

## 2. ASSERTIVENESS SKILLS

*For the person who has learned to let go and let be, nothing can ever get in the way again.*

—Meister Eckhart

Assertiveness is the personal power to:

- Be clear about your feelings, choices, and agenda
- Ask for what you want
- Take responsibility for your feelings and behavior

### Helpful Principles

*In each of these principles we see how movement can happen from old habits to new repertoires of action. We notice the atavistic ineffective behaviors and leave them behind for creative adult responsibility.*

- Early in life, you may have learned that it is not legitimate to:
  - Show your real feelings
  - Give and receive openly
  - Ask for things directly
  - Tell your opinions
  - Take care of your own interests
  - Say No to what you do not want
  - Act as if you deserved abundance

These are injunctions against having power, and to the extent that we have internalized them, we have disabled ourselves and limited our adult capacities. Our journey to wholeness begins from just such a wounded place.

- At first you may believe yourself to be vain, cold, petty, impolite, selfish, or demanding when you act assertively. These disempowering judgments come from an inner critic (usually of early origin). Without attempting to refute or eradicate this voice, simply dub it over by acting as if your wants and needs were worthy. Behavior changes attitudes. Gradually the inner critic is ignored into silence and self-esteem blooms.
- The practice of assertiveness means acting. Act as if you are already the healthiest person you can be. Do not wait until you feel better about yourself or until you believe you have what it takes. Act as if you are self-actualized and your beliefs will follow suit. Act while you fear rather than waiting until you feel unafraid.

“Acting as if” is a form of playfulness. Play successfully combines contrasts and opposites. When we act as if we are already more advanced than we imagine ourselves to be, we are creatively playing with an old, habitual self-image and welcoming a new self that wants to emerge. This new self is encouraged into existence by the image we are displaying when we “act as if.”
- The art in assertiveness is to ask strongly for what you want and then to let go of it if the answer is *No*. You tread the fine line between consistent perseverance and the stubborn persistence that can feel to others like abuse. Passive people do not ask for what they want. Aggressive people demand (openly) or manipulate (secretly) to get what they want. Assertive people simply ask, without inhibition of themselves or pressure on others.
- Your assertiveness may be interpreted by others as aggression. If this happens: adjust your manner to a level that is less threatening; reassure people you love that you are simply asking for what you want, not demanding it; continually ac-

knowledge others' right to say *No* to you. Assertiveness is, after all, "power to" not "power over."

- You do not hurt others' feelings by assertiveness. "Hurt feelings" in others may mean:
  1. you are bullying them, i.e. being aggressive rather than assertive, or
  2. they are not open to interacting with an assertive person, or
  3. the assertiveness has triggered fear or sadness from their own past. "It is such a secret place, the land of tears" (*The Little Prince*).
- Check out your feelings, suspicions, or doubts with the people involved. Whenever possible, check out your decisions with a neutral friend before proceeding to an action. Do this not because you are inadequate, but because you acknowledge your human capacity to overlook something that may be important but only visible to an objective observer.
- It is crucial to remain focused in assertiveness and not to be distracted by argumentativeness. Assertiveness is not a strategy by which you get your way or win victories over others. It is a set of non-violent, non-competitive principles that manifest your values and integrity. The outcome is secondary. Authentic self-presentation is primary.
- You can respond to the negative *impact* of others' behavior toward you while still acknowledging their positive *intention*. Their intention does not excuse their behavior. "I know you mean to help me, but I feel pushed and want to do this in my own time."
- No one creates your feelings. No one is to blame for your situation. You are the author of your condition. Whatever you

have been doing is what you are really choosing, whether or not you consciously want it. The alternative is to see yourself as a victim of people or circumstances and real change becomes impossible. Taking responsibility always leads to a revelation of what your next step needs to be.

- Since assertiveness means taking care of yourself, speaking up is not always appropriate. When the other person is out of control, violent, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs, the assertive person makes no attempt to talk sense or make a point. Simply getting away may be the most assertive and intelligent response.
- When you are suddenly threatened or confronted, especially unjustly, you may feel immobilized by fear. In such stress you are less capable of "thinking on your feet." The assertive person asks for time out to collect himself before having to respond. Notice the paradox: (1) I admit fear and vulnerability as a real though temporary disability; (2) I insist on self-restorative time; (3) I act with access to my full power now that I am honoring my own timing.
- Trying without doing is wishing rather than choosing. You either have a plan in place or you are choosing not to act. "This being the case, how shall I proceed?" is a Zen saying that shows the automatic, assertive progression from circumstance to action.
- You can be *informed* by others' behavior rather than *affected* by it. You can observe the behavior of others without having to react to it or to be controlled by it. You operate from your own repertory of responses that uphold you no matter what others do, say, or mean to you.
- You may ask people to understand, hear, and acknowledge your feelings, but you do not need their validation. Your

feelings stand on their own merit, and every time you express them you validate yourself. At the same time, you validate others' feelings when you are assertive. You show that you see the legitimacy of what they feel and you understand and care about them for what they feel. This validation is so much more self-empowering than self-defense in which you attempt to discount feelings to avoid facing them or from mistaken guilt about "causing" them.

- Assertiveness makes clarity valuable. As a result you will be quite satisfied after an encounter with someone if you have honestly presented yourself and your position. Your satisfaction will no longer depend upon whether the other person acknowledged you or agreed with you. You will no longer wish you had said more. You will have no need to correct people's impressions of you by going back to say more. "I spoke in accord with the truth accessible to me at that moment and that is enough, even though I might have said it more effectively."
- Assertiveness will feel fearsome and risky. Risk really means "not in control of the outcome." When you are assertive, you stop trying to control circumstances or others' behavior. When you are attached to staying in control, you are betraying the part of yourself that is fearless.

### **I. Assertiveness: Owning Your Power**

#### THE WAY OF THE HEALTHY EGO

##### **1. Be Clear**

Say yes when you mean yes, no when you mean no, and maybe when you mean maybe. (Note that assertiveness means being clear, not necessarily sure.)

Show your feelings, choices, and agenda openly.

Check out your fantasies, doubts, fears, and intuitions with

those whom they concern. "Why do we think the face has turned away that only looked elsewhere?" (Erik Erikson). Tell people it is not acceptable for them to judge, hurt, or blame you.

##### **2. Ask for What You Want**

Clear messages from others.

Acknowledgement of your feelings.

Nurturance, appreciation, and constructive criticism.

##### **3. Take Responsibility**

Accept others' right to make assertions to you.

Inquire of others about their feelings toward you.

Acknowledge accountability for your feelings.

Finish your emotional unfinished business directly with the people involved or in your own therapy.

Admit your mistakes, oversights, and offenses, and make amends.

### **II. Passivity: Giving Your Power Away**

#### THE WAY OF THE FEARFUL EGO

Passivity is:

- Refusing to express feelings, act, or decide because of what MIGHT happen to you.
- Making excuses for others' hurtful behavior and not dealing with them about it.
- Over-politeness: always putting others first or letting them take your turn or disturb you without your speaking up.
- Acting from a sense of obligation (a form of fear).
- Smoothing over situations so that the real feelings do not emerge (from yourself or others).
- Over-commitment: doing too much for too long for too little thanks, and when even more is asked of you, doing it dutifully.
- Not registering your recoil from biased remarks or jokes.
- Abandoning yourself by assessing abuse of you from the past or present as justified or "understandable."

- Avoiding decisive action by coping with an unsatisfactory situation or relationship or hoping it might change. **WHAT WE ARE NOT CHANGING, WE ARE CHOOSING.**

### III. Aggressiveness: Changing Power to Control

#### THE WAY OF THE BELLIGERENT EGO

Aggressiveness is:

- Attempting to control or manipulate others.
- Putting others down by name-calling, insults, or blame. This includes sarcasm, even among friends, or meant in jest.
- Rescuing others: doing for them what they can do for themselves. This victimizes and infantilizes them and gives you dominance over them.
- Emotional or physical violence.
- Competitiveness and attempts to prove people wrong.
- Acting spitefully or vengefully toward people who are rude or hurtful to you.

#### Basic Rights of the Assertive Person

1. To ask for 100% of what you want from 100% of the people in your life, 100% of the time.
2. To enjoy emotional and physical safety. No one has the right to hurt you, even if she loves you.
3. To change your mind or to make mistakes.
4. To decide when and whether or not you are responsible for (a) finding solutions to others' problems or (b) taking care of their needs.
5. To say No or Maybe without pressure to decide in accord with someone else's timing.
6. To be illogical in making decisions.
7. To have secrets, to decide how much of yourself or your life you choose to reveal.
8. To be free to explain your choices or not (includes not having to make excuses or give reasons when you say No).

9. To be non-assertive when you see that as appropriate.
10. To maintain the same principles, skills, and rights of assertiveness with your partner, parents, children, or friends.

#### SUMMARIZING ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness is affirming your own truth and receiving others' truth:

You ask for what you want and honor the response.

You share what you feel and accept what others feel.

You really are responsible, so you act that way and you ask the same from others.

Practicing assertiveness leads to a realization that you have alternatives, no matter how confining your predicament may be.

The experience of choice combined with support from others offers the best conditions for departure from the depressing sense of yourself as a victim. Instead, you get on with your life in a powerful, adult, and confident way.

*Like one who lives in a valley and then crosses the mountains and sees the plain, he knows now from experience that the sign saying "Do not go beyond this point," like the high mountains, does not signify a barrier.*

—Alice Miller

The achievement of assertiveness requires that we come to terms with three crucial issues that confront everyone: fear, anger, and guilt. These challenges to mature adulthood are treated in the next three chapters which complete our exploration of assertiveness.