

# Defining Assertiveness As A First Step in Developing Assertiveness

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

Though many people recognize the concept of assertiveness, it is often mistaken for aggression. Assertiveness isn't about overpowering others to have your way; that's more akin to aggression, notably when it disregards the rights or feelings of others. Instead, assertiveness is simply about standing up for your rights while respecting the rights of others.

## **Here are some examples of assertive behavior:**

- a) Saying "no" to a request without feeling excessively guilty or being mean or rude.
- b) Take ownership of your feelings, behaviors, decisions, actions, and reactions while relinquishing responsibility for those same things in others.
- c) Engaging in open, honest, and direct communication.
- d) Establishing boundaries without erecting barriers.
- e) Expressing a full range of emotions to others without undue anxiety.

Conversely, passivity often involves sacrificing your rights, desires and needs for the wants or needs of others. It is the antithesis of assertiveness and a stark contrast to aggression.

## **Here are some examples of passive behavior:**

- a) Saying "yes" to a request when you really want to say "no."

- b) Allowing others to insult, hurt, or abuse you or someone else without attempting to protect yourself or them.
- c) Failing to take action when some form of action is warranted.
- d) Suppressing feelings, thoughts, needs, and wants out of fear or self-imposed submission.

Aggression entails disregarding the rights of others in pursuit of fulfilling your desires or needs. It breaches others' boundaries.

**Here are some examples of aggressive behavior:**

- a) Insisting others conform to your way of doing things.
- b) Using voice tones and body language that imply a threat level.
- c) Crossing others' boundaries by invading their personal space, physically, emotionally, or verbally abusing them.

Passive aggression involves expressing aggression covertly or sneakily. More often than not, passive-aggression entails channeling anger in a concealed manner.

**Here are some examples of passive-aggressive behavior:**

- a) Agreeing to a task or request but intentionally procrastinating or doing it poorly.
- b) Giving someone the silent treatment instead of addressing issues directly.
- c) Making sarcastic or backhanded compliments as a means of criticism.
- d) Sabotaging others' efforts or plans without overtly acknowledging them.

Understanding assertiveness is crucial for personal development and healthy relationships. It's about finding the balance between advocating for oneself and respecting the rights and boundaries of others. By practicing assertive communication and behaviors, individuals can confidently assert their needs and preferences while fostering mutual respect and understanding. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2010 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**

*Assertiveness plays a significant role in healthy communication. Essential to healthy communication and assertiveness are "I messages." "Communication Skills 101: Using 'I' Messages for Positive Interactions" is a brief lesson designed to assist you in shifting from confusing and potentially confusing "You" messages to more effective "I" messages. "I messages" reduce misunderstandings, conflicts, and strain in relationships. By embracing the transformative power of "I" messages, you'll enhance your communication, foster empathy, facilitate problem-solving, and establish a framework for constructive feedback. Revolutionize your communication skills and create meaningful connections with "Communication Skills 101: Using I Messages for Positive Interactions.*



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