

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Gaining Balance by Saying "No" and Setting Boundaries

Balance means setting clear boundaries, and that usually requires assertive behavior. Assertiveness is a skill and, like any skill, it can be learned and it must be practiced. Assertiveness is about:

- Expressing your feelings (positive and negative)
- Communicating effectively
- Establishing your limits and boundaries (so that you don’t feel constantly stretched)

When setting boundaries, it is often necessary to say "no" to some tasks and people. To the non-assertive person, saying "no" can feel uncomfortable, rude, even aggressive or hostile. Non-assertive people tend to find it difficult to stand up for themselves. They may find it hard to ask for what they want, or they may never have learned how to express their preferences, needs, opinions and feelings tactfully or effectively.

Use the tips provided below to practice assertive communication skills in lots of different situations. Soon, you will be able to call upon these skills automatically, and it will become easier and more comfortable to set boundaries and achieve balance.

On the Road to an Assertive New You

Here are a dozen tips to get you started:

1. **Learn to identify and voice your worries and concerns.** It is the first step to acknowledging and expressing your feelings and preferences in a positive way.

2. **Work on your self-esteem.** Do things and be with people that make you feel good about yourself.

3. **Let go of perfectionism.** No one is always right. If you sometimes think you don't measure up, be gentle with yourself (and others). You are doing the best you can.

4. **Learn to use "I feel" statements to express your thoughts and feelings, especially in situations of conflict.** An "I feel" statement sounds like this: "I feel…" (state feelings) "when you (or a certain situation)…" (state facts). "I would like…" (state your requirements, needs, preferences).

5. **Find healthy ways to express your negative emotions**, such as requesting better service in a restaurant, letting people know when they've hurt your feelings, discussing your differing views on a book or a movie, or asking to have some time for yourself or privacy when you need it.

6. **Accept compliments graciously.** Say "thank you" rather than making excuses or downplaying your own success.

7. **Ask why as much as you can—**not to be difficult or challenging, but instead to establish your own thoughtful response to the accepted norm. Try not to accept rules, policies or practices

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unquestioningly, without determining if they make sense to you or are in line with your own values.

8. **Learn what your triggers are.** We all have them: certain people, situations or things that "set us off" and prevent us from behaving with assurance. Once you identify these people, places and things, you can find ways to deal with them.

9. **Learn to begin, engage in and end conversations comfortably.** If you are unsure of yourself in social situations, look up books and online resources on etiquette and personal development; or join a club or group like Toastmaster's where you can interact with others and practice social skills among people who share common interests. If you are extremely shy or anxious in social situations, consider contacting a professional for guidance on overcoming this common problem.

10. **Learn "active listening" skills and apply them.** Focus on what others are saying; repeat what they say in your own words and ask questions to make sure you understand. Wait until the other person has finished speaking before speaking yourself.

11. **When you do have something to say, speak up clearly and state your case with confidence.** Learn to use your voice and be aware of your body language so that you appear calm and in control, but not threatening or aggressive.

12. **Deal with minor irritations before your anger builds.**

The tips above can help you realize that you can change your current behavior and become more assertive when dealing with difficult people or challenging situations. Enhancing your skill set will help you to increase your confidence, share your opinions openly and gain support from others, generating the results you want.