often than not, it is about acting out anger in a hidden way. A classic example is typical backbiting, talking behind one's back kind of behavior that you see in the world of work every day. Most people exhibit this behavior from time to time. The following are examples of passive aggressive responses to a request that you don't want to do:

1. Saying "ok", but not having any intention of doing it.
2. Saying "ok", intending to do it, but putting it off until eventually they do it themselves.
3. Saying "ok", doing it, but doing a lousy job at it, thinking "they will never ask me to do that again."
4. Saying "ok", doing it and doing a good job at it, but going around to everyone complaining about their imposition in the first place.
5. Instead of saying "no", giving 15 excuses why you can't do it and the real reason is that you don't want to.

An appropriately firm way to deal with an undesirable request, is to say, "No, I don't want to do that", or "No thanks", or "No." When you are not accustomed to being assertive, a simple "No" can feel aggressive.

Most people have some area of their lives where they feel pretty confident about being standing up for themselves. Even the least self-assured person has some area where they can be assertive and the most self-confident person has some area where they just can't seem to get it together.

The skills that you use to be firm in one area are transferable to other areas where it seems like you will always give in. All it takes to transfer these skills is "risk". The risk is usually fear of loss when you avoid trying to be assertive. This fear of loss is often about loss of esteem, self-esteem, loss of goods and services, or loss of the relationship. Most of the time, the fear is way out of proportion to the likelihood of actual loss.

In order to find out which areas you have the least confidence in your ability to be assertive, ask yourself whether you typically behave in a confident, firm manner when you engage in the following circumstances:

1. Getting off the phone from the telemarketers without listening to their sales pitch?
2. Taking something defective back to Walmart?
3. Sending a steak back that is not cooked the way you ordered it?
4. Telling your neighbor "no" when s/he wants to borrow something.
5. Setting boundaries with someone at work who tries to take advantage of your good nature either by trying to get you to do their work, or asking you to cover up for them.
6. Negotiating for changes at work, either for more money or a change in working conditions.
7. Saying "no" to one of your siblings who wants something that you don't want to give -- time, energy, or other resources.
8. Saying "no" (and staying at "no") to one of the kids who wants something you don't want to give, do, or buy.
9. Setting boundaries with the previous generation (your parents or spouse's parents) when they want to meddle in your business where they don't belong (e.g. money or marriage).
10. Conveying your feelings assertively to your significant other who has done something that involved your feelings being hurt.

Can you see patterns in the areas where you want to be confidently firm, and where you have more trouble? What are they?

In which areas of difficulty can you accomplish being assertive by practicing the skills you already have? If you took the risk, what would happen?

Look at the areas that lack confident firmness and ask yourself "What is it that I haven't been willing to risk?"

Much of the time, the fear is not reality-based. If you find that you cannot be confidently firm in close personal relationships, the risk is probably fear of abandonment. You may

be afraid that those significant people won't love you if you are honest with them or if you take care of yourself.

Assertiveness is a worthwhile endeavor. It builds and reinforces self-esteem. Passivity, aggression, and passive-aggression undermines self-esteem. Learning to be confident and competent in your relationships with others is an important recovery task. Confident, firm communication is a component of acquiring these relationship skills.

Copyright 2009, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D. <http://www.peggyferguson.com>  
Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, Oklahoma