

# How To Be Assertive

adapted from the book *ACT With Love*, by Russ Harris

“Passivity” (or “passive behavior”) means putting the needs of others ahead of your own, at significant cost to your own health and well-being. You neglect your own needs, and instead of standing up for yourself, you allow others to “walk all over you.”

“Aggression” (or “aggressive behavior”) means standing up for yourself and taking care of your needs in a way that’s disrespectful and uncaring of others. You don’t care about the feelings, rights, or needs of the other party; it’s all about getting your own way.

“Assertiveness” (or “assertive behavior”) is radically different to both passivity and aggression. It means standing up for yourself and taking care of your needs in a way that is fair and considerate of *both yourself and others*. When being assertive, you respect your own rights, while also respecting the rights of the other party.

Assertiveness skills fall into two main categories:

1. Making requests: asking for what you want, in a fair and considerate manner
2. Declining requests: saying no to what you don’t want, in a fair and considerate manner.

Remember: when being assertive, you’ll need to use your [basic communication skills](#) – for example, adjusting your facial expression, your physical posture, the tone and volume of your voice. Otherwise, your words won’t have the desired effect.

## How To Ask For What You Want

Often asking for what you want doesn’t require assertiveness; it’s just a matter of “asking nicely.” And by that, I don’t mean begging or pleading; I simply mean asking politely. You have a right to ask for what you want; and the other person has a right to be spoken to politely. So make your request a friendly one: without snapping, or criticizing, or demands, threats, or insults.

Instead of “Do this,” “Get that,” “Have you done XYZ yet?” “Can I have...,” use words like “please” or “Is it okay with you?” or “Would you mind?” For example: “Would you mind taking the trash out, please?” “Is it okay with you if I take the car tonight?”

There are many other ways to do this. For example, if you’re asking for something that your partner is often hesitant or reluctant to do, you could start off with a compliment, an expression of appreciation, or both: “Honey, I really appreciate the efforts you’ve been making to tidy up after yourself. I know it doesn’t come naturally to you, but it makes my life so much easier.” Following that, when you make your request, you could use phrases such as, “I’d be very grateful if...” or “I’d like it if...” or “I’d really appreciate it if...” or “It would mean a lot to me if...”

## Making “I” Statements

The most basic form of assertiveness is a simple statement that clearly expresses our needs, feelings, or opinions using the term “I.” For example:

“I need to leave in half an hour.”

“I feel really happy that you managed to sort that out.”

“I enjoyed the movie, but the ending was a bit disappointing.”

You can also use “I” statements to praise, compliment, share information, or raise an issue:

"I wasn't expecting you to say that. I'll need to think about it. I'll get back to you shortly."

"I really appreciate what you did."

And to share your feelings:

"I feel awkward."

"I'm stressed."

"I'm feeling anxious about this."

When we use "I" statements to express our feelings this way, it communicates to others that we're taking responsibility for our own feelings. This is very different from "you" statements, such as "You make me so angry," which indicate we are blaming others for the way we feel.

## Basic Requests

Simple "I" statements are very useful for making straightforward requests. And adding the word "please" often lends impact. For example, notice the aggressive quality of this "you" statement: "You've had your say, now it's my turn!" Compare that with this assertive "I" statement: "I'd like a chance to speak, please. Can I tell you my side of things?" Below are some more examples.

Aggressive "You" Statement	Assertive "I Statement"
"Will you stop butting in?!"	"Please stop interrupting me. I allowed you to talk freely; please do the same for me."
"You are so rude!"	"I don't like it when you call me names. Can you please let me speak without doing that?"
"Will you shut up for a moment and let me speak!?"	"I would like a chance to talk about my side of things. Can you please let me speak, and listen carefully, in the same way that I just did for you?"
"Why don't you ever wash the dog?!"	"I notice that, for the last few months, I'm usually the one washing the dog."

## Raising Issues and Sharing Feelings

Most of us are quick to point the finger at the other party, to accuse or blame them for what they've said or done. This usually leads to an unproductive quarrel. But if we raise issues in a fair and considerate manner, and disclose our feelings without any blame, it will usually have a positive impact. Here are some examples:

"You" Statements: Judging, Blaming, or Accusing	"I" Statements: Stating How You Feel Without Blaming or Accusing
"Why are you always so messy?"	"I feel frustrated when I get home after work and the house is a mess."
"You never listen to me. You always go and do what you want to do."	"I feel frustrated when my wishes aren't taken into account."
"You said you were going to call me, but you didn't!"	"When I didn't hear from you, I was really worried."
"You're always shouting at me!"	"When you shout at me, I get a sick feeling in my stomach, and I feel like I want to run away."
"You make me so angry!"	"I feel angry when you do things like that."
"You make me feel useless!"	"When you say things like that to me, I feel sad, and my mind tells me I'm useless."

Leading with a “you” statement will make the other party feel accused or blamed and will likely provoke an argument. Leading with an “I” statement is much less confrontational and paves the way for a constructive discussion. (But watch out for sneaky “I” statements that are really aggressive “you” statements in disguise. For example: *I feel like you’re not pulling your weight. I feel like you leave all the chores to me. I think you’re being lazy.*)

## “Video Descriptions”

Suppose we want our partner to start or stop doing something, and basic assertive requests (like those described) aren’t working. If so, we can make an assertive request more impactful by adding a “video description.” This is a factual description of the relevant behavior, without any judgment: it’s what a video camera would record, as opposed to how a person would judge it. For example, in the top row of the previous table, both statements are judgments, not factual descriptions: *you’re always so messy; the house is a mess*. However, the second statement is better than the first. Why? Because the first one is also a personal attack: *you are messy*.

A personal attack includes any statement to the effect of “you are X,” where X is a harsh global judgment: *you are lazy, selfish, arrogant, etc*. This is always an aggressive stance. The second statement—*the house is a mess*—is a bit better because it’s not a personal attack; it’s not a global judgment about the whole person. However, it’s still a judgmental description rather than a factual one. In contrast, here’s a nonjudgmental “video description”: *there are dirty dishes and food spills on the table*.

A nonjudgmental, factual description like this is much more effective than a judgmental one for two good reasons. One: it’s likely to be perceived as a fairer, more accurate account (as opposed to unfair or inaccurate). Two: it’s therefore much less likely to be contested.

If you say, *there’s mess everywhere, or you’re always messy, or the house is a pigsty*, your partner may well fire back with *that’s not true, or that’s not fair, or you’re exaggerating*. You then both start arguing over the words you’ve used, rather than dealing with the real issue.

Note that video descriptions don’t include words like “always” or “never”; those terms are exaggerations and will usually trigger a defensive response: “I don’t *always* do that!” “Oh yeah? If I *never* do that, then how come just yesterday I did ABC?” (In the left-hand column of the previous table, you can see four examples of “always” or “never” accusations.)

“I” statements are much better than “you” statements. However, to get the best results—that is, get the other party willing to listen to negative feedback, and actually take it on board—we need to include video descriptions.

On the next page you’ll find some examples. In the first column, there are “you” statements with judgmental descriptions; in the second column, there are “I” statements with judgmental descriptions; and in the third column, there are “I” statements with non-judgmental video descriptions.

<b>“You” Statement with Judgmental Description</b>	<b>“I” Statement with Judgmental Description</b>	<b>“I” Statement with Video Description</b>
“ <b>You</b> ’re always nagging me.”	“I feel irritated when <b>you</b> keep nagging me.”	“I feel irritated when you ask me to do something four or five times in a short space of time.”
“ <b>You</b> ’re so unreliable.”	“I feel disappointed when <b>you</b> ’re unreliable.”	“I felt really disappointed last night; you said you were going to be home by 10:00 p.m., but you didn’t get back until 1:00 a.m. and you didn’t call to let me know.”
“ <b>You</b> ’re so lazy.”	“I feel quite annoyed when <b>you</b> ’re being lazy.”	“I feel quite annoyed when you say you’re going to take the trash out later, but then you don’t do it.”

If you think this all sounds very convoluted, rest assured: it’s not necessary to speak this way all the time. These phrases are best used for tricky, sticky situations, when the other party isn’t hearing you. Most of the time, we can use shorter, simpler expressions, like the basic assertive requests we covered first: “I don’t like it when you speak to me that way,” or “Please don’t talk to me like that; I don’t like it.”

### **Practice, Unhook, & Make Room!**

If you want to get the hang of these new ways of speaking, practice is absolutely essential. It’s a good idea to practice in front of a mirror—or better still, record yourself on your smart phone. (At the very least, “run through your lines” inside your head.)

As you rehearse these statements, work on your face, voice, and posture to convey a sense of calmness and openness. Without such rehearsal, you will either forget to use these new skills or you’ll try to use them and screw it up. However, a little bit of practice goes a loooong way.

Like any new skill, it requires time, and effort, and lots of repetition, to get up to speed. Also, as with any new skill, at times you’ll try it and things won’t go the way you wanted or expected. There will inevitably be times you make mistakes, or others don’t respond as you’d hoped. So you’ll need to use your ‘unhooking’ skills, to handle all those unhelpful things your mind is sure to say. And you’ll need to use your ‘making room’ skills, to open up and make room for all those difficult feelings (like guilt and anxiety) that are sure to show up.

### *Enlisting Support From Partners And Loved Ones*

If you’re learning to be more assertive with your partner or kids or other loved ones, it’s often helpful to let them know what you’re doing; explain that you’re practicing new ways of communicating, in the hope this will improve things. Let them know you may sound a bit awkward or clumsy at first, because you’re experimenting with new ways of speaking. And if you think they will respond positively, ask for their support and encouragement. (This isn’t essential, but it helps.)

## Three-Part Assertive Statements

When it comes to getting your needs met, three-part assertive statements do the heavy lifting. The basic formula is this:

*I feel X when you do Y, and I'd prefer it if you could do Z.*

For example, *I feel frustrated when I get home after work and there are dirty dishes and food spills on the table, and I'd really appreciate it if you could wipe the table clean and put the dishes in the dishwasher.*

What you're doing here is an "I" statement first (expressing your feelings), followed by a video description of the other person's behavior, and ending with a request for a new behavior you'd like them to do instead.

And you can change this order if preferred: *When you do Y, I feel X, and I'd prefer it if you could do Z.* For example: *When you ask me to do something four or five times in a short space of time, I feel really irritated. Can you please just ask me once, and trust me to do it?*

When you're making the request at the end, it needs to be specific, as illustrated in the previous examples. If your request is vague, it could be misinterpreted. Consider the first example; suppose the request was this: *I'd really appreciate it if you could tidy up.* Now what does that actually mean? Your idea of "tidying up" may be very different than that of the other party. For them, "tidying up" might just mean wiping up the food spills. For you, it means doing that *and* putting the dishes in the dishwasher. So without being clear and specific about what you're asking, you're setting the stage for a future argument about whether or not they did what you requested. To help with this, it's useful to revisit the idea of a video description: what does "tidying up" look like on a video? It looks like wiping the table and putting the dishes in the dishwasher. So that's what you ask for.

And remember that you're *requesting*, not *commanding*. So we're back to that idea of "asking nicely." Useful phrases for asking include: *I'd prefer it, I'd appreciate it, I'd be grateful, I'd like it, it would mean a lot to me, it'd be so helpful.*

The more assertive you are in your requests—the more fair and considerate, and the less judgmental and aggressive—the more likely the other person is to respond positively. Obviously, this won't always happen. Remember, this a way to influence others; it's not a way to control them. Assertiveness increases the probability that others will behave more like you want, but there are no guarantees.

## When Things Go Awry

Sometimes your assertive request will trigger a negative response from the other person. Or they may agree to your request but not follow through on it. Or they may refuse to discuss it and leave the room. In these moments, your unhooking skills are essential. An emotional storm will blow up, and you'll need to drop anchor. Then come back to your values, and decide on the best course of action. It may be better to leave it for now, and come back it later. Or it may be better to stay with it while helping the other person to calm down; for example, you might say to your partner: "I can see you're upset, and that wasn't my intention. I'm just want to talk about something important, so we can have a better relationship; I love you." Or you may choose to implement some more [advanced assertiveness skills](#).