

Assertion Training

Assertion Training: Be More Competent and Confident With Anyone! Tom G. Stevens PhD Assertion Training helps you learn how to think and act more assertively. It's made a major difference in the lives of many people. People have become less afraid of speaking up, friendlier and more outgoing, more confident and competent handling difficult interpersonal situations, more successful in their careers, and generally happier. By thinking more assertively and learning key assertion skills you can improve your interpersonal competence and be more confident in almost any type of interpersonal situation with almost anyone. Assertive thinking and behavior is contrasted to nonassertive and aggressive thinking and behavior. All of these behavior types are usually situation specific. Situation specific means that you may be assertive in some situations, nonassertive in others, and aggressive in yet others. For example, you might be assertive talking with friends, aggressive with people who hurt you, and nonassertive in conflict situations or with authorities. What is Nonassertive, Aggressive, and Assertive Thinking and Behavior? Nonassertive Thinking and Behavior Nonassertive thinking focuses too much on pleasing others and meeting others' goals compared to satisfying your own values, goals, and happiness. It is a "You win, I lose" position. Nonassertive behavior includes avoidance, withdrawal, timidity, deference, submissiveness, fearfulness, and indirectness. Often nonassertiveness comes from being in an unfamiliar situation or in a situation where you have previously experienced negative outcomes. You may have been punished or criticized. To become assertive it is important to learn the right skills and have adequate motivation to use those skills in that situation. If either element is missing, you will likely be too nonassertive or too aggressive. Passive methods of control. While habitually nonassertive people are often giving in and allowing others to control them, they are not without means of controlling others as well. Passive methods of control (which are often not conscious) include feeling depressed or unmotivated and being a "wet blanket"; refusing to cooperate; talking behind someone's back; spreading rumors; using "sneaky"; passive aggression; making fun of someone; not communicating; and withdrawing. These passive approaches undermine the motivation, work, progress, or happiness of the more dominating person. Often the more dominant person feels as if they are carrying around dead weight. The nonassertive person may help cause the aggressive person to feel guilty, sympathy, or confusion. These feelings may lead to concessions and increased control by the more nonassertive person. In turn these concessions reward the passive, nonassertive behavior. The outcomes of nonassertiveness. The rewards for nonassertiveness include (1) being taken care of: having your needs taken care of by someone else, (2) being a "nice guy" that others like because they always get their way, (3) getting others' sympathy and support, (4) avoidance of unpleasantness: avoiding anxiety or responsibilities temporarily, or not having to face fears. The costs of being too nonassertive include loss of control and freedom (rarely getting one's way), distance and destruction of relationships (due to conflicts never being resolved and resentments increasing), and low self-esteem (for not standing up for what you believe is right and giving yourself repeated messages that you are too weak to cope). The best alternative to nonassertiveness is to become more assertive. Background factors. Background factors that can increase nonassertiveness include low self-esteem or self-confidence (at least in the situation at hand), general beliefs that support self-deprivation or sacrificing one's own happiness for others, lack of autonomy and internal control, too much dependency on others, lack of social-interpersonal skills, bad experiences related to conflict, and lack of experience dealing with other people or conflict. Most are very sensitive to criticism; although some may accept blame readily. Often nonassertive people have come from families and/or other environments where nonassertiveness, passivity, and submissive is often modeled and/or rewarded by at least one family member. In an autocratic family, some children may become rebellious and aggressive while others become passive, submissive, and nonassertive. These two alternative behavior types require less skill; so children can use nonassertiveness or aggressiveness to respond to an aggressive, dominating parent (or a nonassertive one). In a family where everyone is somewhat nonassertive and indirect in communication, all children may adopt that style. It is no wonder that many such children find it shocking to be around people who are aggressive and dominating, and are at a loss with how to deal with aggressive, dominating behavior. Another possibility with two nonassertive parents is that a power vacuum may develop, and one or more children may become aggressive and dominating (a "spoiled brat").

Aggressive Thinking and Behavior

Aggressive thinking focuses too much on pleasing oneself at the expense of others. Aggressive thinking often ignores the impact of one's behavior on others. It is an "I win, you lose" position. Aggressive behavior includes many forms of domination and direct manipulation. Aggression usually aims at getting control of situations or getting one's goals met no matter what the consequences are to others. Aggressive methods of control. Aggression/domination varies from more subtle aggression and manipulation such as dishonest, charming, "con-man" behavior at one extreme to violent, abusive domination at the other extreme. There are many variations of manipulation and aggression between these two extremes. One key aspect of aggressive manipulation is dishonesty. Dishonesty is used to control others for one's own benefit. The dishonesty usually hides one's true motives. [Passive manipulation used in nonassertive manipulation is very similar in its use of dishonesty.] For example, it is manipulative and dishonest to tell a person that you want them to do something for their own benefit, when at least part of your motivation is to do it for your benefit.

Judging, criticizing, out-talking, out-reasoning, out-lasting, or being louder or more threatening can all be used to dominate. Using money, status, physical attributes, attractiveness, or other resources to get control can become aggressive. In these last two instances, key factors are the honesty of the person with power and the degree to which the person in power is using the power to honestly help the other person or not. However, even good intentions can lead to aggressive domination (as the various religious persecutions in history will testify). Being aggressive (or domineering) generally involves having a belief system that puts the aggressor's values and needs far above others. Aggressiveness doesn't consider the other wishes or discounts their communications. For an excellent analysis of all types of passive and aggressive manipulation read Dr. Eric Berne's, *Games People Play*. It is a classic. Following are three common types of aggressive manipulation. Bully-type control. Bully-type control uses some form of mental,

physical, monetary, or other type of power to force or manipulate. This is the most blatant, unsophisticated type of direct domination. Con-type control. Con-type control uses deception, lying, charm, and other verbal skills to persuade others to do what they want. Con-type people may be "super-salespeople." The main difference between "con" behavior and good, persuasive, assertive communication is that con behavior uses lies and doesn't plan to keep one's word. Habitually assertive people are strictly honest and always intend to keep their word. [Sociopath or, psychopath are terms often used for extreme forms of this behavior and indicate that a person will do almost anything to get what they want with little observable guilt.] Judgmental control. Dominant/aggressive behavior may constantly take the role of a parent with an adult. Habitually dominant/aggressive people rely on rules or a "holier than thou" or a "know it all" approach that may keep their partners feeling guilty, unsure of themselves, and off-balance. The judgmental person takes the position that they are morally and/or intellectually right, or have God or some other power of right on their side. They may act as though their partners are morally wrong, stupid, or some in some other way not as good, intelligent, considerate, assertive, loving, etc. as they should be. Judgmental manipulation uses these labels and inferences to belittle others and get control. What makes judgmental manipulation dishonest is that they may be claiming to do the right thing, yet the hidden motivation is to be in control and get their way.. The outcomes of aggressive (or domineering) behavior. The rewards for being aggressive include: (1) control--getting what you want most of the time from people who allow it, and (2) validation-validating your own beliefs by getting others to overtly agree with you.[Often aggressive people don't know that others secretly disagree, but are afraid to say so.] The disadvantages of being aggressive are that aggression typically increases other's feelings of fear, resentment, distance, and distrust. Others often feel lower self-esteem due to being dominated and become passive and withdraw or eventually fight back. In the end the dominated person may reject the dominator for the very "strength" that attracted them to their partner in the first place. Habitually dominant people often lose self-esteem in the area of close relationships and often feel very misunderstood, lonely, and/or unloved by anyone. They may fear that people only stay with them because they take care of their partner--not because they are loved. That fear is often true. The best alternative is to become more assertive. Background factors. Often aggressiveness comes from feeling a great deal of confidence in one's own knowledge, goals, decision, or mind-set. Often the aggressive person may honestly believe that he/she is "right" and the others are "wrong." Often the aggressive person thinks that if others don't like what they do, then they will fight for what they want. They may interpret more passive responses as the other not really caring (when in fact they do, but fear confronting them). Usually the aggressive/dominating person either doesn't know how to be assertive or thinks that aggressive/dominating means are more effective, easier, more acceptable, or preferable to other approaches. Often aggressive people have come from families and/or other environments where aggression and domination were modeled and/or rewarded. People who are more aggressive and dominating may be independent, ambitious, unable to accept blame well (always projecting it upon others), suspicious of others, and very "righteous" about following their rules (but not about following others' rules), Many aggressive people put on a show of confidence and may be confident in many situations. They may fight back and attack when they feel criticized or put down. But deep down they may have low self-esteem and fear that the criticisms are right in some frightful way. Their greatest fears may be of failure, lack of respect and being loved, and ultimate rejection. Many aggressive people lack trust and/or intimacy skills. Rejection increases their own feelings of loneliness and inadequacy in the area of intimacy, and makes them feel hurt, suspicious, and angry toward others. Understanding their previous hurt and feelings of isolation, being trustworthy, and demonstrating intimacy can often be very helpful in relating to aggressive people. From one extreme to the other. Often someone who generally is too nonassertive will become too aggressive at times. This may happen because time-after-time you they felt small amounts of resentment when someone dominated or hurts them and the didn't respond assertively. Finally, they have "the last straw," blow their stack, and behave aggressively. If you have this problem, the best solution is to learn to think and act more assertively in the previous situations, though you may also need to learn more about anger management (see below). Sometimes a person who has been too nonassertive for years becomes determined to change and then becomes generally too aggressive instead of assertive. The reason they become so aggressive may go back to their childhood. In the same setting (usually their family) where they learned to be too nonassertive, they may have learned the scripts of both the nonassertive and aggressive roles. When they wanted to make a change, all they knew to do was flip from the nonassertive/submissive role to the aggressive/dominant role. They never learned the script for the assertive role. If this has happened to you, you need assertion training. Assertive Thinking and Behavior

The U. S. Constitution asserts our right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" so long as we don't violate others' rights to do the same. Assertive thinking balances an active concern for one's own welfare and goals with an active concern for the welfare and goals of others. It is a genuine, active, and persistent attempt to find "win-win" solutions to problems. It includes a willingness to probe more deeply into the motives of one's self and others to find out what each really, really wants. It is an attempt to find general, lasting solutions to recurring problems as opposed to only finding surface, temporary solutions that cause the underlying problem to keep reoccurring. Assertive methods of control. The assertive approach attempts to tap into one's unconditional love and respect for self and others and treat the other person in an understanding and kind way, yet be able to be as direct, firm, persuasive, and persistent to accomplish the win-win solutions. Honest, persuasive abilities and diplomacy are key sets of skills that assertive thinking needs to be maximally effective. Assertive behavior is generally understanding, open, direct, honest, caring, calm, focused, persistent, kind, and firm. An assertive person makes every attempt to de-escalate conflicts, but can escalate the level of response to manipulation if necessary, The escalation generally uses more honest, understanding, caring, persistent, and diplomatic means than the manipulator. The goal is still to de-escalate and still find win-win solutions. Sight of that end goal is never lost. The sections below will define assertive skills for many different interpersonal situations. The outcomes of assertive behavior. Assertive behavior improves communication, solves problems better, and brings people closer than any other approach. Treating people assertively will, in the long run, maximize your chances for productive and

happy relationships with co-workers, friends, family, lovers, or almost anyone. Assertiveness works best because most people like being genuinely understood and respected, they like having adequate freedom and control, and they like win-win solutions. Assertiveness works best because it motivates people to genuinely want to be cooperative and responsible--not just feel obligated to do so. When there is obligation, resentment and rebelliousness are often close behind. Assertiveness not only works best when your partner also treats you assertively, it also is the most effective response to nonassertive, aggressive, or almost any type of manipulative response. Remember that the assertive response is extremely flexible and skilled. What you think, say, or do in response to nonassertiveness, assertiveness, or aggressiveness may be very different, but your response will still follow these general principles of assertiveness outlined above. The main disadvantages of assertiveness are: (1) Assertiveness is often a longer, more complex response (which may mildly frustrate people accustomed to authoritarian directives or no communication at all). (2) Assertiveness requires more training and skill whereas nonassertive and aggressive responses are usually more primitive, simplistic responses (even though both nonassertive and aggressive people may take a very long route to say very little that is useful). (3) Assertiveness means facing difficult, emotion-laden situations more directly and searching for the most upsetting underlying cause. This can be an uncomfortable prospect for habitually nonassertive or aggressive people who usually avoid facing the root causes of their problems. However, achieving deeper insight is a key to finding immediate and lasting solutions to problems--a hallmark of the assertive approach. Some people believe that assertive means of influence are not as effective as aggressive, dominating, or manipulative means. Space concerns preclude a full discussion of this issue. However, it is very clear that assertiveness is much more effective--especially in the long run. People who know that their partners genuinely care for them and will treat them understandingly, honestly, and kindly are much more likely to cooperate, care back, give back, and stay in the relationship longer. These outcomes of assertiveness are especially true of close relationships such as family, romantic, friendship, and business relationships. I have seen this outcome in hundreds of relationships and research produces the same conclusion. Our scales on the Stevens Relationship Questionnaire (now part of SHAQ-see below) found correlations of more than .70 between our scales of assertive conflict resolution and assertive intimacy skills and a standard scale of relationship satisfaction (the Locke-Wallace scale). Don't be fooled; assertiveness works better overall!

Common Control Dynamics in Relationships Many problems in relationships are due to people's own nonassertive or aggressive beliefs and behavior. For each of the following relationship types and each "side" of the relationship, visualize and analyze a relationship where you have been in that role or position.

Dynamics of Aggressive-Nonassertive (Win-Lose) Relationships

The traditional marriage script is that the man plays the dominant role and the wife plays the submissive role. (Note: In many relationships the woman is the dominant partner, but the dynamics are usually a role-reversal of those described below.) The dominant-submissive relationship usually leads to a control imbalance. This control imbalance almost always increases feelings of resentment and distance. For example, a person with a nonassertive style might begin feeling resentment and distance and withdraw: they want more "space." Thus, it is ironic how some of the qualities that most attracted a person to in their partner became the very qualities that caused the biggest problems. For example, a female may have been initially attracted to her partner and married him because he was so strong, masculine, decisive, and confident. He may have initially been attracted to her because she was so emotionally responsive, playful, nice, and needed him so much. The more dominant, aggressive partner (more often the male) may be used to planning, making decisions, and being able to use persuasive or manipulative communication to get what he wants. He is used to focusing on his goals and overcoming the objections of others. He may feel very confident that he can take good care of himself as well as someone else. He may be attracted to someone who sees him as confident, strong, decisive, and successful. He may be afraid to be with someone he considers his equal, because he is afraid he might lose control and freedom, and he may fear that she may be too independent and leave him if she doesn't want to do things his way. Someone who needs him is much less likely to disagree and is safer, because she is less likely to leave him. The more submissive, nonassertive partner (more often the female) may try very hard to be accepted by others and please them. She may be used to listening to others and doing what they say. She may not be confident in her own goals, decisions, and skills. She may not be used to being assertive and persistently pursuing what she wants. She may be afraid of conflict, while he may not. She may lack the confidence to be on her own and feel very dependent on him. The result is that he becomes dominant and possibly aggressive in the relationship and she becomes submissive and nonassertive. Over the years her self-esteem usually diminishes. She may become depressed because she does not feel free and happy to be who she wants. She may resent her partner and feel the love slip away due to that resentment. Yet she may feel so dependent upon him and so afraid of being alone that she doesn't leave him until she feels miserable for a long time. The best way to improve matters is to develop her interests, herself, and her assertiveness. She needs to learn how to take care of herself and not be dependent upon her husband for her needs or happiness. She needs to learn how to assertively tell him how she feels. He may also feel his love slip away. Overall, he may be the more satisfied of the two, because he has more control. On the other hand, the person he loved has mysteriously become unhappy, depressed, and resentful of him. She is no longer the fun person he dated who loves him so much, and in whose eyes he is a prince. She may have little interest in fun or sex. She may have become boring to him because she is so easy to control and because she has not developed her interests, herself, and her self-esteem. She may have become sloppy or care less for her appearance as well. His best way out is to learn to listen to her, give her more love, positive attention, and control. He needs to encourage her interests, self-development, confidence, independence, and standing up to him. He needs to serve as her advisor (and "attorney") about how to be assertive with him. He needs to listen to her about how to tell of his inner feelings and how to use assertive (not dominating, aggressive) means of communication with her. It could be that these dynamics appear in just one area of a relationship. Or, it may be that the man is dominant in one area and the woman in another. Yet the dynamics may still make both unhappy in that relationship area. Sadly, two people have seen much of their love slip away over time and now feel a lot of resentment. In the end the submissive, nonassertive person often rejects

the dominator for the very qualities that seemed so attractive initially, and/or the dominating person rejects the submissive one for being so uninteresting and nonassertive. Dynamics of Aggressive-Aggressive (High Conflict) Relationships

When two aggressive or domineering people get together, they tend to have a lot of conflict. These relationships tend to be low in intimacy, because the partners do not trust revealing weaknesses to each other. The strength of the relationship may be built on mutual respect each partner has for the other and upon the excitement they generate together. However, they may butt heads often or violently. Many say, "I can't live without him/her, and I can't live with him/her." Some couples keep separating after a major conflict and then kiss and make up and come back together for another round. To remedy this situation both partners must learn to become more assertive. They must both learn to listen, give up control, and give many love gifts to each other (see below). They must learn to change suspiciousness and negatively interpreting each others motives into realizing that most of their fighting is due to wanting the other's love so much and to being so afraid of being rejected by their partner. Learn how to understand how loving (and not trusting) can lead to fighting for many aggressive people. Say to yourself, "I will not question that my partner really loves me. Even though I don't know it for sure, I will try to believe he/she loves me and act as if he/she does." Then, don't interpret your partner's hurtful actions (being inconsiderate, being aggressive, etc.) as a sign he/she doesn't love you. Instead, realize that these aggressive acts are part of your partners's habit structure (just like yours are!). Realize that the underlying motive is most likely that your partner feels hurt by you! Your action had such a dramatic effect on your partner because he/she wants your love and respect so much. If your partner's action is a simple inconsideration, it may just be that he/she is habitually inconsiderate; not that he/she is doing it to hurt you. (Are you the same way?) If your partner is being aggressive and apparently trying to hurt you, it is probably because he/she felt so hurt about something you did, and are trying to get even. (Do you do the same thing?) Your partner probably felt you don't care about her/him, and that hurts so much because he/she wants your love so much. (If it were a stranger who did the same thing, your partner wouldn't care so much because he/she doesn't care how the stranger feels about them.) Notice that one way to understand your partner better is to look inside and see what your own thoughts and feelings are. Odds are that because you two are so alike, your partner at his/her deepest levels feels and thinks much the way you do! Aggressive, dominating people usually focus on their partner's problems and focus on changing their partner's behavior. That leads to endless fighting and conflict, and no one will change. Try a different strategy. Try focusing on changing only yourself. Start trying to accept the truth that you can't control your partner (dominating people hate to believe this). Instead, focus on making your thoughts and behavior understanding, loving, and assertive (as defined below). Also, have frequent fun/romantic times together (with ground rules of avoiding contentious issues during those fun times). Have other special times for discussing problems. It is extremely important to begin sharing your inner, vulnerable and tender fears, hopes, and feelings of love with each other. Dynamics of Nonassertive-Nonassertive (Passive-Passive) Relationships

In these relationships both parties usually avoid making decisions and usually bend over backwards to please the other. In some of these relationships partners hardly interact at all. The partners may like that they rarely or never have any open conflict, but in many cases there is a lot of hidden conflict--disagreements that never get discussed or resolved. By avoiding the deeper issues, conflicts surface in smaller ways that eventually undermine the closeness and love in the relationship. Partners may interpret an innocent comment as hurtful, but never discuss it. The hurt and consequent resentment are avoided and build over time. In some of these relationships, hurts and resentments build until one person erupts aggressively. An aggressive conflict might ensue that never gets resolved. Then the couple feels even more hurt and resentment. If the underlying issues that led to the hurts aren't resolved, they can eventually destroy the relationship. Either the couple will separate, or they will lead separate lives under the same roof. Assertiveness is the best option. Both partners need to know how to take care of themselves better and learn how to talk more openly about their feelings and wants. They need to make assertive requests when they want something, and actively listen and strongly urge their partner to say what he/she wants. They may need to learn how to actively give more love gifts to each other and/or have more fun together. Many people who are habitually nonassertive also need to quit avoiding their own problems. They may also need to work on building positive thinking and self-esteem. Dynamics of Assertive-Assertive (Win-Win) Relationships

Assertive-assertive relationships are the gold standard of relationships. Two people are each independent enough so that they know they can take care of their own needs and make themselves happy alone. They know that they do not "need" (must have) anyone else to make them happy or care for them. Being in a good relationship is a bonus, not a necessity. Thus, when they enter a relationship they do it for other motives. They do it to enhance their happiness and to share their lives with others who are also internally-directed and assertive. This approach eliminates problems of too much dependence ("neediness") or codependence. It reduces the desperateness and fear of not having the other, so it reduces the level of emotionality when disagreements arise. The assumption in independent, assertive-assertive relationships is, "We can be happy alone and we will be together only when we both want to be together." Many more dependent relationships start with the assumption, "We can never be apart unless there is a good reason that is acceptable to my partner." Often the second assumption leads to conflicts when one partner wants to do something away from their partner (such as visit friends or relatives or pursue individual interests). The underlying problem is that basic assumption. If both assume the first, then there is never a question of a right to pursue one's outside interests unless they are explicitly taboo (such as having an affair). Assertive Communication. Some qualities of assertive-assertive communication include:

- Caring: they express caring and compliments frequently (even at the height of conflict)
- Open: they are open and honest about their thoughts and in discussing (not acting out) their emotions.
- Focused, yet diplomatic:.. important discussions get to the point directly, but kindly and diplomatically.
- Active listening: partners actively listen for deeper meaning and respond with empathy and questions to help their partner get to the heart of the issue. They truly consider what their partner is saying instead of just focusing on their own thoughts or their next

response. They take time to consider both their partner's and their own position (even at the height of conflict).

Good boundaries:

they focus on what they can control--their own thoughts and behavior--not the thoughts and behavior of their partner. When they think about or suggest possible solutions, they focus on what they themselves can do--not on how their partner should change. Partners telling each other how the other should change usually leads to heightened conflict and little change. Partners suggesting how they themselves can change creates appreciation, cooperation, and genuine change. You can still ask your partner to change behaviors, but ask it as a favor and remember that he/she is the one who will decide what to do. You must work on accepting your partner as he/she is.

Constructive Use of Natural Consequences. What do you do if the problem is so important that you can't just ignore it? Alternatives include applying natural consequences, each doing their own thing, reducing time with the other, or leaving the relationship. By each doing your own thing and applying natural consequences, you can find creative ways of providing strong incentives for your partner to change actions. Taking care of your responsibilities and letting your partner take the full, natural consequences of his/her own without intervening is a much better alternative than "enabling" their behavior by buffering them from the natural consequences. In extreme cases such as substance abuse, mismanaging finances, failure to seek employment, or abusive behavior, it is extremely important to take a strong, persistent stand against these behaviors, to not protect people from consequences that may help the "hit bottom" and become motivated to change, to set strong boundaries and protect yourself from these negative consequences, and to strongly urge the person to seek help from professionals and 12-step recovery programs (if appropriate). By taking a "tough love" approach you are most likely to get a win-win solution in which (1) you are minimally dragged into the abyss, and (2) the other person is most likely to fully feel the consequences of his/her actions so that he/she is most motivated to change. Nagging will not work, nor will just accepting them as they are and protecting them.

Less important problems can still be important to your happiness and the eventual success of the relationship. For example, if your partner will not complete chores, try giving him/her responsibility for the chores that affect him/her most and you least. For example, if your partner lets his/her own laundry, personal finances, job, car maintenance go, he/she may shape up after awhile. If they don't take care of the problems and your laundry, finances, etc. are OK, then you may be able to accept their actions (or lack of actions). For the behaviors that affect you the most, try creative consequences like putting items he/she doesn't put away out of your sight in a place that may inconvenience your partner. Whenever you plan to use consequences such as these, it is almost always better to get your partner's permission. However, if you can't get it, you may still need to do take these actions if the problem is too great.

No negative manipulation or aggression. Assertive relationships are characterized by an absence of labeling (name calling), blaming, anger, pouting, withdrawal, harsh judgments, put-downs, passive agreement, hateful statements, all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, and harsh criticism.

Due to these thoughts and behavior, assertive-assertive relationships tend to be loving, open, interesting, more equal in decision-making, foster individual growth and self-esteem of each partner, and be relatively conflict free. Though there will be periods of conflict, the conflicts will tend to be at a lower level of emotionality, more focused on the underlying issues, eventually find win-win solutions, and not recur over the same issues later. Once a person achieves this type of relationship, then that relationship becomes extremely valuable. They are valuable because the relationship is such an important bonus in their lives--they are so much happier with that person than alone, and they know this kind of relationship is rare. That bonus happiness is the glue that holds the relationship together and makes each partner so attractive to the other. You look forward to being with your partner and miss them when you are away because you have so much happiness together.

The description sounds more like a romantic relationship, but similar dynamics occur in any assertive-assertive relationship--parent-child, employer-employee, friendship, teacher-pupil, etc. An employee of the late cowboy movie star, Roy Rogers, said that when Roy hired him, Roy told him that Roy wanted him to be happy in his work. Roy told him that any time he was not happy, he could come to him for help. Roy said the employee could come no matter what the source of unhappiness was--work or personal. The employee said that Roy really meant it, and people would often come to him and receive help. How many employers have told you that? How would you feel working for an employer like that compared to the ones you are used to? Wouldn't this assertive caring tend to create an atmosphere of caring, motivated workers who really cared about the goals of the organization? Wouldn't this assertive caring lead to both enhanced employee happiness and organizational productivity?

Persistence: Gentle, kind, caring, focused comments are like drops of water wearing down the rock. If you persist, they are hard to resist in the long run. You will not only be more successful getting others to cooperate, you will likely earn their respect and affection if you persist with assertion. Assertive persistence is one of the most powerful tools you have. It breaks down the manipulation and other resistances and plays to others' higher motives to do the right thing. It also makes them realize that you are going to be a pain in the backside until they treat you fairly.

Your Personalized Assertion Training Program I have taught assertion training in workshops and in counseling for many years. You can put together the elements of your personalized assertion training from materials available elsewhere on my web site. Following is a list of suggested readings. Each attacks various parts of the underlying problems. I suggest that you start by taking the SHAQ assessment, then use those results to help you decide on which readings to complete next. If you are having problems with confidence or anxiety, it is probably best to focus on assertive thinking before you start working on assertive behaviors. However, you need both assertive thinking and assertive behavior, so balance working on both. You may complete parts of the program in whatever order you want. Choose the part(s) that are most relevant to your own needs and situation. Also, choose parts that you will be motivated to do. Don't become overly ambitious and try to do it all unless you know that you are the kind of person who can really do that. It is better to start with the most parts you are most interested in and gradually read the others. Finally, it is important that you balance three

factors: (1) changing internal factors like internal control, self-esteem, and developing your higher self; (2) external social skills like empathetic listening, responding to criticism, the assertive request, conversational skills, and intimacy skills; and (3) actually practicing these skills in gradually more challenging situations. Generally it is a good idea to understand something well in your head before you try practicing it. Step 1: Assess Your Assertiveness and Underlying Factors

The first step to your individualized program is to decide what it is you want to work on and what the underlying causes may be. Then you can better decide what learning experiences will maximize your chances at success. I suggest two parts to assessment: SHAQ and an Assertiveness Log. 1. SHAQ Internet Assessment. To get an overall assessment of factors that can cause you to be too nonassertive or aggressive, take the Success and Happiness Attributes Questionnaire (SHAQ), which contains several scales related to relationships and assertiveness. This is the best place to start your program. You will get a chance to look at yourself in detail to see what self-esteem, internal control, nonassertive or aggressive beliefs, lack of assertive interpersonal skills, or other factors may be causing your nonassertiveness or aggressiveness. Go to <http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens/success>. 2. Keep an Assertiveness Log or Journal. Keep a log or journal of interpersonal situations that relate to your general assertiveness goals (example: opportunities for conversations, speaking up about your feelings, dealing with criticism, etc.). Write a brief description of the situation; your thoughts, actions, and feelings; and the outcomes for you and the other person(s) involved. Also, write or think about what you could have done to think or act more assertively. Step 2: Set Assertiveness Goals

After some initial exploration and input from Step 1, write a list of both general and specific goals for your program. General goals include "raising my self-esteem," "getting more internal control," "trying to get win-win solutions to all interpersonal problems," "make my own and others' happiness my top priority," and "improve my assertive skills." Note that all of these goals are process goals. They are thoughts or actions that you can control. You can also set outcome goals such as "getting promoted," "having a happy relationship," and "being liked and respected by others." However, you don't have immediate control of these outcomes, and focusing on them will greatly increase your anxiety level. They depend more upon others' reactions to you and upon their personalities, etc. It is best to focus on process goals and make them your primary goals. Then you can be happy that you are being the kind of person you really want to be. No matter what the outcome, you can be happy about that. I suggest that you set outcome goals only as secondary goals, and also use progress toward them as feedback for making adjustments in your process goals. (For a more complete discussion about goal-setting and its effect on anxiety and motivation, go to <http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens/h85agoal.htm>. It is also important that you set more immediate specific goals and objectives on weekly basis. Such goals may include attending a meeting, speaking up in a certain group, speaking to a certain person assertively, or initiating more conversations. Use them as part of a more general time management or self-management system such as the O-PATSM system. Assertiveness grows one step at a time, one day at a time, one week at a time.

As you learn more from your reading and experience, keep revising your goals. Step 3: Learn To Think Assertively and Feel More Confident Before you can consistently act assertively, you need to learn how to think and feel more assertive. One way to learn to think more assertively is to act assertively and then learn from what you observe. However, it is also important that you learn the rationale behind assertiveness and developing high, realistic self-esteem. Following are several general types of issues that relate to improving assertiveness. Focus on the ones that you believe you need to work on the most and are most interested in. Assertive thinking and self-esteem--increase confidence and reduce underlying social anxiety. No matter how many assertive interpersonal skills you have, you will not use them if you feel too much anxiety or anger. You will not use them if you are still thinking nonassertively or aggressively. The root of self-esteem and self-confidence is in your choice of values, goals, and expectations and in your basic beliefs. To understand basic causes of nonassertive (and often aggressive) thinking and behavior, read the following chapters from my book, *You Can Choose To Be Happy*: 1. The Transition from External to Internal Control of Your Life (Chapter 6). Has specific information about how to change underlying beliefs and change habits that can help you become more internally controlled. 2. Develop Greater Self-Worth and Self-Confidence (Chapter 5). Low self-esteem can be a root of negative thinking, motivation, poor relationships, and negative emotions (anxiety, anger, and depression). This chapter focuses upon practical ways that you can improve self-esteem. 3. Our Search For Happiness and Self-Actualization (Chapter 1). The first chapter of my book gives an overview of some of most important decisions you can make to lead a happy life and outlines a program for achieving more happiness and self-actualization. 4. Develop Your Higher Self. This chapter tells you how you can discover and strengthen the core part of yourself that can be your greatest source of inner caring, strength, and confidence. Overcome fears of rejection, loneliness, or specific social anxieties. To focus on overcoming fears of rejection and loneliness, understanding how to find the "right" person for you, and learn more about how to meet people you really want to be with, read: 1. Beyond Fear of Rejection and Loneliness to Self-Confidence. Guide for overcoming fears of rejection and loneliness, also focuses upon finding people who are right for you in a relationship. 2. Using the Systematic Desensitization Technique to Overcome Specific Fears and Phobias. Use this technique to gradually overcome fears like talking to an attractive stranger, confronting authorities, or speaking in front of a group. Replace anger and aggression with assertiveness. To focus specifically on getting control of anger and/or aggressive thoughts and behaviors try the following: 1. Overcome Anger and Aggression. This simple self-help manual from my book has helped many people cope with anger and aggression. Get control of anxiety and depression that keeps you from being assertive. People who are habitually nonassertive frequently are also people who feel a higher than average amount of anxiety (stress) and/or depression (tiredness, lack of motivation, sadness). To get some help try these links: 1. Overcoming Anxiety and Fear. Learn the "Six Mental Control Strategies" that can help you get control of anxiety along with other ways to find the roots of your anxiety and modify the underlying causes. Also, learn quick ways of reducing anxiety and fear.

Step 4: Develop Assertive Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills

To focus on developing general communication skills, state your opinions more directly and diplomatically, resolve conflicts successfully, and develop intimacy read:

1. Choose To Be Happy In Relationships. A set of general guidelines connected to other links for specific step-by-step help for improving relationships of all types--especially close or romantic ones.
2. Improving Communication, Intimacy, and Conflict Resolution READ THIS for key assertive skills. Information about beliefs and specific skills that help establish good relationships of any type, but focus more on close interpersonal relationships. Step-by-step help.
3. How to Make an Assertive Request for a Behavior Change. Do you feel confident about asking someone for a favor, asking them to change their behavior, or confronting them about some problem? If you would like to learn an effective and diplomatic way to ask for a behavior change, try this method. Many aggressive or nonassertive methods of asking for change not only don't work, they weaken the relationship. This method is not only effective motivating the other person to change, it often strengthens your relationship with that person and seldom weakens it.
4. Harmonious Relationships: Finding Intimacy and Independence. Discusses several types of relationships and general beliefs and actions that can lead to more intimate, healthily independent, and happier relationships.

Step 5: Making Assertiveness a Lifestyle: Replacing Old Habits With Assertiveness

You will become more assertive just by reading, because you will strengthen the assertive part of yourself by giving it more knowledge. On the other hand, several aspects of yourself may hinder your efforts to become more assertive. The two major aspects are old beliefs and old habits that conflict with assertiveness. Let's look at each one.

Old beliefs inhibiting assertiveness. All your current nonassertive or aggressive beliefs are still there. These parts of yourself will never completely go away. Think of the next stage of your development as a battle between the old, dysfunctional nonassertive or aggressive parts of yourself and the assertive part of yourself. Your assertive part values your own and others happiness and seeks win-win solutions through assertive means. The nonassertive parts will tell you to always put others first and worry about what they think. The aggressive parts will tell you to not care about what others think or how they feel. You can see that someone who is primarily nonassertive needs to focus more on not worrying about what others think and more on what they themselves think and want. The aggressive person has the opposite task.

Don't be frustrated by the fact that these old, dysfunctional parts will always be in you and speaking to you. The hardest part is in the beginning when their strength is highest relative to your assertive part. The way you strengthen the assertive part is to choose to think and act assertively. Then as these thoughts and behaviors are successful and reinforced internally and externally, your assertive thinking and habits will be strengthened.

Old habits inhibiting assertiveness. We all have millions of automatic habits that fill up our time. You have habit routines for dressing, eating, driving, studying, greeting people, etc. If someone says, "Hello," you automatically reply. Similarly, if someone calls you "selfish," you may tend to feel guilty and habitually start thinking about what you may have done wrong. You need to change that habit and literally reprogram yourself so that you respond more assertively. For example, you could learn to respond to a "selfish" comment by asking yourself what is going on in the other person's head that might cause them to call you selfish. Are they trying to get you to do something they want and using that as a way to get you to feel guilty and give in? To reprogram your thoughts and habits, use one of the following techniques:

1. Prepare by role-playing. Before entering a difficult situation, role-play the situation to prepare for the most likely problems. Either do it alone by mentally rehearsing or use a partner. What words or actions from the other person(s) would be the hardest to cope with (internally and externally)? What outcomes do you fear most (being rejected, being fired, being called certain names, being embarrassed in front of others, etc.). Then use your knowledge from the readings above to prepare for how you will generate both assertive thoughts and assertive behaviors to cope with the most difficult or feared aspects of the situation. Keep working on both your thinking and behaviors until you are confident that they meet the criteria for assertiveness (win-win, calm, diplomatic, strong, persistent, etc.) you are trying to achieve and you feel pretty confident about using them.
2. Take time to think before your act. During the actual situation with the other(s), slow the action down and give yourself time to think. You can slow the situation down by saying to yourself and the other person, "I can't give you an answer this moment. I need some time to think about it." Perhaps the best way to give yourself time to think is to use the empathetic listening technique (see communication skills above). The empathetic listening technique gives you time to think as you are encouraging them to explore their thoughts and feelings. Also, by letting them give you more information about what is going on inside them, you will have more data for making a good decision.
3. Post-situation analysis. Analyze the situation later and evaluate your own and others' actions. [This is a good time to use your assertiveness log/diary.] Remember that you can't change others' actions and that blaming them is dysfunctional. Instead try to understand why they acted the way they did at a deep level. What was their underlying motivation? You are trying to understand their motivation better so that (1) you can treat them with as much understanding and respect as possible, and (2) so that you can be more effective and persuasive by speaking to their real motives in a way that gives them positive motivation to cooperate with you. It is important to understand the other person, but it is even more important to evaluate your own thinking and behavior by the assertive criteria you are learning. Don't beat yourself up if you don't do well. Instead replay the whole situation in your mind and role-play the assertive thoughts and behaviors you could have used. This technique actually reprograms your thinking and habits so that the next time you are in a similar situation, your new assertive response will be more likely to pop out automatically (or with minimal thought about it). You have reprogrammed your thinking and behavior. Gradually overcoming fears as you become more assertive. The most powerful tool in your program to becoming more assertive is to take one step at a time. When you begin your program, it is a good idea to write down your eventual goals and your most feared situations. For example one 20-year-old student who came in for counseling couldn't look at me or speak more than a few words at a time. He had never had a friend or a date. For him, asking someone for a date was a major goal that elicited terror. Even speaking to a woman was extremely anxiety producing. His first steps were to learn conversational skills and ways of mentally coping with rejection. He also used some systematic desensitization (see above). Initial steps included

things like making a casual comment about something in class to a woman whom he was not attracted to, asking her major, telling about himself, etc. After he became more confident talking with women he wasn't interested in, he began to talk to some he was. Finally, he asked one out for coffee. She said, "no." So did some others, but he learned to cope with rejection and kept trying and improving.

About the Author

Dr. Tom G. Stevens is a psychologist at California State University, Long Beach and author of the book, *You Can Choose To Be Happy: "Rise Above" Anxiety, Anger, and Depression*.

Source: <http://www.improveskillsacademy.org>