

THE UK'S BESTSELLING BOOK  
ON ASSERTIVENESS

How to be

**ASSERTIVE**

in **any** situation

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# **How to Be Assertive in Any Situation**

**Sarah:** 'The thing is, I'm not sure what time I'm finishing work tomorrow and, sorry, what film did you say it was? Oh, well, I'm not really into romantic comedies but I did like Jennifer Aniston when she was in Friends. I'll be too tired for drinks afterwards; will the film be finishing late?'

What does Lou want?

- (a) Help with the housework.
- (b) For her son not to have so much homework.
- (c) For her son not to use homework as an excuse.

What does Theo want?

- (a) For a window to be opened.
- (b) For the other person to give up smoking.
- (c) Both of the above.

What does Ali want?

- (a) Her money back.
- (b) A replacement DVD.
- (c) For the stallholder to decide what to do.

What is it that Sarah does not want?

- (a) To see the film.
- (b) To see that film.
- (c) To stay out late.

Not entirely sure what they all want? That's because neither Lou, Theo, Ali or Sarah are clear what they want, either.

You can make it easier for other people to do what you ask if you can tell them clearly what exactly it is that you want.

'Being direct' is a straightforward technique. When you want something, or want to refuse something, get straight to the point. For example:

**Lou:** 'I'd like you to do the washing up.'

**Theo:** 'Please would you smoke in the garden?'

**Ali:** 'I want a refund please.'

**Sarah:** 'Thanks, but I don't want to see that film.'

Being clear and direct has a number of benefits, including:

- time saving
- other people don't have to second-guess what you really mean
- misunderstandings are avoided
- enabling negotiation to take place
- you are more likely to achieve a win-win solution.

How often, when you do or don't want something, do you use all sorts of indirect ways to let others know? When you use techniques such as hints, excuses, sarcasm or anger, the meaning of what you really want to say is hidden. The only way to ensure that someone has understood what you want is to be clear and direct in what you say.

## **Take your time**

What if you are not sure about how you feel or what you want? Say so. Simply say that you are not sure how you feel about something and need time to think about it.

In American films and TV, you often hear one character say to another: 'Can I get back to you on that?'.

Of course, you might not find it easy to say so, but the aim here is to learn to identify your feelings and needs. There is nothing wrong with saying: 'I'm not sure. Can I get back to you?'. If the other person needs an answer now (and, to be fair, they may have a good reason for needing an immediate response) calmly suggest they will need to ask someone else.

## **“The aim is to learn to identify your feelings and needs.”**

Another reason for asking for time out, or a break, is if the conversation becomes too heated. Explain that it has nothing to do with the other person, it is just that you feel confused, tired or need time to reflect and can you resume the conversation later?

## Active listening

Once you have said what you do or do not want, you must make a conscious effort to listen to the other person's response. Too often, you might find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said; your expectations and assumptions can distort what you think the other person has said. So it's important that before you reply, you clarify what you think you heard the other person say.

You do not have to agree with what the other person said, just be sure that you have understood. You can check whether or not you have understood the other person by summarising your understanding of what was said and asking for verification. This not only lets you know whether you have understood the other correctly, it lets the other person know they have been understood.

When Jamie responds to his mother's request to do the washing up with 'Not right now, I've got homework', there's very little for Lou to clarify. However, the response that Theo receives is not so clear. Careful listening and verifying are crucial:

**Theo:** 'I'd like you to smoke in the garden.'

**Evie:** 'Will you please stop nagging. Honestly, I'm fed up with you going on and on about it. It's not easy to give up, you know.'

**Theo:** 'OK, I'm not sure what you're saying here. I'm not asking you to give up, simply to smoke outside. Are you saying you won't go out to the garden to smoke?'

By changing your attitude and approach, you may find that others respond differently to you because they sense your ability to listen and understand.

## Get more information

It takes concentration and determination to be an active listener. As well as verifying what the other person has said, you may need to ask for more information:

**Lou:** 'When does your homework have to be handed in?'

**Jamie:** 'End of the week.'

**Lou:** 'Fine. Then please wash up now and do your homework another time.'

If, on the other hand, you are the one who is being asked to do something, make sure you understand exactly what is being asked of you before you respond. Perhaps, for example, you are being asked to do something that is more time-consuming than you thought. However, it may not take much effort at all.

## Accept other people's rights: compromise or negotiate

Saying what you do and do not want, and acknowledging the other person's response, does not, however, guarantee you will get what you want or need. The other person has a right not to cooperate.

If, when the other person refuses to do what you ask, your usual response is to back down, argue or sulk – stop! Instead, acknowledge the other person's perspective and try to negotiate or compromise with him or her. For example:

**Lou:** 'I'd like you to do the washing up.'

**Jamie:** 'Not right now, I'm doing my homework.'

**Lou:** 'When does your homework have to be handed in?'

**Jamie:** 'End of the week.'

**Lou:** 'The end of the week? Then please wash up now and do your homework another time.'

**Jamie:** 'No. I'm seeing my friends tonight. I want to get the homework done before I go out.'

Lou might claim that her son does not have homework – that he is using it as an excuse to get out of helping out. Maybe he genuinely does have homework that has to be done right now. Either way, Lou should take his right to refuse into consideration.

**Lou:** 'OK. I'd like the washing up done before you go out with your friends tonight.'

Remember, being assertive does not mean you will always get your own way. When you get a response, you must be prepared for it not being the response you wanted! For example:

**Ali:** 'I want a refund.'

**Stallholder:** 'Sorry, but it wasn't me on the stall yesterday and anyway we don't give refunds.'

**Sarah:** 'Thanks for inviting me but I'm too tired to watch a film.'

**Liz:** 'That's not fair. I never get to go out. The children are with their Dad tonight and I want to do something.'

Remember that your goal is to behave assertively – to respect both yourself and the other person equally. Do not make changing the other person one of your goals. The other person may or may not change; that is not within your control.

If, like Lou, your request for the washing up to be done is met with, 'No, I'm doing my homework', instead of replying: 'Oh all right, I'll have to do it then' or 'For God's sake, I'm sick of you using homework as an excuse to get out of doing the chores', stop yourself! One way forward is to ask the other person what alternatives he or she might have:

**Lou:** 'Well, what would be a good time for you to do it?'

This type of response will not only position you as reasonable, it may also lead to a better conclusion for both of you. By changing your attitude and approach, you may find that others respond differently to you because they sense your willingness to be reasonable.

**“By changing your attitude and approach, you may find that others respond differently to you.”**

## Negotiate

Fortunately there's a way to say 'no' and 'yes' at the same time: refuse the request, but offer an alternative that works for you and benefits the other person as well:

**Lou:** 'OK – I'll do the washing up tonight, but I want you to do it tomorrow.'

**Sarah:** 'Sure, I'll come to the cinema but I won't be going for a drink afterwards.'

## Know your limits, set boundaries, stand your ground

If you choose to negotiate or compromise with the other person, bend as far as you can but no further. Once you reach your limit, stop before you create a new set of problems that could take even longer to resolve.

Setting limits is a crucial part of being assertive; your limits define how you allow others to treat you. They should represent the least and the most that you will accept, based on your values and rights. Your boundaries and limits support you in respecting and taking care of yourself.

If you are unclear about your limits, or you have established weak boundaries, you invite others to take advantage of you and take control of your choices. On the other hand, recognising and accepting that you *do* have choices is the first step to consciously setting positive boundaries.

Identifying and maintaining your limits will empower you to choose what to do and not do, in every situation. You will choose to say 'yes' to those things that you want to do or be part of, and say 'no' to those things and people that drain your energy. The choice is yours.

There will be times when you want to stand your ground and refuse to give in. You will not be prepared to negotiate or compromise but will insist on asserting your rights and maintaining your limits.