



The Importance of Assertiveness

By: Katherine Brown

Assertiveness is the ability to express your feelings and desires to others in a confident and healthy way. It allows you to stand up for yourself. Assertiveness is an important life skill, and necessary for communicating with others.

An article writes, "Assertiveness offers many benefits. It helps you keep people from taking advantage of you" (Mayo Clinic, 2020, p.1). That same article notes that, "Behaving assertively can help you: gain self-confidence and self-esteem, understand and recognize your feelings, earn respect from others, improve communication, create win-win situations, improve your decision-making skills, create honest relationships, and gain more job satisfaction. Learning to be more assertive can also help you effectively express your feelings when communicating with others about issues" (Mayo Clinic, 2020, p.1).

As a child, I wasn't really taught to be assertive, and unfortunately, this did cause issues later. The fact that I never learned to be assertive proved to be detrimental in my life. I didn't know how to communicate with people in a healthy way. As a result, I often behaved in inappropriate ways when angered or annoyed. I also felt that being assertive or direct was disrespectful, rude, or mean. This feeling made it hard for me to even *begin* to assert myself.

I often said "yes" to people without really thinking about what the person was asking, or if I really wanted to do it.

"Katherine, can you do this?" Sure. "Katherine, can you do that?" Sure.

I was so quick to say "yes" that I didn't stop to think about my own feelings in the matter. People often bossed me around. I wanted to avoid conflict so I did whatever other people wanted. An article writes, "Sometimes it seems easier to go with the flow to avoid potential conflict. But the truth is that letting people walk all over you can increase feelings of stress and anxiety, and it might eventually lessen your feelings of self-worth and play to your insecurities" (Patel, 2017, p.1).

I've been taken advantage of in the past for what people assumed was my "chill" and "laidback" nature. However, it wasn't that I was "chill", or "laidback", or truly didn't mind. I wasn't "chill" or "laidback", and I *did* mind - I just didn't know how to say that something bothered me. I didn't know *how* to be assertive or direct.

As a result, I would be angry that they had taken advantage of me, and I would be consumed with the fact that they had used me. I became obsessed with the issue, and consequently, the person. I wanted to make them understand that what they did to me was wrong. The feelings I experienced were common side effects of passive behavior. In fact, an article notes that, "The internal conflict that can be created by passive behavior can lead to: stress, resentment, seething anger, feelings of victimization, and desires to exact revenge" (Mayo Clinic, 2020, p.1). Rather than being direct with the person that mistreated me, I always ended up acting inappropriately, making even more trouble for myself.

For example, imagine that your coworker routinely harassed you. Obviously, this is very inappropriate (and annoying) behavior. You would feel very angry and aggravated. You might even feel like punching your coworker. However, it wouldn't be socially acceptable to punch your coworker. If you did, you would turn into the "bad guy" in the situation. People would view the situation as *you* being the problem, rather than the *coworker* being the problem - all because of your *response*. You would probably get fired.

This was my problem. I often reacted to annoying situations in inappropriate ways, simply because I didn't know how to be assertive and tell the person to stop what they were doing. I did everything *but* be direct. I would often create elaborate plans to make the person understand that what they did was wrong. However, this just detracted from the actual problem. No one actually remembered or cared about the original problem. The actual problem never got solved, because everyone was so focused on my response. That same energy should've been towards solving the original problem - not my reaction. It was frustrating, because the original problem never actually got solved, thus, continuing the cycle.

It wasn't until a few months ago that I really started to come to terms with my non-assertiveness, and how much of a problem it really was and had become. After a particularly disturbing dispute

with a former acquaintance, I realized that something needed to change in how I interacted with other people. Though the acquaintance was in the wrong, my reaction to it was inappropriate as well. At this point, I was 22 years old, and a college graduate. I was entering a new phase in my life, and I knew that I couldn't continue like this. I just couldn't carry this problem with me into my adult life, potentially ruining opportunities and relationships. I decided that something needed to change.

If someone mistreated me or made me angry, I needed to know how to say so rather than holding it in. If someone was bothering me, I needed to know how to tell them to leave me alone. I needed to learn how to effectively communicate with people in a healthy way - one that wouldn't end with me acting crazy.

In order to do that, I've been practicing assertiveness in my life. I've also decided to take formal assertiveness training lessons. I've been a doormat for 22 years, and I know that it will be hard for me to change without some professional training. As one article notes, "If you've spent years silencing yourself, becoming more assertive probably won't happen overnight" (Mayo Clinic, 2020, p.1). Being passive is very ingrained in me at this point, and I have to break the mold.

For 22 years, I've said "yes". It's finally time for me to say "no".

References

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