

Finding Your Voice: A Guide to Assertiveness

Saying what you mean, kindly and clearly — a self-help guide from Wellness Counselling and Psychotherapy

Assertiveness is the ability to express your thoughts, feelings and needs honestly and respectfully — while allowing other people to do the same. It sits between **passive** communication (your needs disappear) and **aggressive** communication (other people's needs disappear).

It is a skill, not a personality trait. Most people who struggle with it learned early on that keeping the peace was safer than speaking up. That can be unlearned, gradually and with practice.

Four communication styles

Style	Sounds like	Cost over time
Passive	"It's fine, whatever you prefer."	Resentment, exhaustion, feeling unseen
Aggressive	"You never listen. Just do it."	Guilt, damaged trust, distance from others
Passive-aggressive	"No, I'm not upset." (then withdrawing)	Confusion, unresolved conflict
Assertive	"I'd rather not take this on this week."	Clearer relationships and steadier self-respect

What gets in the way

- A belief that other people's needs matter more than your own.
- Fear of conflict, rejection or being seen as difficult or selfish.
- Early experiences where speaking up brought criticism or withdrawal of affection.
- Perfectionism — "I should be able to manage everything without complaining."
- Confusing assertiveness with aggression, so avoiding it altogether.

Your assertive rights

You have the right to say no without lengthy justification.

You have the right to change your mind, and to make mistakes.

You have the right to ask for what you need — and to be told no.

You have the right to your feelings, and to express them respectfully.

You have the right to take time before answering.

Practical techniques

The “I” statement

Describe the situation, name the feeling, state the need: “When meetings run late, I feel stretched, so I need us to finish by five.” It keeps the focus on your experience rather than on blame, which lowers defensiveness.

The broken record

Choose one clear sentence and repeat it calmly, without new arguments: “I’m not able to take that on.” You do not have to win a debate — you only have to stay steady.

Saying no without over-explaining

A short reason is enough. “I can’t do Thursday” is a complete answer. The more you justify, the more you invite negotiation.

Buying time

“Let me check and come back to you this afternoon.” Delaying a reply is assertive, and it stops the automatic yes that you later resent.

Negative enquiry

When criticised, ask for specifics: “What is it about the report that isn’t working?” This turns vague disapproval into useful information — or exposes that there isn’t any.

The soft start

Open with warmth and stay concrete: “I value working with you, and I need to raise something.” Tone carries as much as words.

Fogging

Acknowledge any grain of truth without collapsing: “You may be right that I took longer than usual — and I still need the deadline extended.”

Body language

Steady eye contact, open posture, unhurried pace and a level voice. Your body tells people how seriously to take your words.

Practise in small steps

Start where the stakes are low and build upwards. Assertiveness grows through repetition, not through waiting until you feel confident.

- Send back a cold drink or an incorrect order.
- Say “I'd prefer...” when choosing a film, a restaurant or a meeting time.
- Ask a colleague a clarifying question in a meeting.
- Decline one small request this week without apologising twice.
- Tell someone you trust what you actually need from them.

Prepare a difficult conversation

Step	Ask yourself
1. Outcome	What do I want to be different afterwards?
2. Facts	What actually happened, without interpretation?
3. Feeling	What is the honest feeling underneath?
4. Request	What specific change am I asking for?
5. Limit	What will I do if nothing changes?

Handling the discomfort afterwards

If you have spent years accommodating others, being assertive can feel like being unkind. That guilt is a sign of an old habit changing, not of wrongdoing. Expect some people to test the new boundary. Stay warm, stay consistent, and give it time.

When to seek support

Therapy can help if speaking up brings intense anxiety, if you are in a relationship or workplace where boundaries are repeatedly ignored, or if the roots of your silence go back a long way. If you feel unsafe with someone, please seek specialist support rather than practising assertiveness alone.

Being assertive is not about being louder. It is about being clear — and staying kind to yourself while you are.

This worksheet is for general self-help and is not a substitute for therapy. To arrange a free 15-minute enquiry call, visit www.wellnesscp.co.uk or email miriam@wellnesscp.co.uk.