

SESSION 26: Assertiveness

WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions.

SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are *Attending*, *Appreciating*, and *Acting* with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called “Appreciative Attending,” generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take *Action* to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session we discussed the practice of trust. I hope you've had a chance to review this lesson and begin to incorporate some of the practices for trusting skillfully in your life.

Today I will be discussing assertiveness.

Let's begin by discussing what assertiveness is.

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To be assertive is to stand up for your rights, needs, feelings, and opinions while respecting the rights, needs, feelings, and opinions of others. Assertiveness involves working to both get what you want and to say “no” to what you don’t want. You take care of yourself and protect yourself from harm.

Let’s say someone cuts in front of you in line. Being assertive would mean kindly but firmly say, “Excuse me, but I was here before you. Could you please go to the back of the line?”

Assertiveness entails mutuality, because assertive people maintain a concern for the well-being of everyone involved. **You care about others even as you negotiate to get your own needs met.** When you’re assertive, you can express your needs and feelings freely in a way that is both self-satisfying and socially effective.

We need to be assertive because conflict is a normal and inevitable part of human relationships. We all have different needs and preferences. We can also lack awareness of other people’s needs and feelings. We are all porcupines at the ball, accidentally poking each other from time to time, and we all have a selfish side that can cause us to disregard what’s best for others. No one is perfectly aware and saintly all the time.

If your goal is to avoid conflict at all costs, you will adopt a passive or nonassertive way of relating. This doesn’t work well because your needs won’t get met, you’ll feel stressed, your self-esteem will take a hit, and others won’t change. What’s more, your resentment may cause you to eventually blow up and retaliate.

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There are times when a nonassertive approach is appropriate, however, such as when you're dealing with authority, are under threat, or if you're living in a totalitarian government. You might also decide to be nonassertive when your needs are minor and the relationship is important to you. Let's say a friend always likes to go to Italian restaurants, but you prefer Mexican. You might choose to go to their favorite Italian restaurant because they like it so much, and the food isn't as important to you as seeing them enjoy their meal.

If your goal when there's conflict is to get your way or to be right at all costs, you'll adopt an aggressive way of relating. You might be forceful, coercive, or even threatening. You may "win" much of the time, but you'll hurt and alienate people in the process. While you may experience short-term gain, this is a losing strategy in the long run.

There are times, however, when an aggressive approach is best. If you're dealing with someone with an addiction, a personality disorder, or other mental illness, that person may not have the capacity to be mutual. If they're threatening or harming you in some manner, you may have to go as far as using physical force to protect yourself. What you must ask yourself is whether you can persuade the other person to voluntarily respect your rights, needs, and preferences. If not, then aggression may be an option of last resort.

Overall, though, the **best approach to resolving conflict and getting your needs met is to be assertive**. Avoid being judgmental, critical, coercive, manipulative, pushy, demanding, or threatening. You don't want to go through life as a bully. People will react negatively and consider you to be entitled. Plus, harming others often results in harm to you as well.

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When you adopt a win-win strategy as much as possible, everyone does better in the long run. When you welcome and respect other people's needs and opinions, they will feel your concern and be more willing to cooperate and compromise with you. This allows you to negotiate reasonable changes and solutions to conflicts. **When you're assertive, the focus is on a balance of everyone's feelings.**

Since assertiveness is based on mutual respect, you welcome others' needs, wants, and opinions. Your focus is on cooperation, collaboration, and reasonable compromise as well as protecting yourself from harm. If your partner wants to watch TV and you want to talk, you might negotiate to spend some time together after their TV show is over. In the end, you get your needs met in a fair way that considers your partner's needs as well.

When you're assertive, you get your needs met without upsetting others or getting upset. You can express yourself honestly and comfortably while respecting everyone's rights. **Assertiveness is linked to self-esteem.** You know that you have a right to be treated well, just as much as the other person. If you don't feel you're worthy of being treated well, however, you'll find it more difficult to be assertive.

People will respond better to you when you're able to state your needs calmly and kindly. If you're very upset, it's best to take time to cool down and talk it out with other supportive people. When you don't attack others, they will be less likely to become defensive. The exception is people with sociopathy or psychopathy, who will take your kindness for weakness and attempt to further exploit you. Therefore, you should **always combine kindness with firmness without resorting to rudeness.**

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You're better off **firmly asking for what you'd like** rather than complaining about what you don't like. Also, be clear and direct, using simple, short sentences. Don't beat around the bush. As an example, it would be better to say to your housemate, "I'd be grateful if you would put your dishes in the dishwasher" rather than, "I hate it when you leave your dishes in the sink!"

Also, **be flexible**. Let's say your friend asks you to give them a ride to a doctor's appointment during your work hours, but you can't leave work. You might say, "I can't leave work, but if you can reschedule your appointment for after work, I can give you a ride."

Try to **be tactful, diplomatic, and honest at the same time**. I recently had a situation with someone who had bad breath. It was painful for all involved to be around him. After I thought it through, it became clear that while he would initially be embarrassed, it would be best for everyone, including him, to make him aware of it. In this case, honesty allowed him to address his problem so that interacting with him was more pleasant for everyone.

You can **boost your assertiveness by being proactive when you anticipate a difficulty**. For instance, if you know a coworker is habitually late, you might say to them, "I'm hoping you can arrive on time for our meeting. I'll wait ten minutes for you, but after that, we'll need to reschedule."

Assertive people are respectful because they are respectful people. The idea is that everyone deserves respect regardless of how they're behaving. If someone is shouting at you and calling you names, you might respectfully say to them, "I can see that you're upset. But for this conversation to continue, we both need to be respectful to each other."

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THE BENEFITS OF ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness is good for everyone. It's loving because in the end, you and everyone else benefits. It's the antidote to the fear, anger, aggression, and passivity that so often poison relationships. Because assertive people take care of themselves, they have greater self-respect, which usually elicits more respect from others. **Assertiveness maximizes the chances of your getting your needs met** in the long run.

When you're assertive, you protect yourself from harm. When you know that you can negotiate to protect yourself and get your needs met, you'll feel less anxious, even when you're under stress. Your assertiveness will give you self-confidence. You will not only feel less stress, but you will also avoid feeling victimized or overburdened.

Because you're taking care of yourself and not letting others walk all over you, you'll feel less resentment. Assertiveness is a great way to nip anger in the bud. Once I was waiting to speak to someone, when another person intruded upon us. I was able to say, "Excuse me, but I was waiting here before you." By being assertive, I was able to avoid the resentment I would have felt if I'd allowed the intrusion.

Because **assertiveness leaves you feeling more effective, you'll also be less prone to feeling helpless**, which can lead to depression.

Assertiveness boosts self-efficacy. In fact, if you struggle with low self-esteem, the practice of assertiveness will help you to boost it.

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Assertiveness leads to better, more harmonious relationships. When you're assertive, everyone wins. At work, you'll notice better teamwork. Managers who are assertive are better leaders. Because you communicate more effectively, you cultivate the trust of others.

When you're assertive, you help others to be their best. It's better for others to not impose upon you and to become accommodating to meet your needs and preferences along with their own.

Finally, **you'll find that being assertive not only makes relationships better, but it also leads to better outcomes in other ways.** Because you're looking for win-win solutions and cultivating cooperation and collaboration, you help everyone become better at solving problems and getting things done.

THE BARRIERS TO ASSERTIVENESS

Passivity is probably the most common barrier to assertiveness. It's usually due to a fear of anger, disapproval, harm, or rejection. If you're afraid of upsetting others, you may say "yes" when you really mean "no." If you're afraid of conflict, you may also allow others to impose their desires on you without setting boundaries. If this happens to you, ask yourself if you really believe you have the same rights as others to be treated well and to have your needs considered. If not, you need to affirm your rights, because you're just as worthy as any other person on this planet.

Another cause of passivity is being **overly dependent upon others.** While we're all interdependent, it's important to avoid being so dependent on another person that you must sacrifice your well-being for the sake of the relationship.

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Sometimes, this may seem unavoidable, if you depend on your spouse for support, for example. Then, the work is to become more independent.

Another disguised form of passivity comes out of a lack of clarity. You see this when people say “maybe” rather than “no.” Or they may say “I’ll think about it” when they really mean “I won’t.” If you want a raise, telling your boss “I was hoping that I might get a raise at some point” is less clear than, “I’ve been with the company for two years now and would like at least an 8 percent raise.”

Passivity leads to stress, resentment, seething anger, feeling victimized, and sometimes even retaliation. It also reinforces the unfair, self-centered behavior of aggressive people. **Ironically, passivity causes the very damage to the relationship that you feared in the first place. Therefore, it’s generally better to be assertive.**

As you’ve probably guessed by now, the **second barrier to assertiveness is aggression**. You should only be aggressive when assertiveness absolutely won’t work or you’re in danger of being harmed. Otherwise, your aggression will undercut trust and mutual respect, and you’ll trigger resentment, avoidance, and opposition. While you may win in the short run, you will lose in the long run.

Another common barrier to assertiveness is a **combination of passivity and aggression**. It’s called passive aggressive behavior. In this case, someone seems to go along with others but then resists them in indirect ways. One example is stonewalling, in which they disengage and shut down.

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They may give someone the silent treatment, fail to follow through on agreements, indirectly voice their displeasure through sarcasm, or complain about people behind their backs. Passive aggressiveness may also show up as a generally negative attitude.

HOW TO BE ASSERTIVE

Start by valuing yourself. You have a right to be here, to be well, and to be happy! If you feel unworthy or have low self-esteem, get therapy to address these wounds. You deserve to feel strong, confident, and vital.

Know your needs and beliefs. Do you have beliefs such as, “I need to go along with others” or “My needs don’t matter?” If so, examine your insecurities and fears. Root them out, and expose them to the light of your inquiry. Are they realistic? To get clarity, share them with others you respect and trust.

Also, **know your boundaries, limits, and rights.** For example, if you go to bed at 9:00 p.m., let people know that you wish for them to call you before that time. You have the right to refuse requests, and you have the right to right a wrong. You also have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

At the same time, **respect the rights of others.** Like you, they also have the right to make requests, refuse requests made of them, etc.

Be true to yourself and your values without compromising your integrity. If you decide to sacrifice your well-being or comfort for someone else, do it freely and knowingly out of love, not out of fear or compulsion.

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Commit to taking very good care of yourself while also taking good care of those around you.

Avoid self-importance, self-sacrifice, and “my way or the highway” thinking. Instead, **be collaborative, and commit to mutuality.** In other words, make sure your requests of others are reasonable and not from a place of feeling entitled. If you’re in doubt, seek out the counsel of someone you respect and trust.

When relating to others, **show empathy.** Remember that people are more willing to address your concerns when they feel understood. If you first strive to understand, you’ll have a better chance of being understood yourself.

Commit to managing your anxiety about being assertive. If you’re afraid of it, address your fears of criticism, rejection, harm, conflict, or anger. What is the worst thing that could happen? Gather your courage, and be willing to accept the outcome. If you are skillfully assertive, others will usually respond with mutuality, and your relationships will improve. Don’t take anyone’s negative reactions personally; it’s about them, not you. In fact, assertiveness is a great way to figure out who can engage in healthy relationships with you and who cannot.

Don’t take responsibility for the other person’s reaction. Realize that you can’t control how they behave. Out of your commitment to mutuality, however, avoid being aggressive, if possible. Avoid nagging, bullying (force, threat, coercion), and emotional blackmail (fear, obligation, guilt), as these are relationship killers.

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Remember, however, that we're all human. No one does life, including assertiveness, perfectly. Give yourself and others permission to get better with practice.

When you communicate, be clear and specific about what actions you'd like stopped and started. Avoid generalizations. Rather than saying, "You never clean up the kitchen," say, "Last night, you left the dirty dishes in the sink." Focus on behavior, not motives. Saying "You have only spent ten minutes with me in the past week" is better than saying "You don't love me." Replace questions with statements. Rather than saying, "Could you show me more love and attention?" say, "I'd like for us to spend an hour together. When would be good for you?"

Sometimes, of course, it's OK to complain. You might say, "I'm upset that you forgot to pick me up from work tonight. I waited an hour and had to take a taxi home!" But when you complain, be respectful. Avoid absolutes such as "you always" or "you never." Keep it in the present, and avoid bringing up a string of misdeeds from the past.

Use the "ABC, sometimes D technique": "When you did 'A', I felt 'B.' In the future, please do 'C.' If you don't do 'C,' I will need to do 'D.'" For example: "When you said I was lazy last night in front of my friends, I felt embarrassed. In the future, please speak about me with respect in front of others."

"D" is for sanctions. Uses sanctions carefully only with people who refuse to negotiate with you. In this case, you might say something like, "If you continue to ridicule me, I will need to end our relationship."

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When you're assertive, your goal is to minimize resistance to your request, to encourage cooperation, and to resolve any conflict. You can do this by describing what happened as simply and specifically as possible. Say no more than a few sentences, and use neutral words without negative labels that could provoke defensiveness or anger. For example, saying "You spilled coffee on the car seat and didn't clean it up" is far better than "You're an inconsiderate slob." In other words, separate concerns for people's behavior from judgments about who they are. Always focus on behavior rather than character traits.

Use simple statements, such as "I was hurt," "I was afraid," "I was sad." Understatement is often best. "I was disappointed," for example, is likely better than "I was devastated." If you use extreme terms, you're more likely to upset the other person and put them on the defensive.

If you have several concerns, focus on one at a time. Otherwise, you risk overwhelming the other person and muddying the waters.

When talking about your feelings, own them. Use "I" statements, saying "I felt" rather than "you made me feel." Avoid blaming others or putting them down. Remember that no matter what the other person did, you are responsible for your reactions.

People will be more likely to meet your needs if you agree with them in part or in principle. If someone is late picking you up and tells you they can't make it on time because of the traffic, you might say, "I know how difficult it is for you to get out of work and get through all that traffic." Your empathy will engender goodwill, which might create the opportunity to either negotiate their leaving work earlier or agreeing on a later pickup time.

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Remember, too, that assertiveness goes both ways. There are times when others will make requests of you as well. Just as others will at times say “no” to your requests, so you at times will need to say “no” to them. Learning to say “no” is a key life skill. At the same time, try to address the other person’s needs or concerns if you can, always look for that win-win solution I’ve mentioned. If you’re negotiating for something, signal flexibility by providing options, and be willing to brainstorm for a solution. For example, if you would like a pay raise, you might be open to a bonus instead of an increase in salary.

Another trick I’ve heard about is using the term, “I have a policy.” If someone asks to borrow your prized golf clubs, you might say “I have a policy of not lending out my clubs.”

Sometimes, people will come at you with a criticism or demand. This might happen when you’ve provided a service of some kind. Let’s say you washed their car, and they say you did a terrible job. So they want a refund. The first thing to do is to inquire into their criticism. Ask for details, and strive to understand their concerns. Then, empathize with them as you avoid defensiveness: “I can see you’re very upset and disappointed in the car wash.” You can agree with them in principle, but not agree to their demand. “I agree that I could have done a better job on the windows. I can’t give you a refund, but I’d be happy to do the windows over for you.” With this response, you’re saying “no” while validating their concern and offering a compromise.

When being assertive, watch your body language. Stand or sit upright. Lean forward a bit. Maintain direct eye contact without staring. Have a neutral or friendly facial expression and an open posture. Avoid crossing your arms or looking harsh or threatening.

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Asserting yourself can be difficult at first if you're not used to it. You might feel anxious the first few times, but you'll get better at it and more comfortable with repetition. You can give yourself some time by saying to someone, "Let me get back to you." Then, rehearse what you want to say with a neutral party, and ask for their feedback. Then, modify your assertiveness as needed until you feel confident about what you will say.

Be patient and persistent. By the hundredth time you've practiced assertiveness, you'll be a master at it!

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll be discussing a heart-mind practice for cultivating compassion for ourselves and others. It is called the lovingkindness meditation.

In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to do the following:

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer in the meditations in the resource section of my website.

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3. Practice appreciative attending. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of negative judgments as they arise.
4. Review this lesson on assertiveness. Write in your journal about assertiveness. What are the benefits of assertiveness for you? What makes it difficult for you to be assertive? How would you like to be more assertive in your life? What changes do you need to make to be more assertive?

Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!