

Assertiveness and Self-Confidence

How to help build, boost, and develop self-confidence and assertiveness

Building self-confidence and assertiveness is probably a lot easier than you think. 'Non-assertive' people (in other words 'normal people') do not generally want to transform into being excessively dominant people. When most people talk about wanting to be more assertive, what they usually really mean is:

- 'How can I become more able to resist the pressure and dominance of excessively dominant people?'
- How can I stand up to bullies (or one bully in particular)?'
- And also, 'How can I exert a little more control in situations that are important to me?'

Pure assertiveness - dominance for the sake of being dominant - is not a natural behaviour for most people. Most people are not naturally assertive. Most people tend to be passive by nature. The assertive behaviour of highly dominant people tends to be driven by their personality (and often some insecurity). It is not something that has been 'trained'.

For anyone seeking to increase their own assertiveness it is helpful to understand the typical personality and motivation of excessively dominant people, who incidentally cause the most worry to non-assertive people.

You do not have to choose between being honest and being tactful. There are numerous ways to say the same thing, and a tactful approach is more likely to gain cooperation.

It's helpful also at this point to explain the difference between leadership with dominance: Good leadership is inclusive, developmental, and a force for what is right.

Good leadership does not 'dominate' non-assertive people, it includes them and involves them. Dominance as a management style is not good in any circumstances. It is based on short-term rewards and results, mostly for the benefit of the dominant, and it fails completely to make effective use of team-members' abilities and potential.

The fact is that most excessively dominant people are usually bullies. Bullies are deep-down very insecure people. They dominate because they are too insecure to allow other people to have responsibility and influence, and this behaviour is generally conditioned from childhood for one reason or another. The dominant bullying behaviour is effectively reinforced by the response given by 'secure' and 'non-assertive' people to bullying. The bully gets his or her own way. The bullying dominant behaviour is rewarded, and so it persists.

Dominant, bullying people, usually from a very young age, become positively conditioned to bullying behaviour, because in their own terms it works. Their own terms are generally concerned with satisfying their ego and selfish drives to get their own way, to control, to achieve status (often implanted by insecure ambitious parents), to manipulate, make decisions, build empires, to collect material signs of achievement, monetary wealth, and particularly to establish protective mechanisms, such as 'yes-men' followers ('body-guards'), immunity from challenge and interference, scrutiny, judgement, etc. Early childhood experiences play an important part in creating bullies. Bullies are victims as well as aggressors. And although it's a tough challenge for anyone on the receiving end of their behaviour they actually deserve sympathy. This is almost never true. Most people engage in conflict because they have genuinely different interests, expectations, information, or values.



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N.B. Sympathy is not proposed here to be a sole or significant tactic in countering bullying. Rather, sympathy is advocated as a more constructive, stronger, alternative feeling to being fearful or intimidated.

Non-assertive people do not normally actually aspire to being excessively dominant people, and they certainly don't normally want to become bullies. When most people talk about wanting to be more assertive, what they really mean is 'I'd like to be more able to resist the pressure and dominance of excessively dominant people.' Doing this is not really so hard, and using simple techniques it can even be quite enjoyable and fulfilling.

Importantly, the non-assertive person should understand where they really are - a true starting point: non-assertive behaviour is a sign of strength usually, not weakness, and often it is the most appropriate behaviour for most situations - don't be fooled into thinking that you always have to be more assertive.

Understand where you want to be: what level of assertiveness do you want? Probably to defend yourself, and to control your own choices and destiny (which are relatively easy using the techniques below), not to control others.

For people who are not naturally assertive, it is possible to achieve a perfectly suitable level of assertiveness through certain simple methods and techniques, rather than trying to adopt a generally more assertive personal style (which could be counter-productive and stressful, because it would not be natural). People seeking to be more assertive can dramatically increase their effective influence and strength by using just one or two of these four behaviours prior to, or when confronted by a more dominant character or influence, or prior to and when dealing with a situation in which they would like to exert more control. Here are some simple techniques and methods for developing self-confidence and more assertive behaviour.

Assertiveness and self-confidence methods and techniques

1. Know the facts relating to the situation and have the details to hand.
2. Be ready for - anticipate - other people's behaviour and prepare your responses.
3. Prepare and use good open questions
4. Re-condition and practice your own new reactions to aggression.
5. Have faith that your own abilities and style will ultimately work if you let them.
6. Feel sympathy for bullies - they actually need it.
7. Read inspirational things that reinforce your faith in proper values and all the good things in your own natural style and self.

Know the facts and have them to hand

Ensure you know all the facts in advance - do some research, and have it on hand ready to produce (and give out copies if necessary). Bullies usually fail to prepare their facts; they dominate through bluster, force and reputation. If you know and can produce facts to support or defend your position it is unlikely that the aggressor will have anything prepared in response. When you know that a situation is going to arise, over which you'd like to have some influence, prepare your facts, do your research, do the sums, get the facts and figures, solicit opinion and views, be able to quote sources; then you will be able to make a firm case, and also dramatically improve your reputation for being someone who is organised and firm.

Anticipate other people's behaviour and prepare your responses

Anticipate other people's behaviour and prepare your own responses. Role-play in your mind how things are likely to happen. Prepare your responses according to the different scenarios that you think could unfold. Prepare other people to support and defend you. Being well prepared will increase your self-confidence and enable you to be assertive about what's important to you

Prepare and use good open questions

Prepare and use good questions to expose flaws in other people's arguments. Asking good questions is the most reliable way of gaining the initiative, and taking the wind out of someone's sails, in any situation. Questions that bullies dislike most are deep, constructive, incisive and probing, especially if the question exposes a lack of thought, preparation, consideration, consultation on their part. For example:

- 'What is your evidence (for what you have said or claimed)?'
- 'Who have you consulted about this?'
- 'How did you go about looking for alternative solutions?'
- 'How have you measured (whatever you say is a problem)?'

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- 'How will you measure the true effectiveness of your solution if you implement it?'
- 'What can you say about different solutions that have worked in other situations?'

And don't be fobbed off. Stick to your guns. If the question is avoided or ignored return to it, or re-phrase it (which you can prepare as well).

Re-condition and practice your own new reactions to aggression

Re-condition your own reaction to dominant people, particularly building your own 'triggered reactions', giving yourself 'thinking time' to prevent yourself being bulldozed, and 'making like a brick wall' in the face of someone else's attempt to dominate you without justification. Try visualising yourself behaving in a firmer manner, saying firmer things, asking firm clear, probing questions, and presenting well-prepared facts and evidence. Practice in your mind saying 'Hold on a minute - I need to consider what you have just said.' Also practice saying 'I'm not sure about that. It's too important to make a snap decision now.' Also 'I can't agree to that at such short notice. Tell me when you really need to know, and I'll get back to you.'

There are other ways to help resist bulldozing and bullying. Practice and condition new reactions in yourself to resist, rather than cave in, for fear that someone might shout at you or have a tantrum. If you are worried about your response to being shouted at then practice being shouted at until you realise it really doesn't hurt - it just makes the person doing the shouting look daft. Practice with your most scary friend shouting right in your face for you to 'do as you are told', time after time, and in between each time say calmly (and believe it because it's true) 'You don't frighten me.' Practice it until you can control your response to being shouted at.

Have faith that your own abilities will ultimately work if you use them

Non-assertive people have different styles and methods compared to dominant, aggressive people and bullies. Non-assertive people are often extremely strong in areas of process, detail, dependability, reliability, finishing things (that others have started), checking, monitoring, communicating, interpreting and understanding, and working cooperatively with others. These capabilities all have the potential to undo a bully who has no proper justification. Find out what your strengths and style are and use them to defend and support your position. The biggest tantrum is no match for a well organised defence.

Feel sympathy rather than fear towards bullies

Re-discover the belief that non-assertive behaviour is actually okay - it's the bullies who are the ones with the problems. Feeling sympathy for someone who threatens you - thereby resisting succumbing to fearful or intimidated feelings - can help to move you psychologically into the ascendancy, or at least to a position where you can see weaknesses in the bully.

Aggressors and bullies were commonly children who were not loved, or children forced to live out the aspirations of their parents. In many ways all bullies are still children, and as far as your situation permits, seeing them as children can help you find greater strength and resistance. Modern transactional analysis theory may be helpful for some people in understanding how this sort of childhood emotional damage affects people, and how specific communications can be planned and used in response to excessive dominance, bullying, temper tantrums, and other threatening behaviours.

Feeling sympathy for bullies should not be seen as approval or justification for bullying. Neither is sympathy proposed here to be a sole or significant tactic in countering bullying. Rather, sympathy is advocated as a more constructive, stronger, alternative feeling to being fearful or intimidated. People responsible for bullying are the bullies, not the victims. So if you are a bully: get some feedback, get some help, and grow up.

Several tactics are explained above to tackle bullying head-on, as is often very necessary. Additionally there are serious laws and processes to protect people from bullying, and these protections should be invoked whenever bullying becomes a problem.