

# Acting with Assertiveness

## Living life fully depends on it

DEAR DR. MAZIE,

*I was recently talking with some coworkers about the need for all of us to be more assertive. We recognize that one of our coworkers usually gets what he wants and is much more outspoken than the rest of us, but we're not sure if he is being assertive or pushy. Can you give us some clarity on what is being assertive?*

*Frank from Pittsburgh*

BY MAZIE LEFTWICH, PSY.D.

Recognizing the difference between assertiveness and aggressive behavior is important to understand. Let's look at three behaviors and some of their diverse nuances.

**Assertive:** When you are assertive, you are emotionally honest, expressive and direct. Assertive people typically have a stronger sense of self and don't shy away from defending their points of view or from trying to influence others. They are willing to claim their own rights, while remaining fully aware that others have the same rights. Behaviorally, assertiveness is all about asking for what you want in a manner that respects others. In terms of affect, assertiveness means reacting to positive and negative emotions without aggression or resorting to passivity. If you have decided that you would like to become assertive, this behavior can be learned but will require daily practice.

**Passive:** Passive individuals may be filled with self-doubts, brought up to believe that one should not speak unless spoken to, or perhaps fearful of retribution if they speak their mind. Being passive isn't very satisfying because these folks generally don't get their needs met. They often hold back, hoping others will figure out what they need and want, without having to directly ask. It is a very dependent lifestyle, and generally wears others out over a period of time. In fact, many marriages end because of this. However, it's important to note that passive people can indirectly make assertive individuals appear to be aggressive. So as you strive to become assertive, be watchful of the passive folks around you.

**Aggressive:** The act of aggression is an overt and often harmful interaction that's intended to inflict damage or other unpleasantness upon another individual. Aggressive individuals pursue their own



interests forcefully, often at the expense of others. They are tough to deal with because they come across as overly sure of themselves, demanding, sometimes arrogant, often superficial, and usually not aware at all how others perceive them. It's difficult to get them to listen, to acknowledge others' ideas or needs, or to sit down and work things out collaboratively. It takes a very self-assured assertive individual to stand up to an aggressive person and convince them to slow down and listen to others. But I have experienced this working effectively and it can, over time, work to change a person's aggressive stance and behavior.

### Finding Success and Happiness

In the world of right of way, as well as in our personal lives, we are all capable of changing our behavior and our approach to life. It is a choice, although it takes great focus to let go of bad habits and break away from some of the dysfunctional rules learned earlier in life that still rule our life. There may be some legitimate times when taking a passive approach makes sense, especially when a topic or an issue is not important to you. And there may be times when being aggressive is called for, such as standing up for a basic human right and being willing to fight for it or protecting someone who can't protect themselves.

But happiness and success in the truest sense come to those who work at being assertive and maintaining that assertiveness in their everyday lives. Assertiveness is the best choice for those who want to live life fully. ☘



*With a clinical background in applied psychology, Mazie is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and development.*