



What does it mean to be Assertive

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To be assertive, which is to act with high self-esteem and confidence, means a “we count equally” approach. It means I consider myself and those I am dealing with as equal human beings. Not equal in terms of physical attributes or knowledge or skill, but equal as a human being. It means I recognise that we all have value. We all have worth. At a human level, no one is better than me or less than me. This is something that is enshrined in the legal system in many countries, it is often part of spiritual beliefs, and is something found in democracies. In many countries, including South Africa, we are equal before the law. The law applies to everyone in the same way. If you are the Chairman of a multinational, a business owner, or the person who picks up the refuse, and you commit murder, you will be judged by the same criteria. If you are over 18 in most countries you get one vote. No one gets two or three votes because they are considered to be more important people than others. The underlying assumption is that each person counts equally. So, if being assertive assumes a “we count equally” approach, what does that mean in practice?

- It means I show myself respect and I show others respect.
- It means I express my needs, wants, opinions, and values. I don't hide who I am, I express myself in appropriate ways that respect others.
- It means I stand up for myself in all situations.
- It means I don't speak badly about myself. Not even as a joke. Lots of people jokingly are quite disparaging about themselves. Don't do that. You are giving others the invitation to also put you down. Make sure you always convey to others that you treat yourself with respect.
- It means I ask questions when to do so is going to help me, when things would be easier for me if I did.
- It means I take responsibility for my life and actions.
- It means I confront challenges and deal with conflicts. I don't pretend that things are okay when they are not.
- It means I can say “no”, or “not now” when asked to do something I cannot do or don't want to do.
- It means I can comfortably share my feelings, opinions, and experiences with others.
- It means I think for myself and stand by what I think.
- It means I live authentically. I don't fake who I am to be liked.
- It means I can challenge the status quo, not to be a rebel, but to make situations better.
- I can initiate, carry on, and end conversations comfortably.

- It means I can give and receive compliments comfortably.
- It means I speak up when someone has upset me.
- It means I am comfortable meeting new people in social situations.
- I can say no without feeling guilty or anxious.
- I can accept and own up to my mistakes.
- I can speak confidently in group situations.
- I can easily accept help and information from others.
- I can confidently express my views even when the majority disagrees with them.
- It means I believe I am capable of learning new things.
- It means I believe my needs are as important as other people's and should be considered.
- It means I know what I know, see what I see, and don't pretend otherwise.
- It means I can express anger and disappointment without blaming others.
- It means I value my own experience and wisdom.

That is quite a list, and I am sure people could add to it. What you need to notice is that being an assertive person means you are psychologically healthy. You also are likely to get ahead in life. People who are assertive have better relationships, do better in their careers, often have better health because they manage stress better, and are able to feel more in control in difficult circumstances. They also tend to have fewer financial difficulties.

If you read all the above, and think wow, that is a lot to have in place, note that it is. Fundamentally, to be assertive means to be very healthy psychologically. And for most of us to get to that place takes work. And takes time. We are all works in progress, so don't throw your arms up in despair when you read the above points. We can learn to be like this. Assertiveness can be learned.

Read through all the above statements. Think about them. If you act like every one of these points in all situations in life, either you are old, you have done a lot of work on yourself, or you somehow have had fantastic experiences with amazing people in life. You could also be narcissistic and think you are a perfect person. For most of us though, if we are being authentic and honest, we have some way to go. Maybe we behave in some of the above ways. Maybe we can be assertive only in certain situations. Because assertiveness is linked to self-esteem you do want to learn to be assertive. People who are assertive have far better relationships than those who are not, are more likely to be in senior positions in their careers, tend to have a better lifestyle, and tend to cope better with stress and adversity and change.