

AWAKENED REALM's

The Return to You

ASSERTIVENESS



by Jax Southam

Assertiveness

Before I go any further, I have to say that my favourite book on assertiveness has to be 'A Woman in Your Own Right' by Anne Dickson, which must now be between 40-50 years old.

I have endeavoured to lay out the essential 'What, Why and How' of assertiveness here to back up what you have learned in your *Return to You: Rebuild* chapters.

The What

Assertiveness is expressing your feelings, needs and opinions without damaging or ignoring the feelings, needs and opinions of others.

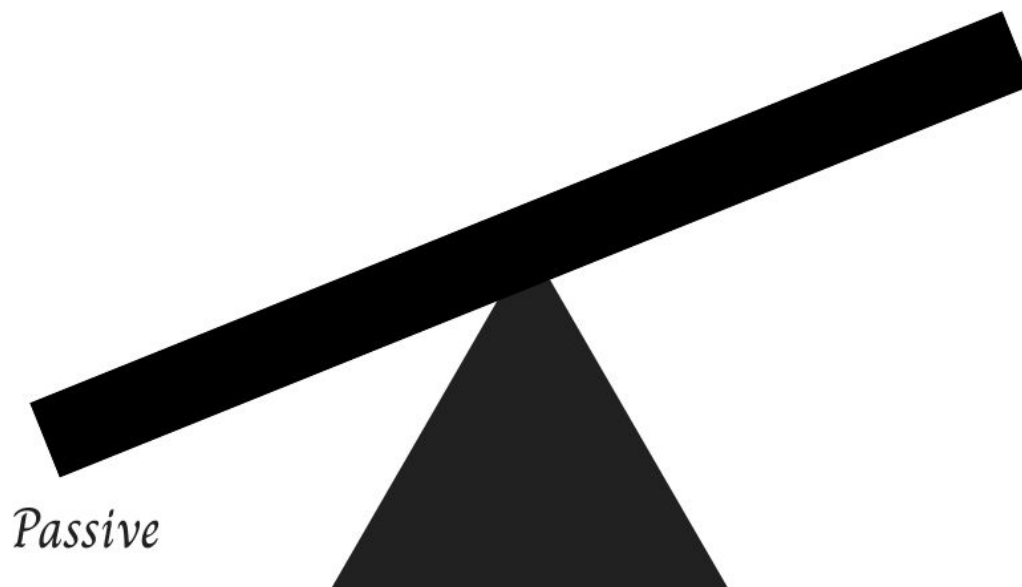
However successful you may be in some areas of your life, it is likely that there are areas in which you feel you have little or no personal power. Maybe you are a great boss, your team respect you, and you are well rewarded for your efforts, but at home things are less satisfactory. You feel unappreciated, like you are doing the lion's share of the chores, like sometimes you feel invisible, yet you are unable to say or do anything about it. You are a martyr at home or a slave to work.

Equally, you might have a great home life, but at work, you feel unappreciated and your ideas are rarely considered, even when you dare to be brave enough to speak them.

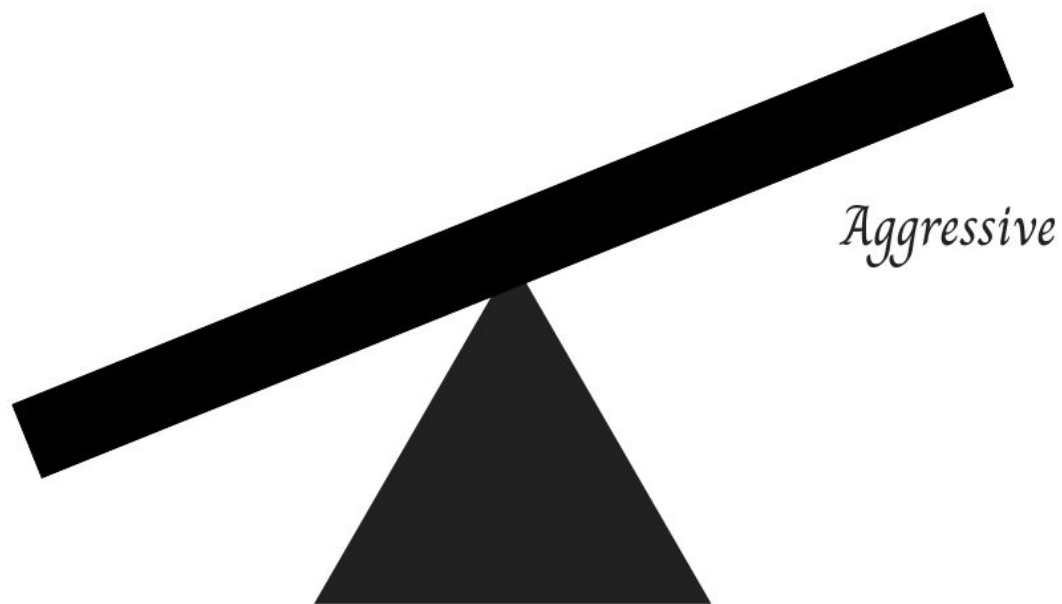
Amongst friends, maybe you are always the one to go with the flow, go bowling when you might prefer to go dancing for a change. You are always the **passive** one in the situation, letting others drag you along. Perhaps you feel that you need to 'walk on eggshells' so as not to upset someone.

If this is you, you are responding passively to what is happening around you.

If you don't recognise this in yourself, can you identify anyone you know who always acts in a passive manner? Think about this because you may not have noticed it before.

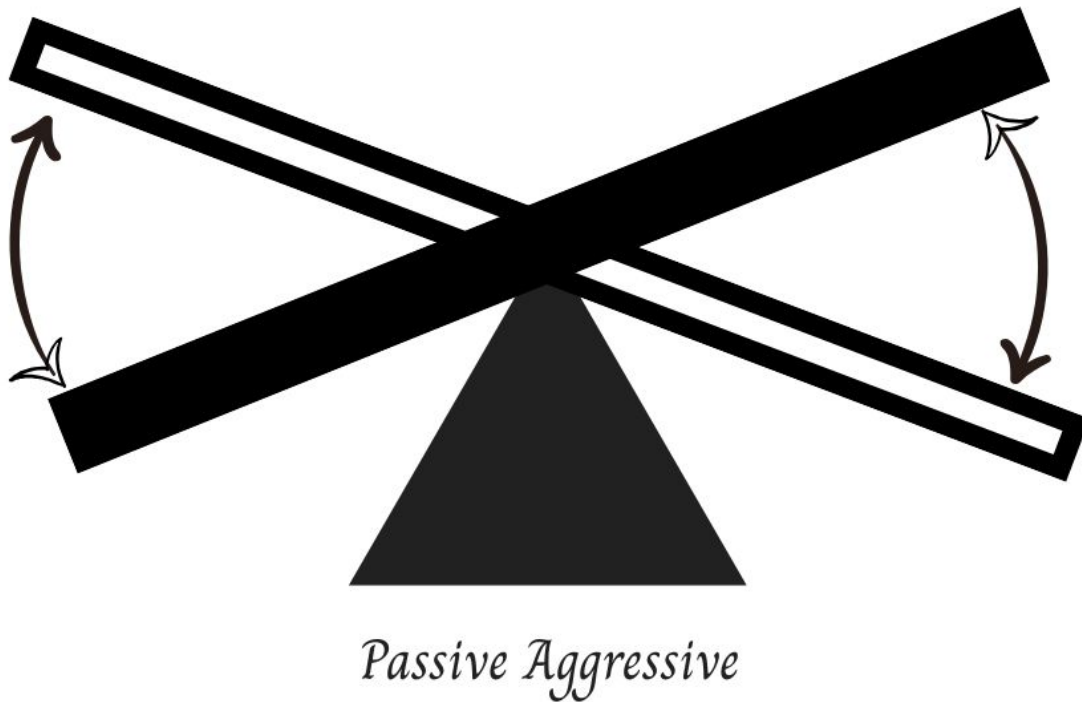


Looking at it from another angle, do you lead your work team, family and friends with a strong will to get them to do what you want them to? Do you always get your own way, but somehow the satisfaction you gain from that win seems shallow? If this is you, you might have an **aggressive** approach, this does not mean that you are violent in your persuasion, but as we shall see, there are other ways to use aggression when dealing with other people, and it is important to be aware of this so that we can stop it happening. Do you recognise yourself here, or can you think of anyone who does fit that description?



Perhaps you are someone who switches from one approach to another, silent and afraid, bottling things up until you can hold it back no longer, then letting it all out, sometimes at the most inappropriate time, with a burst of anger (or tears), saying things you don't mean and then feeling awful about it afterward.

This one used to be me, and it was always the tears that burst out when I could take no more. I found it impossible to express anger. This method of 'dealing' with situations is called **passive/aggressive**, and it got me nowhere, but after many years of behaving this way, I learned about assertiveness and was able to move forward.



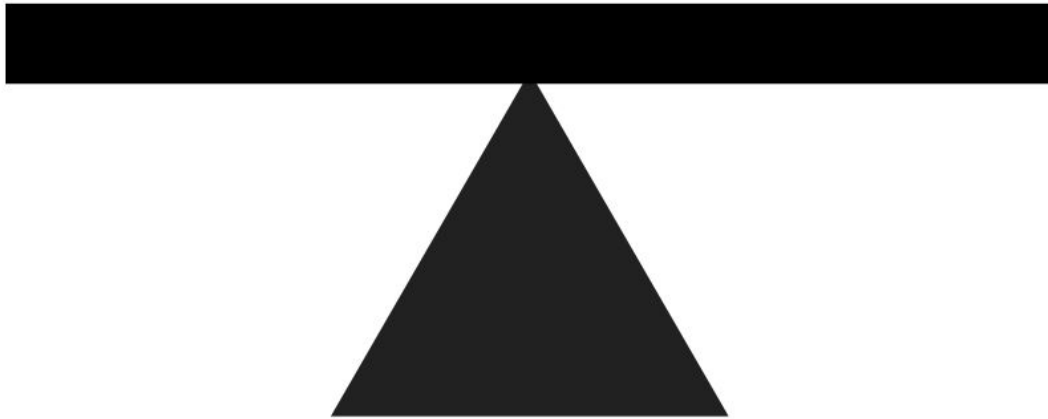
In any of the scenarios above, being assertive (or at least possessing some assertiveness skills) will help you balance the see-saw of power.

Have you ever wished you could be different? Have you ever thought about how wonderful it would be to share what you are thinking and feeling in a way that others will really listen to you and consider what you have to say?

Well, the good news is that, like me, you can. Assertiveness is a set of skills that enable you to respect both your own needs and the needs of others. It is a way of

expressing your feelings and opinions clearly, with empathy, whilst remaining self-assured and confident.

Assertiveness requires neither aggression nor passivity. It is not about winning arguments; in fact, if done correctly, there should be no arguments. Neither is it about one-upmanship. It is about the win/win situation. If communication is clear, honest and done with empathy, everyone is better off.



Assertiveness

Let's break down that definition of assertiveness.

Assertiveness is:

- A set of skills
- Respect for the needs of self and others
- Expression of thoughts and feelings
- With empathy

We will revisit these points in detail later in the book, but first, we will take a brief look at the 'Why' and the 'When' of assertiveness.

The Why

Why be assertive? Assertive people can express their feelings honestly without worrying that they will be less liked as a result. If anything, assertive people earn the respect of their peers.

Conversely, aggressive people force their opinions onto others, which usually results in the loss of respect or even in the loss of a friendship.

Passive people worry so much that others will not like them that they never express their opinions for fear of upsetting someone.

Take a look at the list below of your rights and responsibilities as a respected individual living in a civilised world. Keep in mind that everyone should have these rights and responsibilities equally. Whilst reading through the list, ask yourself how it makes you feel and what it makes you want to change.

Your Rights

I have the right to:

- Respect myself and be treated with respect
- Express my feelings, opinions and ideas
- Say yes, or no
- Make my own decisions and choices
- Make mistakes
- Change my mind
- Change anything else about me
- Ask for what I want or need
- Take responsibility for myself
- Refuse responsibility for others' problems
- Set my own priorities
- Have my own time and space, my own privacy
- Do what I believe is right, whether or not others approve, as long as it is legal and does not harm anyone
- Do nothing
- Acknowledge my strengths

- Accept my weaknesses

Your Responsibilities

I am responsible for:

- Myself
- My life
- My children
- Others IF, and only IF they cannot take responsibility for themselves, AND I choose to undertake that responsibility for them

I have responsibility towards:

- Other people, e.g. employer, relatives, friends
- My community, e.g. residents of the area in which I live, fellow travellers
- Animals
- The environment

Take a moment to think about that list now. How does your life correspond with these rights and responsibilities? Can you see any area for improvement? Can you see where it might help to be more assertive?

The When

When is it appropriate to use assertiveness skills? In my opinion, the skills of assertiveness are something you constantly have at your fingertips, to be drawn on in any given scenario. Once learned, they can be brought to the fore instantly when needed. In essence, they are the best means of communication, and communication is something we use all the time.

It is also important to pick your moment. I would be no good approaching your boss, however assertively, when he/she is knee deep in an imminent deadline or is on his way to an important meeting (or the loo). Arrange an appointment or ask for ten to twenty minutes of his/her time when you can have an uninterrupted discussion.

If at home, make sure the conversation is started with enough time to get it resolved amicably before going to bed.

Although it is sometimes easier to broach a difficult conversation in the car because nobody can walk away from it, this is not a good idea for safety reasons.

The How

Assertiveness is a set of skills that:

- Express thoughts and feelings
- Respect for the needs of self and others
- Show empathy

A set of skills

Communication is a skill, the skill of relating your meaning to another person or persons and vice versa. As Professor of Psychology, Albert Mehrabian famously reported, communication comes through three elements: words, tone of voice and facial expression. Only 7% of our communication is through the words we use. 38% comes from the tone of our voice, and a whopping 55% comes from our non-verbal communication, that is, the expression on our faces. Things like the way we stand, the position of our shoulders and head, and our breathing all have a part in this 55% too.

The next three sub-headings cover the skills needed, breaking them down into those small, manageable chunks that we love so much.

Expression of thoughts and feelings

- Be certain about what you want or feel
- State clearly what you want or feel
- Take time to ensure you maintain that clarity as the conversation progresses
- Do not apologise or make excuses for what you want or feel
- Repeat what you have stated (several times if needed) to maintain focus
- Watch your body language. Present as relaxed and open to discussion, yet firm in opinion (more on this later)
- Avoid crossing your arms, which can be mistaken for aggressiveness (though it is more likely to indicate self-soothing) or shrinking away into the distance, which signals passivity.
- Say 'No' when it is appropriate to do so

Respect for the needs of self and others

- Choose the appropriate moment and ensure you speak clearly and concisely. Remember, you are entitled to your opinions as much as the next person is entitled to theirs
- Reconsider if the response has genuinely made you feel differently or changed what you want (this is where you need to take that time)
- Be open to compromise, **IF** a compromise will meet your needs - a compromise is not the same as giving in
- Restate your needs, explaining how their response does/does not meet your needs
- Keep the conversation on track, don't be swayed away from your goal
- Ask for help or support if needed. Other people will benefit from helping us as much as we benefit from helping others - it feels good.

Show Empathy

- Put yourself in the shoes of the person you are communicating with
- Actively listen to responses - (more about this later)
- Ensure that you look the other person in the eye, not to stare but not to shy away from that eye contact
- Try to understand and share that you have that understanding of their situation
- However, they need to give you that same respect and try to understand your needs
- Counter offer - aiming for that win/win situation

Not all of these points will be required in every assertive conversation, but they are all useful elements to put in your assertiveness toolbox. With surprisingly little time and practice, you will be accomplished at using the right ones at the right time.



Now that we have identified the elements needed to become assertive, let's look at some of those that need a little more explanation. Body Language, Active Listening and Ways of Saying 'No'.

Body Language

Posture and Stance

As far as possible, hold yourself upright with your shoulders relaxed and your head held up with your eyes looking straight forward, not down at the ground.

Your feet should be shoulder-width apart if you are standing, to give you a firm root on the ground with good balance. If sitting, sit straight and upright with your legs together but not crossed, as this will put you off balance again. Do not cross your arms as this can appear aggressive, but hold them still. If you are in a position where your head is lower than that of the person you are speaking to, find a way of adjusting that position by standing or adjusting the chair.

Proximity

Be aware of personal space, yours and theirs. You need to be close enough to ensure it is a one-to-one conversation, but not so close as to appear threatening.

Stand or sit squarely, ready to engage, but do not speak until you are given their full attention.

Facial Expression

Our facial expression must match the message we are conveying. So often, we smile through every conversation, especially when we are nervous or are uncertain what to say. Try to avoid this temptation as it detracts from the message you are giving. Contact your inner self, establish what you are feeling, then use your face to express it. Use your eyes to look at them directly, and take care not to tighten your jaw, which like crossing your arms, can mistakenly come across as aggressive or closed off.

Comfort in being you

Dress appropriately but in a way that expresses who you are. The more you feel like ‘you’, the more assertive you will feel and the greater the likelihood of a successful outcome to the situation.

Gestures

We have already looked at body language, but the subject of gestures is worthy of a section on its own. We are not talking about specific hand gestures here; it is more about the fidgeting that we do when we are nervous, the clenching we do when we are frustrated or angry, and the shuffling about we do when we are feeling awkward.

- Scratching
- Playing with your hair
- Rubbing your eyes
- Biting your nails
- Tapping on the desk
- Cleaning your glasses

These can all send out messages that you are nervous, anxious, uncertain of what you are saying, just testing the water, not serious or not worthy of listening to.

Whilst

- Leg jiggling
- Clenched fists or teeth
- Tight jaw
- Strong hand movements

indicate aggression, embarrassment, or impatience.

Active Listening

Focus

Keep the conversation on track. Avoid going off on a tangent or letting the other person lead you off in another direction. Stick to the point and focus the conversation on what it was intended for.

Pay attention to Body Language

In the same way that your body language will be sending messages to the other person, you can study their body language to help you understand what is going on for them. Are they feeling impatient with you? Do you need to get to the point? Are they short-tempered or distracted? Do you need to point out that you deserve the respect of their full attention?

Verbal cues

Speaking more slowly to emphasise certain points, stressing certain words, using a different tone of voice, or pausing can all be used to get your message across, but likewise, it is a part of active listening. Listen for those cues. What are they conveying? Why are they saying nothing? Are they giving you time to think of your response, or are they thinking of their own? As long as there is focus, some silence is a good thing on both sides.

Clarifying and paraphrasing

Don't be afraid to clarify what you are being told; it is essential that both parties have an accurate understanding of what is being said. Paraphrase what is being said and wait for a response. Either the other person will agree with you that you have understood correctly, or they will offer more information or context.

Ask Questions

This is an active listening skill that goes beyond clarifying and paraphrasing to seek further information. You can ask open questions, ‘How do you see that suggestion meeting the needs of my team/family/community?’ or closed questions like ‘Repairs to the damp in my bathroom will be carried out on Thursday of this week, then?’ A closed question, you will note, can only be answered with a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, whilst an open question requires an explanatory response.

Refrain from Judgement

Being non-judgmental, in this context, means keeping an open mind, not deciding either before or during the conversation that the other person is thinking this because they are (insert trait of your choice). Use your active listening skills to explore and discover the truth. What are their reasons for and against your request?

Summarise, Share and Reflect

At the end of the assertive conversation, confirm you are both on the same page. To do this, summarise your understanding and share it with the other person. Allow them time to confirm that you are in agreement, and if not, negotiate some more. Always end with this summarising and sharing exercise.

Reflect back on what you have achieved or learned. How do you feel?

Helping you to say No

Delay Immediate Reaction

When someone asks you for a favour, do you sometimes get that sinking feeling? You had been looking forward to a quiet night in, or a soak in the bath, or the chance to read your new book, but you say yes anyway.

One of the best ways to avoid this is to get into the habit of responding with ‘let me check if I am able to do that for you, I’ll get back to you (state time)’. In this way, you are respecting the other person’s request enough to give it due consideration, but you haven’t committed yourself yet.

Examine your immediate reaction

Next, take time to consider how you feel about it. Is it a favour you are happy to do? Is it a rare occurrence for this person to ask you for a favour, or do they do it all the time? Are you always the one they come to when they could ask other people? Do you want to do it? What would be the consequences to them if you said No? Is that your responsibility?

The answers to these questions will tell you what your answer needs to be. Now the issue is how you will tell them.

If your answer is ‘yes’, there will not be a problem, but to avoid being taken advantage of, you might want to let them know that you have managed to reschedule something or that you can do it this once but cannot be relied on to do it regularly.

Avoid excuses

If your answer is ‘No’, however, you might be tempted to give a list of excuses as to why you cannot do what they ask. Don’t. Remember, you have the right to say ‘no’, you don’t need an excuse. In fact, excuses rarely have any use at all, they just

weaken your response as the other person might find a way to overcome them, leaving you with just not wanting to do it. 'I'm sorry, I am unavailable' is a perfectly adequate and assertive response.

Remember empathy

Draw on what you learned about empathy when considering your options. Try to understand their position, but remember that understanding it is not the same as giving in to it. Empathy will help you make the right decision.

Bring it to a close

Once you have made your decision, move away, change the subject, or end the call. Do not hover around as if there is more negotiation to be done. There is not. You have given your response, and that is final.

Well, that brings us to the end of this assertiveness guide. I hope you will be able to make use of the suggestions here. If you would like to explore assertiveness in more detail, I would suggest Anne Dickson's *A Woman in Your Own Right*.

Don't forget to also check out my novels in the Moons & Runes Private Investigator series, The POISE Archives trilogy and Time to Shine, which are full of feel-good escapism and characters you will want to have as friends. You'll find them all in the Awakened Realm website shop.

Blessings,

Jax

