

Assertiveness 101: How to speak your truth clearly and directly

Ask **Dr. Sharon**



By Dr. Sharon Lamm Hartman

Make a decision that 2008 is the year to increase assertiveness by speaking your truth. Women are traditionally taught to be nice and cooperative. This can often result in passive behavior, meaning we don't speak our truth, yet we get upset and let our feelings out in unconstructive ways. It can also result in aggressive behavior, which can look like road rage or slashing our significant other's tires.

Being passive can make us feel powerless, and acting aggressively can make us feel harsh and overbearing. Clear and direct communication is a good middle road.

Here are some key communication techniques for increasing assertiveness:

Situation, behavior, impact – When someone behaves unacceptably in your opinion, speak to him or her directly, clearly state the impact his or her behavior had on you, then ask for what you need in the future.

Position, reasoning, inquiry – When you have a firm position, state it with why you believe so strongly and follow with a question that encourages dialogue. Here is an example: "I feel we should go with option one because it meets all of our success criteria, including lowest cost and quickest turn around. What is your perspective?" Listen to their point of view and then respond. If no agreement can be reached, you may need to agree to disagree or seek mediation.

Just say no – As women, we often want to meet everyone's needs – it's an impossible task. Begin to pay attention to your gut feeling when addressed with a situation. Sometimes all we truly need to say is, "No, that just won't work for me."

What is with all the aggression, and what can we do about it?

The U.S. has the highest incidence of road rage in the world. I recently watched a man tailgating a car filled with a family. The family was apparently going too slow for him, so he waved his clenched fist and shouted what could only have been obscenities. If he had come a few inches closer, or if that family had put on the brakes, there could have been a serious accident. Responding to a situation with aggression does not help to change a thing. All it can do is cause a lot of stress and a lot of pain. Each one of us needs to learn to handle rage more responsibly. Develop patience and do not take another person's actions personally.

Surprisingly, women are only 7% less likely than man to engage in aggressive acts, such as road rage. I polled some local professional women and asked what they felt most rage about. These are their top three responses, along with my and recommendations for confronting the issues.

What do women feel most rage about?	Effective strategies for handling this rage
Being cheated on by a spouse or significant other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get physical with kickboxing, going for a run, taping pictures of your spouse to your tires and driving over them. • With the help of a therapist or coach, make a decision whether you'll work through or leave the relationship.
Doing more than a fair share of work or being treated unfairly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a conversation about duties, responsibilities and fairness. If the other person won't help, seek other sources of help (temp agencies, errand runners, etc). • Stand up for what you believe in. Recently, I was treated disrespectfully at a local car dealer. I asked for his manager's phone number and sent a letter to the CEO of the car dealership. He never responded. I tell every friend not to buy from them. They also lost a customer as I am due to buy a new car. • Learn to say no.
Not having enough down time or family time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule down time; even Oprah takes Sundays off. Slowing down can increase productivity. • Get clear on your priorities and schedule your time around them. • If your work environment requires too many hours, remember you have a choice to do something else, somewhere else. • Communicate your needs clearly to those who can support you.

Upsets generally start with resentment, then change to anger and end with rage. Take action when you first feel resentment, and don't delay—make clear what you need and discuss the situation with those involved as early as possible. ■

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