Focus

Take-Aways

• Productive communication and positive assertiveness create good relationships.
• Allowing others to manipulate your behavior sacrifices your self-respect and sense of personal responsibility.
• In addition to the “fight or flight” response to challenges, humans can solve problems verbally.
• People can make you feel guilty by labeling your behavior “good” or “bad,” just like your parents did when you were a child.
• The “Bill of Assertive Rights” is the basis for healthy relationships.
• The right to be the judge of your behavior is the foundation of all the other rights.
• People use manipulative behavior to make you believe that you should live by their rules.
• To thwart manipulation, use the “broken record” behavioral response: Repeat what you want in a calm, collected manner, with no explanations.
• “Fogging, negative assertion and negative inquiry” are useful reactions to criticism.
• Your best answer depends on the context of the conversation and on what kind of relationship is at play: “commercial or formal,” authoritarian, or “equal.”

Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Applicability</th>
<th>Innovation</th>
<th>Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How other people may attempt to manipulate your behavior to get you to do what they want; 2) What your basic “assertive rights” are; and 3) How to thwart others’ manipulative behavior and promote productive communication at work and at home.

Recommendation
Take a trip back to the 1970s, when leisure suits, long sideburns and “assertiveness training” were all the rage. Psychologist Manuel J. Smith was a pioneer in the life-changing assertiveness training movement. Reading his bestseller about it decades later adds a new perspective. Some of his advice still feels relevant, particularly when he urges you to beware of those who try to impose their standards of “right” and “wrong” to manipulate you. Smith lists your 10 “assertive rights,” the most important being the right to be the ultimate judge of your own behavior. He details several verbal techniques you can use to block manipulation, and encourage productive communication and negotiation. He supports each tactic with sample dialogues from real-life situations. Although some of his counsel may seem as dated as disco, getAbstract recommends his classic training manual to anyone who still feels guilty about saying “no!”

Abstract

Problem Solving
No one’s life is problem-free. Inevitably, everyone encounters bumps on the road. Just like other members of the animal kingdom, humans have an innate, survival-based “fight or flight” response when they feel threatened. Unlike animals, however, humans in conflict possess another coping skill: the ability to solve problems verbally. Yet, when threatened, challenged or intimidated, people often respond with “anger-aggression, fear-flight or depression-withdrawal.” These primordial coping mechanisms pale in comparison with “verbal assertive problem-solving.” Unfortunately, many people have not learned this skill or do not use it as well as they could.

From the moment you could walk and talk, your parents attempted to control your behavior. Often, they manipulated your emotions so you felt “anxious, ignorant or guilty” about your actions. They did not intend to be mean and they were probably unaware of the impact of their words because their parents brought them up the same way. For instance, if you left your toys on the floor, your mother might say, “Only bad children leave their toys out to make a mess.” This made you feel guilty, nervous and a little bit scared. It would have been better if she simply had said, “I want you to pick up your toys, even though I know you don’t feel like it,” without assigning the label of “good” or “bad” to your behavior.

“A Bill of Assertive Rights”
In your daily life, at work and at home, people may try to manipulate you into doing what they want by making you feel nervous, uninformed or culpable. If you let them push you around, or if you run away from them or withdraw, you will feel frustrated, angry or depressed. When you permit others to control your actions, you abdicate self-
respect and your sense of personal responsibility. The first step in fixing the situation
is to know that “no one can manipulate your emotions or behavior if you don’t allow
it to happen.” Follow the Bill of Assertive Rights, which outlines the basics of healthy,
nonmanipulative relationships in business and at home:

1. “You have the right to judge your own behavior, thoughts and emotions, and to take
   the responsibility for their initiation and consequences upon yourself.”
2. “You have the right to offer no reasons or excuses for justifying your behavior.”
3. “You have the right to judge if you are responsible for finding solutions to other
   people’s problems.”
4. “You have the right to change your mind.”
5. “You have the right to make mistakes – and be responsible for them.”
6. “You have the right to say, ‘I don’t know’.”
7. “You have the right to be independent of the goodwill of others before coping
   with them.”
8. “You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.”
9. “You have the right to say, ‘I don’t understand.’”
10. “You have the right to say, ‘I don’t care’.”

Rights and Relationships
The first assertive right, the right to judge your own behavior, is the foundation of all of the
other rights. When you become your own judge, instead of heeding others’ opinions, you
set up a barrier against being manipulated. You base your judgments on your values, not
an external system of “rights and wrongs,” or a set of rules that people use to manipulate
your emotions by making you feel that you are “supposed” to act, think, feel and behave
a certain way. When people try to manipulate you, they are sending the message that they
– not you – are the arbitrators of your behavior. People base nonassertive but manipulative
actions on the belief that you should live up to their rules. If you accept this premise, you
leave yourself open to a limitless variety of manipulations.

If you feel that you should improve your behavior according to other people’s arbitrary
standards, they can force you into giving reasons why you do the things you do. This
makes you vulnerable to outside judgment. Don’t rationalize your behavior to others
and, thus, give them an opportunity to decide if it is right or wrong. If they do not agree
with what you are doing, they have the assertive option of telling you so. Then, you can
choose to disregard them, compromise or modify your behavior.

Communication is the foundation for building relationships. Assertive communication
allows you to discover another person’s likes, dislikes, values and expectations. As you
get acquainted with people, they provide “free information” about their interests, needs
and life choices. Encourage them by asking questions. That makes “it easier for other
people to talk about themselves.” Such communication is an essential social skill.

“Broken Record”
Just being aware of your assertive rights is not enough. You must also know how to act
upon them. One tactic is the broken record response. Most people say no the first time
someone asks them to do something they don’t want to do, but then give in and say yes.
To use the broken record method, simply repeat what you want in a calm, collected
manner, offering no explanations or rationalizations. For example, consider the following
common situation:
Salesperson: “If you buy this great encyclopedia, your children will get better grades.”
Prospect: “I understand, but I’m not interested.”
Salesperson: “You don’t understand or you would want to buy it for your kids…how old are they?”
Prospect: “I understand, but I’m not interested.”
Salesperson: “You mean you won’t even answer one question I ask you?”
Prospect: “I understand how you feel, but I’m not interested.”
Salesperson: “If you don’t want to talk to me, I’ll leave.”

You are not required to answer questions or offer explanations when you don’t want something. If the other person responds assertively, that gives you the opportunity to deal with the real underlying issue while maintaining your self-respect.

“Fogging, Negative Assertion and Negative Inquiry”

People often use criticism to get you to behave according to their arbitrary rules and standards. Most people react to criticism with anxiety, denial and defensiveness. If you learn how to cope with criticism, you can begin to separate your behavior from imposed “right” or “wrong” labels. For example, the statement “You’re always tinkering with your car” insinuates that there is something wrong or lazy about working on your car in your free time. Respond by asking, “I don’t understand, what is it about me working on my car that bothers you?” If you receive an answer such as “I’d prefer we visit friends this afternoon,” you have found the crux of the issue.

The verbal coping methods you can use to deal effectively with criticism are fogging, negative inquiry and negative assertion. Instead of reacting to criticism with denials or counterattacks, try fogging, in which you agree only to whatever is true in the statement. Fogging forces you to listen carefully, to respond to what someone says rather than what he or she implies, and to think in terms of probabilities rather than absolutes. This dialogue demonstrates fogging:

Critic: “I see you are dressed in your usual sloppy manner.”
Fogger: “That’s right. I am dressed in my usual way.”
Critic: “Those pants! They look like you stole them from a homeless person.”
Fogger: “They are a bit wrinkled, aren’t they?”
Critic: “And that shirt! Your taste must be all in your mouth.”
Fogger: “True. I don’t have a very good fashion sense.”

Others may criticize you when you make a mistake, but if you modify your ingrained response, you can remove guilt from the equation. To cope with errors, “assertively accept” the negative:

Critic: “You promised to leave the file on my desk before you left on Friday so I could work on it over the weekend, but you forgot!”
Response: “I’m so sorry. That was stupid of me! What will you do now?”
Critic: “Your negligence put me in a tough spot!”
Response: “You’re right! You asked me for the file and I completely forgot.”

Using “negative inquiry” encourages the critic to respond assertively, not manipulatively. Use this verbal tactic to ask for additional information about the criticism. For instance:

Critic: “The shirt you’re wearing isn’t very attractive.”
Response: “What is it about my shirt that makes me look bad?”

“We humans are the most successful, most adaptive, smartest and toughest biological organisms ever to come off nature’s evolutionary drawing board.”

“If we have the same expectations about ourselves as our manipulators do, we surrender to them our dignity and self-respect, the responsibility for governing our own existence, and the control over our own behavior.”

“Behavior compromise worked out between two people is not behavior control.”

“Compromises don’t have to be fair to be useful. All they have to do is work!”
Critic: “Well, it doesn’t fit you very well.”
Response: “What else about me bothers you?”
Critic: “Well, you tend to talk a lot.”
Response: “Let me understand this. You think I talk too much?”
Critic: “Yeah, you talk and talk, and don’t accept what I tell you.”
Response: “It sounds like you’re saying I’m insensitive; is that right?”
Critic: “That’s it. You’re insensitive. But, not now.”

**“Different Types of Relationships”**
The basic verbal skills you use to cope with manipulation don’t change as you handle problems in different relationships, although you can vary the words. Relationships fall into three categories:

1. **“Commercial or formal”** – These relationships are clearly defined, even to the extent of having a written contract, like the relationship between a buyer and a seller.
2. **“Authority”** – One person is in authority, and the other is not.
3. **“Equality”** – Both parties are equal. This kind of relationship has the least formal structure, such as connections among friends, roommates, co-workers or spouses.

Using assertive verbal skills is often easier in commercial relationships because the interactions follow a defined structure. In authority-based relationships, which also provide structure, emphasize finding compromises that build upon the existing interpersonal dynamic. Try to avoid previously established manipulative ways of communicating. Here, Mike converses assertively with his boss, who has been taking advantage of his willingness to fill in at the last moment:

**Boss:** “Mike. Greg is sick and I need you to work his shift tomorrow.”
**Mike:** “I won’t be able to make it tomorrow.”
**Boss:** “Can’t you put it off? You’re leaving me in a bad situation.”
**Mike:** “If I put it off, I’ll feel bad about myself, so I won’t be available tomorrow.”
**Boss:** “Well, that leaves me in a fix.”
**Mike:** “That is a fix, but I’m sure you’ll work something out.”
**Boss:** “That’s all right; it’ll be rough, but I’ll get someone to cover it.”

In interactions between equals, everything is open to discussion. Yet, arbitrary rules frequently interfere with true communication, for instance, between spouses. Often people can clarify their positions by being assertive and reaching logical compromises. In equal, close relationships, including marriage, use assertiveness “with empathy” to express your wishes and concerns without diminishing your spouse’s self-respect. This also will encourage your partner to consider whether he or she has hidden anxieties that are prohibiting a productive dialogue. Thoughtful open communication reassures people that you will not hinder or impede their decision making, even if you may disagree. This leaves room for whatever compromise is possible.

**About the Author**

**Manuel J. Smith**, Ph.D., is a clinical-experimental psychologist and the author of *Yes, I Can Say No*. His work has appeared in numerous professional and scientific publications, including the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* and *Psychology Report*. 