

The Four Point Rule of Assertive Behavior

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Although the act of behaving in an assertive manner always carried with it a positive connotation, its exact meaning varied from one speaker to another. However, as a graduate student, studying under Arnold Lazarus at Rutgers University, I learned how to view assertive behavior in a very specific and operational context. The definition comprised four explicit behaviors that could be communicated to other people quite clearly. I refer to this definition as the **Four Point Rule**; I have helped a great number of my clients in private practice in increasing their assertive behavior resulting in their very much improved self-image.

(1) The first of these behaviors is simply the ability to say **No**. There have been several books that one can find related to self-improvement that emphasizes the importance of an individual being able to say **No**. People that can't say **No** often find that they are promising people things or actions that they really have no intention of delivering. Some reasons why a person will not say "no" are: 1) He/She does not want to hurt the other person's feelings; 2) He/She is afraid of losing the other person's friendship and/or 3) He/She may feel indebted to the other person for one reason or another. Of course, the person who responds positively to a request by another but makes a habit of not following through, more than likely, will lose the respect or trust of the other. On the other hand, the person who says "yes" but; deep down really does not want to do what she/he commits to, probably will feel some resentment toward the one requesting the favor.

(2) The flip side of being able to say “no” to someone is the ability to someone is the ability to ask for a favor. The implicit risk one takes in asking another for a favor is that the other person may say “no.” A person may not ask for a favor from someone he/she knows well because he/she may not feel worthy of a positive response from that friend. One type of client I have worked with is the shy male who is so afraid of rejection that he will not take the risk of asking a woman with whom he may be attracted out on a date.

(3) This neatly ties in with the third feature of assertive behavior: The ability to initiate and/or terminate a conversation with a stranger. I have helped several single shy males by role playing and, subsequently, giving them the assignment to talk to any two women they may meet during the week. Their goal for the week is to be rejected by these women. This may sound counterproductive, at first, but the paradoxical nature of the assignment makes it impossible for them to fail. Simply stated the client cannot perceive himself being a loser whether he is rejected or not and, this realization in and of itself, has therapeutic value.

(4) The fourth characteristic of assertive behavior is the ability to make positive or negative comments to a stranger or someone you know well. An example of the latter would be a non-assertive spouse who will be always apologetic to his/her partner never being able to express anything negative to that person for fear perhaps that the partner may leave him/her. That person’s mate will probably have little respect for such a partner. Examples of asserting oneself in less familiar situations would be the ability to return a steak not cooked the way it was ordered, at a restaurant, or the ability to tell people talking in a movie theater to quiet down..

To conclude, when an individual asserts oneself in any of the above situations defining

assertive behavior, that person takes the risk of being rejected.