

How to Gain Assertiveness to Empower Your Recovery

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

For individuals on the path to recovery from substance use disorder, the acquisition of new life skills is a crucial step. Among these, assertiveness stands out as a key tool for effective communication and relationship management. It's about confidently asserting one's rights without infringing upon others', expressing oneself without guilt, and having the ability to say 'no' when necessary. Assertiveness also involves taking ownership of one's emotions, behaviors, decisions, and actions, while respecting others' boundaries and expressing a full range of emotions appropriately. These skills are not just beneficial, but essential, in recovery.

Confident and assertive behavior, like setting boundaries, entails openly, honestly, and directly communicating one's desires and needs. Establishing firm boundaries does not involve constructing impenetrable walls but instead clearly communicating one's position and outlining acceptable behavior to oneself.

Conversely, passivity indicates a lack of self-assurance and firmness, often resulting in sacrificing one's rights, wants, and needs for the sake of others. This lack of appropriate assertiveness permits others to disregard one's desires and needs.

Aggression involves disregarding others' boundaries to fulfill one's wants or needs and may manifest in various forms of abuse, including verbal, emotional, sexual, spiritual, or intellectual. Passive-aggressive behavior is characterized by covert aggression, often expressed through manipulation and underhanded tactics, such as backbiting or gossiping.

An appropriate and assertive response to an undesirable request involves simply saying, "No, I don't want to do that," or "No, thank you," without feeling obligated to provide excuses or explanations. A straightforward "No" may feel aggressive for those unaccustomed to assertiveness.

It's important to remember that most individuals have areas in their lives where they feel confident asserting themselves and others where assertiveness is challenging. However, the skills you use to assert yourself in one area can be transferred to others through taking risks. Often, the fear associated with assertiveness is disproportionate to the likelihood of loss, whether it's esteem, goods, services, or relationships. This realization can be a source of hope and motivation on your recovery journey.

To identify areas where assertiveness may be challenging, consider how confidently and firmly you handle various circumstances. For instance, think about how you respond to telemarketing calls or how you set boundaries with coworkers or family members. These are situations where assertiveness can be tested. Recognize patterns where assertiveness is desired but difficult to achieve, and contemplate the risks associated with asserting oneself in those situations. This self-reflection can be a powerful tool for personal growth.

In many cases, fear inhibiting assertiveness is not based on reality. For instance, fear of abandonment may hinder assertiveness in close personal relationships. However, assertiveness is a valuable pursuit that enhances self-esteem, whereas passivity, aggression, and passive aggression undermine it. Learning to confidently and competently navigate relationships is a vital aspect of the recovery process, with assertive communication as a cornerstone. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**

As you improve your assertiveness to empower your recovery, it's essential to recognize the profound connection between assertiveness and self-esteem. Assertiveness is a cornerstone in building and reinforcing self-esteem, paving the way for personal growth and fulfillment. "Building Self-esteem: A Workbook" is a PowerPoint-type presentation that offers a structured approach to self-discovery, providing thought-provoking prompts, insightful questions, and instructions to guide and empower you toward a more positive self-perception. With your new awareness of assertiveness as a powerful tool for your recovery, you can add new insights and strategies to continue to develop your positive self-esteem through meaningful personal growth and thoughtful transformation. **This is a digital download, available immediately.**



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