

Stand Up for Yourself!

(Without Stepping on Everyone Else)

By Heidi Smith Luedtke, PhD

A coworker slacks off and you're stuck with extra work, or company's coming and you want more help cleaning the house. What do you do? Many smart, successful women stay silent. But when you grudgingly work late or mutter about your lazy husband, negativity prevails.

What Assertiveness Is and Isn't

Assertive women speak up for their own self-interests. When they're unable or unwilling to grant a request, they say no. When they have a good idea, they share. Assertive women don't let bad feelings fester; they address broken promises and unmet expectations directly.

Assertiveness is not a watered-down version of aggression, says Judith McClure, PhD, author of *Civilized Assertiveness for Women*. It isn't hostile. Women can stand up for themselves without stepping on others or putting them down. It is both respectful and self-respecting.

Making Everyone (Else) Feel Good

As women, we define ourselves in large part by our relationships to others. We're friends, coworkers, daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. From childhood, girls are told they should put others first and do what it takes to keep the peace, says Marjorie Bauman, a counselor and career coach.

Women are expected to be nurturing and compassionate and to value connection more than achievement. As a result, women may worry they'll be labeled aggressive, pushy or arrogant if they stand up for themselves. The risk of rejection can create paralyzing anxiety and apprehension. So they put their own interests aside.

The Price of Passivity

If we don't pursue or protect our own interests, friends and colleagues may ask for loans or favors and expect us to respond cheerfully time after time. The boss may expect we'll sacrifice family time to work extra hours because we haven't said no in the past. And she may overlook you when it's time for pay raises and promotions, cautions Bauman, because your passive approach eclipses the solid skills you have to offer.

A do-nothing approach can destroy your self-respect and the respect of others. Ignoring your own needs can create intense resentment, too. If you often think, "He never asks what I think," or "She never helps me when I need it," you need to speak up.

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Just Say No!

If you respond to almost any request with an automatic "yes," here's help.

- 1. Slow down.** Practice suspended civility, says McClure. Say, "Let me check my schedule and get back to you." Think it through when you aren't under pressure.
- 2. Get the details.** Repeat the request back to ensure you understand. Then clarify exactly what, when and how you're expected to help.
- 3. Check your feelings.** Is this something you'll enjoy? Do you have time for it? Is it required? If not, politely decline.
- 4. Say no.** Say "That won't work for me," "I can't," or "I've made another commitment." And don't apologize. You don't want to sound weak or indecisive.



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Find Your Voice

It's common for women to overshoot and behave aggressively when they stand up for themselves, says Bauman, especially if they've let angry feelings build up. Here's how to speak up assertively.

Set priorities. Make a list of goals and priorities to guide your actions. When a lunch invitation conflicts with your fitness goals, say, "I've made a commitment to exercise at lunchtime, so I'm not able to go with you."

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Listen up. That voice inside is your gut reminding you of what you really want. Perhaps it's telling you to ask the boss for added responsibility or to find out more about a child care provider before you hire her. Don't ignore intuition, act on it.

Be direct. Women often try to soften the impact of their assertive words. If you preface opinions with "I may be wrong, but..." you discount your own wisdom before you share it. Say the truth.

Don't over-justify. You have every right to speak up, pursue opportunities and set boundaries. There's no need to explain your feelings about why you want something.

Be constructive, not emotional. You won't get the results you want if you're anxious or angry, so calm down before speaking up. Then use "I" statements instead of "you" statements so you aren't perceived as blaming or dictatorial, advises Bauman.

When you speak your truth thoughtfully and courteously, you build honest, trusting relationships and you stop aggressive and manipulative people in their tracks, McClure says. Be your own best advocate. And when you see another woman stand up for herself, don't tear her down, cheer her on. We're all in this together. *mk*

Heidi Smith Luedtke, PhD, is a personality psychologist and mom of two.



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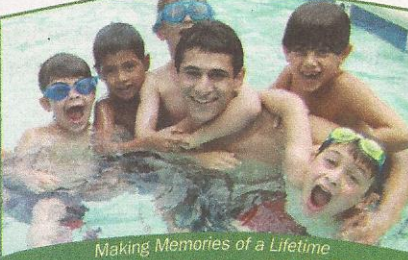
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