

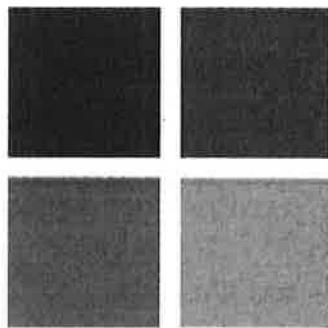
THE ASSERTIVENESS WORKBOOK



How to Express Your Ideas
and Stand Up for Yourself
at Work and in Relationships

Randy J. Paterson, Ph.D.

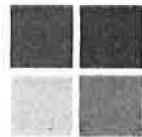
THE ASSERTIVENESS WORKBOOK



How to Express Your Ideas
and Stand Up for Yourself
at Work and in Relationships

Randy J. Paterson, Ph.D.

New Harbinger Publications

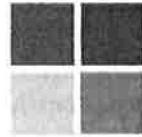


CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
INTRODUCTION BEING THERE	1
PART ONE UNDERSTANDING ASSERTIVENESS	
CHAPTER 1 WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?	11
CHAPTER 2 OVERCOMING THE STRESS BARRIER	29
CHAPTER 3 OVERCOMING THE SOCIAL BARRIER	43
CHAPTER 4 OVERCOMING THE BELIEF BARRIER	53
CHAPTER 5 REALITY CHECK	63
CHAPTER 6 ON THE LAUNCHPAD: PREPARING FOR CHANGE	71
PART TWO BECOMING ASSERTIVE	
CHAPTER 7 BECOMING VISIBLE: NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR	83
CHAPTER 8 BEING PRESENT: GIVING YOUR OPINION	97
CHAPTER 9 TAKING THE GOOD: RECEIVING POSITIVE FEEDBACK	105

CHAPTER 10	GIVING HELPFUL POSITIVE FEEDBACK	113
CHAPTER 11	TAKING THE VALUABLE: RECEIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK	121
CHAPTER 12	CONSTRUCTIVE, NOT CRITICAL: GIVING CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK	137
CHAPTER 13	THE ASSERTIVE "NO"	149
CHAPTER 14	MAKING REQUESTS WITHOUT CONTROLLING OTHERS	159
CHAPTER 15	COUNTDOWN TO CONFRONTATION	169
CHAPTER 16	CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION	181
POSTSCRIPT	BEING YOU	197
	ANNOTATED RESOURCE LIST	199
	ASSERTIVENESS SCORECARDS	203

INTRODUCTION



BEING THERE

Two kinds of people pick up books on assertiveness. Some want to polish their image. They have a face they present to the world, and sometimes it cracks. Sometimes the mask falls off. Sometimes people see through it. They want to learn how to hold the mask more firmly, how to present it more rigidly, how to prevent others from seeing them so easily. They have rejected themselves, and they have decided that they want to preserve the personality (or lack of it) that they display to the world. Often they want to learn how to control others more effectively. How to push others to agree with them, see their way of doing things, do it their way.

Some of the skills in this book may help these people in their quest. But the book isn't written for them. At least, it's not written to help them in the way they want to be helped.

Assertiveness isn't about building a good disguise. It's about developing the courage to take the disguise off. It's designed to help the other group of people. The ones who have already tried wearing a mask and have found they can't breathe very well with it on. They want to go out into the world naked-faced, as themselves, but not defenseless. They want to be themselves in a way that doesn't push others off-stage. In a way that invites the people they meet to be more fully themselves too.

Assertiveness, then, is about *being there*.

Many people in today's society fear conflict and criticism. They believe that in any conflict they would lose and that any criticism would crush them. They feel that they have no right to impose their views—or for that matter, themselves—on the world. They have been trained from childhood to believe that their role is to accept and live up to the standards that other people impose. Being visible, being flawed, holding opinions, or having wishes of their own all leave them open to attack.

Is this you?

The solution is to be invisible. To offer no opinion until others have done so, and then only to agree. To go along with any request. To impose no boundaries or barriers. To prevent yourself from ever saying "no." To give up on directing your own life. To pacify those who might disapprove of you. To hide your ideas, your dreams, your wishes, and your emotions. To dress, act, and live in order to blend into the background and disappear. To exist not so much as a person, but as a mirror for other people: reflecting back *their* ideas, *their* wishes, *their* expectations, *their* hopes, and *their* goals. To reflect and thereby vanish. Anything to keep yourself from really *being there*.

Unfortunately, this solution does not really work. Humans are not meant to be invisible, nor to live as reflections of the lives of others. Extinguishing the self is not an option. It leads to greater fear, more helplessness, sharper resentment, and deeper depression.

Other people see life as little more than a competition. If they are not to become invisible themselves, then others will have to be invisible. There is no choice. Their views must be accepted. Their wishes must be honored. Their way must be everyone's way. And should anyone not give in, the anger will flow. The issue will be forced, and the wishes, hopes, and desires of others will be ignored or trampled. To *be there*, other people (with their inconvenient attitudes and opinions) will have to be absent.

Is this you?

The competitive approach doesn't work either. The anger is never really satisfied. When others give in, it is never joyfully. And they begin drifting away to the exits, leaving the angry person alone to resent the desertion. The effort to control others makes life uncontrollable.

The real solution? To *be there*. Not to be perfect. To expose our flaws, our irrational emotions and opinions, our strange preferences, our incomprehensible dreams, our unaccountable tastes, and our all-too-human selves to others. To *be there*. Not so that others will bow down to us or hide themselves from us, but in a way that invites others to be there as well. A way that acknowledges the right of everyone to be every bit as irrational, flawed, and human as we are.

Assertiveness is all about *being there*.

In this workbook you will learn about many of the basic skills and ideas involved in being more fully present in your world and your life. Many of these skills you already know. Some may be new. Bringing them into your life will take practice and effort.

Ready?

Don't Read This Book

Perhaps you are wondering what good reading this book will do you. Let's end the suspense early. Not much. Perhaps you will learn more about assertiveness. You may recognize assertive strategies in others more readily. You may become more able to classify your own behavior as assertive or otherwise.

And neither your behavior nor your life will change.

Take a minute to think. What are you doing here? Why are you holding this book in your hand? If it is to *understand* more about assertiveness, then by all means read on. And just read. That'll be enough.

But perhaps you are dissatisfied with your way of dealing with people. Perhaps something holds you back from being yourself with others; from expressing your opinions, desires, or expectations; from setting boundaries that you can defend. Or perhaps it is hard for you to tolerate differences in others or to hold back from trying to control them. Maybe you find yourself overwhelmed by fear, anger, frustration, or despair when you have to deal with some of the most important people in your life.

If this sounds more like it, then *don't read this book*. Reading won't be enough. Throughout the book you will find a series of self-assessments, short writing exercises, and practice suggestions. Stop. Find a pen. Do the work. Carry out the practice exercises. Doing so will involve a greater investment on your part, but it will almost certainly generate a much greater return.

If being more assertive is important to you, it will have to be a high priority in your life. Is this the time for it? Are you able—and willing—to spend the time that it may take to change your style? If not, then maybe you should put this book on your "To Read" shelf and wait until you're really ready. You'll get to it. Sooner or later, your life will convince you that you need to be able to stand up for yourself, to *be* yourself, and to do so in a way that invites others to be themselves as well.

Does Anyone Else Want to Work with You?

You may be reading this book as part of an assertiveness training group. If not, don't worry. You will still be able to carry out most of the exercises and suggestions. You may wish, though, to see if anyone wants to work on this material with you. That way you can practice some of the techniques together. The feedback you give each other can be invaluable. It's always easier to learn these skills in practice sessions before you try them out in real life. Fake insults, for example, are a lot easier to handle than the real thing.

If you don't know anyone who wants to work on their own assertiveness, maybe you know someone who would still be willing to help you out with the exercises. Maybe asking them will be your first assignment for yourself. You may be surprised how agreeable they'd be. After all, you'll be practicing with them anyway—whether they know it or not.

Using Yourself as a Partner

One of the best sources of feedback you can have is yourself. Whether or not you are working with someone else, recruit *yourself* as a partner. Carry out some of the exercises in front of a mirror. Yes, that includes talking to yourself as though you were speaking to someone else. Although it's hard to be objective with ourselves, mirror practice can be a helpful way of evaluating how you come across. As you watch your performance, try to forget that you are looking at yourself. Imagine that it's someone else talking to you. How would you react?

Tape recorders and video cameras can also be immensely helpful. You can record your practice sessions and play them back. Then you can concentrate on

evaluating your style. This is easier than trying to express yourself and evaluate your performance at the same time.

Assertiveness Scorecards

Luckily, you don't have to wait for the exercises in this workbook to practice assertiveness. Difficult interactions happen to most of us fairly often. You can take advantage of these situations by recording what happened and how you handled it and then working out a more assertive alternative. Coming up with what you would *like* to have done may take some time when you're getting started. But gradually you'll speed up. Eventually you will find that you come up with the assertive response right there, on the spot.

At the back of the workbook (see page 206), you will find a set of pages entitled "Assertiveness Scorecards." You have our permission to photocopy these pages for your own use. In fact, we recommend that you run off twenty or more copies for yourself. If anyone objects because they think you are violating our copyright, just show them this page—or come up with something suitably assertive of your own.

Then get to work. Use one form for each challenging interaction you have, *starting now*. Record your behavior in the situation and classify it as assertive, passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive (using the definitions you will find in chapter 1). If it was other than assertive, come up with an alternative response that might have worked better.

Here's an example:

Date: March 12 Time: 3 pm Place: My office

Person/Situation: Paul, my department head, asked me to hire his nephew for the summer replacement position, despite the fact that we need someone with experience.

Your Response: Couldn't think of what to say. Told him I'd think about it, then thanked him for the suggestion!

Assertive, Passive, Aggressive, or P/A? Passive.

How did it turn out? He expects me to hire the guy.

Feelings Afterward: Anger at myself. Anger at Paul for trying to manipulate me.

Alternative Response: Paul, we need someone in that position who knows the business. I've been planning to hire a student from the last year of the community college program. Your nephew is welcome to apply, but I'm not willing to put him at the head of the list unless he has the

As you use these forms you will find that you gradually become better and better at coming up with assertive responses. And as you read this workbook you will be able to apply the concepts discussed to your own life. Eventually the more effective responses will occur to you right in the situation, and you will be able to put them into practice.

Notice what you will have done. You will have made unwelcome situations welcome. They are no longer threats or disappointments. They are opportunities.

A Caution about Violent Relationships

Some people find themselves in violent relationships—sometimes with family members, sometimes with others. Many of these people believe that assertiveness training might help them to deal with the violence of others or reduce the temptation to engage in violence themselves. They may be right. But these problems deserve more specialized attention than a workbook such as this one can provide.

If violence plays a part in any of your relationships, you are urged not to regard this book as the solution. Instead, please address these issues with a counselor. If you are reading this manual as part of an assertiveness training group, please let your leader know that you have this additional concern.

One reason that *The Assertiveness Workbook* may be inappropriate for violent relationships is that you will be encouraged to deal with troublesome situations directly and assertively as you feel ready for them. Assertive strategies are designed to help you maintain control over your own life while letting go of attempting to control others. If someone close to you is violent, they may be threatened by your efforts to take back control over your life. Unless this is dealt with carefully, some violence on their part may follow.

If you have a history of violence yourself, then trying to practice being assertive with others may put you in “trigger situations” that cause you to escalate into violence without meaning to do so. Specialized help will be needed to reduce this risk. Please seek help to deal with this issue.

Organization of This Book

Which parts of this workbook should you use? Probably all of it. Most people will find that at least part of each chapter applies to their own situation. There may be certain areas, however, in which you have particular difficulty. You will want to pay special attention to the chapters on those topics.

Part One

Entitled “Understanding Assertiveness,” Part One covers most of the concepts involved in being assertive. Chapter 1 defines the four primary communication styles: assertive, passive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive. Because these definitions form the keystone of everything that follows, you should be

sure to read this chapter. It includes exercises designed to help you determine which of the styles you use the most and which situations you find most difficult. It also presents reasons why the assertive style usually works better than the alternatives.

If it's true that assertiveness leads to better outcomes in most situations, why isn't everyone assertive all the time? Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Being assertive requires 1) that you have some very specific skills and 2) that you use these skills when it is appropriate to do so. Even when you have the right skills, something may hold you back. Chapters 2 through 4 describe the barriers to assertive behavior.

Chapter 2 reviews the impact of stress on communication and how the stress response actually pulls us away from using the assertive style. Suggestions are provided on how to reduce stress in your life and overcome stress-related barriers to effective communication.

Chapter 3 discusses how the expectations of others can make it more difficult for us to be assertive. Over the years you may have unintentionally led others to expect nonassertive behavior from you, and they may react less favorably than you might think to the changes you want to make. Chapter 3 also considers the effect of your gender on others' expectations.

In chapter 4 you are invited to consider your own belief system and how it might impose barriers to assertiveness. Becoming aware of self-defeating beliefs is an essential step toward discarding them. You might never behave assertively until you have surmounted the belief barrier.

Chapter 5 suggests a series of positive, supportive beliefs for you to consider. These beliefs are associated with assertive action and can assist in guiding your decisions about the way that you communicate.

Once you have dealt with the barriers to assertive behavior, you are ready to begin practicing the skills involved. But first, chapter 6 provides a checklist of some last-minute concepts, tips, and guiding principles to take with you on the journey.

Part Two

Part Two is entitled "Becoming Assertive" and focuses on the actual skills used in assertive communication. Each chapter in this section includes one or more practical exercises designed to help you to master the skills. It will be important for you to make these exercises a priority if you really want to develop your ability to communicate in an assertive way.

Nonverbal communication tells others about our expectations, attitudes, and level of confidence. Even the best assertive communication can be undermined by a poor nonverbal style. Chapter 7 reviews the various elements of nonverbal behavior and compares the assertive, passive, and aggressive styles (the passive-aggressive style typically mimics passive nonverbal behavior). A series of exercises provides strategies for honing an assertive nonverbal style.

Are you able to express your opinion effectively while leaving room for others to think differently? This essential relationship skill lies at the heart of the concept of being present with others and is discussed in chapter 8.

Chapters 9 through 12 consider the issues of providing and receiving feedback in relationships. Chapter 9 opens the topic by considering a skill that

seems simple but is a surprisingly frequent source of difficulty: receiving compliments. Some of the most common traps are covered, along with the distorted thinking underlying them.

Next, we consider the giving of positive feedback. Most people are stingier with positive feedback than they need to be, and this reluctance is motivated by a variety of fears. Chapter 10 challenges these ideas and provides specific recommendations for giving positive feedback that is useful to the person receiving it.

In chapter 11 the value of negative feedback is discussed, along with the difficulty of gleaning useful information from the criticism we receive. Suggestions are made for defusing the anger that frequently accompanies negative feedback, as well as for narrowing criticism to the real issue at hand.

Chapter 12 covers behavior that many people avoid and that most others cannot perform effectively: giving negative (or constructive) feedback. Strategies are given for providing such feedback in a way that is useful and not hurtful. The accompanying practice exercises are designed to increase your comfort with these situations.

Who's in charge of your life? Chapter 13 argues that if you aren't able to say "no" then it certainly isn't you. The ability to refuse unreasonable requests is an essential skill of self-determination. This chapter considers the fears that hold people back and provides a set of skills involved in setting and maintaining personal boundaries.

Chapter 14 puts the shoe on the other foot by discussing strategies for making requests of others. Some people avoid making requests altogether, while others make demands rather than requests. A structured four-step strategy for phrasing requests is presented, plus a set of exercises designed to increase your confidence and comfort in translating your plans into action.

All of the skills in the book come into play when you find yourself in difficult conflict-laden situations. The final two chapters deal with confrontation. Chapter 15 argues that confrontation is an essential though sometimes painful aspect of almost any close relationship and that adequate preparation on your part can make confrontations go much more smoothly. It provides a ten-step preparation strategy that considers issues such as defining the real problem, envisioning your goal, assessing your own responsibilities, and choosing your time and setting. Chapter 16 deals with the confrontation itself and presents fifteen strategies for keeping the discussion on topic and moving toward a solution.

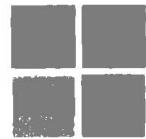
Throughout, remember that this is a workbook. You will find self-assessments, exercises, practice session advice, and so on. These are essential elements in learning to be more assertive. So let's get started. Based on the description of the book given above, which chapters do you think will be the most critical for you to work on?

List the chapters here:

Don't use this as a cue to ignore the remaining chapters, however. Each chapter builds on the one before it, so you will probably want to read them all. Take special care with the chapters you have identified. Reread them as necessary and ensure that you carry out the associated practice exercises.

Throughout your reading of the book, continue to fill out Assertiveness Scorecards for the difficult exchanges you experience. As time passes, you may begin to find that these situations become easier and easier to handle.

PART ONE



UNDERSTANDING ASSERTIVENESS

CHAPTER 1



WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?

Human beings are social animals. We constantly communicate with each other. Sometimes to ask directions to the nearest grocery store; sometimes to ask for a date; sometimes to communicate displeasure; sometimes to offer a compliment; sometimes to resolve disputes; sometimes to turn down requests; sometimes to accept.

Assertiveness is a style of communication that can be used in all of these situations. But it is only one of four such styles. The other three are the *passive* style, the *aggressive* style, and the *passive-aggressive* style.

Each of these styles is used for a variety of reasons. In most situations, the assertive style is the most effective of the four. Unfortunately, most people do not use the assertive style as often as they could. As a result, their interactions with other people are frustrating and unsatisfying.

Let's take a look at each of the styles in turn. As you read them over, you may find yourself trying to see which description fits you the best. This can be useful. Most people use one of the styles more than the others. But remember that the styles are types of *communication*, not types of *people*. All of us use each of the four styles at least some of the time. Try to think of the times that you have used each one.

The Passive Style

Nadia looked exhausted. She had been referred to a psychologist for symptoms of anxiety and depression. Both were clearly visible on her face. Distressed people sometimes have a convincing mask of confidence that they can present to the world, hiding what they are experiencing. If Nadia had ever had such a mask, it was cracking badly.

She described her life. She held a full-time job as a clerk in a small accounting firm and lived in a suburb with her husband and son. Her mother, who lived across town, was healthy, but she depended on Nadia for everything: drives to appointments, decisions about purchases, what to wear, yard work, chores about the house, everything. Nadia's sisters helped very little and indeed were cut off from her. They criticized her for helping their mother so much and openly accused her of angling for a larger inheritance.

Nadia's home was no retreat from the stress of the world. Her husband's only contribution was to pick up the newspaper—so that he could read it. She described her eleven-year-old son as the joy of her life but lamented the fact that her other duties meant she could not care for him as well as he seemed to need. There was his laundry to do, his bed to make, his room to tidy, his favorite meals to cook, and when she failed to do things exactly right, he pouted and became disappointed with her. She could see why. After all, wasn't it a mother's duty to take proper care of her son?

Work was stressful. She was the only clerical assistant in the firm and could barely keep ahead of the tide of work and tasks constantly coming her way. She harbored a fearful knowledge of her own incompetence. She was thankful that her employers hadn't yet caught on to the fact that she was struggling. Each time she completed a job they would give her two more. She knew that someday soon she would simply be incapable of getting it all done and they would be shocked to find the imposter in their midst. On top of everything, they never seemed to think to give her a raise. She guessed that she didn't deserve one.

At one point, Nadia began to weep with anxiety and frustration, saying that she felt her life was unmanageable. She wanted to be convinced otherwise, but she was right: things really were as bad as she described. It was no wonder she felt anxious and depressed. She had become a servant to the world. She did nothing that was just for her and had stopped living her own life so long ago that she no longer knew what she might want to do even if she could find the time to do it. Although she accomplished prodigious amounts of work and had developed innumerable skills in the process, she could take pride in none of it, because she secretly felt herself to be a failure and an imposter.

Nadia is an excellent example of someone who overuses the passive style. Many of her problems were situational: a stressful life at work, demanding relations, an unsatisfying marriage, a difficult child. Her reaction to these stressors, however, was to deny her frustration, take personal responsibility for all of the problems, and hope that things would get better. Instead, her behavior appeared to be making things worse.

The passive style is designed to avoid conflict at all costs. We do this by:

- Giving in to unreasonable demands from others.

"The overnight shift? The day after my wedding? Um, well, sure, OK. No, no trouble at all."

- Going along with the crowd.

"Bob's Ptomaine Shack for dinner? Oh, uh, yeah, that sounds like a great place!"

- Not offering your opinion until others have offered theirs.

"My opinion on capital punishment . . . well, what do you think? For jaywalkers? Oh, well, yes, I'd go along with that."

- Never criticizing or giving negative feedback.

"I got your (two-sentence) budget report yesterday. No, the crayon was just fine. No problem at all."

- Never doing or saying anything that might attract comment or disapproval.

"No one will notice me if I wear these pants. Perfect. I'll buy them."

The result of the passive style: We give control over our lives to other people—even when we don't want to do so.

In wolf packs there is an established order of dominance between the animals. When two wolves meet, the less dominant one will behave as though to say, *"Yes, you are more important than I am. I submit to you. Don't attack me."* When we use the passive style we behave in much the same way. Like submissive wolves, we may avoid eye contact, appear nervous, look downward, and make ourselves small. We can think of the passive style as a posture of submission to others.

Calling this style "passive" can be misleading. It suggests that the person just sits around saying nothing. Sometimes this is exactly what happens. But, like Nadia, a person using a passive style is often *more* active than anyone else: scurrying around, working twice as hard as others, explaining his or her actions, trying desperately to gain approval, and striving to solve everyone else's problems.

All of us can think of certain situations in which we would willingly hand the lead over to others. The first time we go mountain climbing we might be quite happy to have an expert give us orders. In fact, it would be alarming to have the climbing instructor ask *us* what to do. In some circumstances, it is just fine to take a secondary or submissive position. We can *choose* to use a less assertive style.

Beliefs That Hold You Back

We always have the choice of whether or not to be passive. But often we are not aware of making the choice. Instead, when we behave passively, we often feel helpless, as though we are not in charge of our own lives. This is because passive behavior often results from a belief that we are not *allowed* to behave any other way. Here are some examples of beliefs that may hold you back:

- "Other people are more important than I am."
- "Other people are entitled to have control over their lives. I'm not."
- "They can do things effectively. I can't."
- "My role in life is to be the servant."

Passive Emotions

There are a lot of emotions that support the passive style. For example:

- A profound fear of being rejected. If you don't do everything others want, will they still like you?

- Helplessness and frustration at the lack of control over your life. Psychologist Martin Seligman (1991) argues that a sense of helplessness is a primary risk factor for the development of depression. People who rely exclusively on the passive style really *are* helpless, because they cannot override the demands of others. As a result, the helplessness may escalate into discouragement, a sense of futility, or even all-out depression.
- Resentment at all of the demands being made on you. If you find yourself thinking that many of your friends are manipulative "users," perhaps it is really you who created the situation by adopting a passive style that actually *encourages* others to use you.

How Does the Passive Style Develop?

There are a lot of reasons why people adopt a mainly passive style.

- Some people grow up in extremely considerate families. "*Oh, don't ask Jane to do that; she's busy enough already.*" As a result, they never get any practice saying "*no*."
- Some children are taught to be perfectly obedient. Although obedience to others may be useful during childhood, we all need to rethink this style when we become adults.
- In some families, children's requests, needs, or boundaries are never respected. Why would you ever become assertive if it never works?
- In some families, assertiveness unfortunately leads to violence. "*How dare you say 'no' to me! I'll show you!*"
- Some people just never see assertiveness in action. All they see as they grow up is aggression or passivity. And if you've never seen it, it's hard to imagine what assertiveness would be like.

Nadia, it turned out, had a number of these influences. She grew up in a family with a tyrannical father and a passive mother. Her father demanded absolute obedience and her mother modeled it. She rarely saw assertiveness in action. As a child, whenever Nadia had tried to assert her independence, she had been punished for it. As the eldest daughter, she was expected to care for her younger sisters.

The passive style can be useful at times. As the only option, however, it generally leads to misery.

The Aggressive Style

"No offense, but you just don't understand business," Mike said.

Mike was taking exception to the suggestion that his aggressiveness was doing more harm than good in his life. Mike ran a car dealership and had about thirty employees. He dressed well and had a look of confident success about him. What he couldn't disguise was the fact that he was in a psychologist's office, sent there by an ultimatum from his wife. She was threatening to leave him.

Mike was dissatisfied with his life but felt that his problems were due to circumstance. Business was tight, suppliers were pushy and incompetent, and it was impossible to find employees who didn't need a fire lit under them now and then. As a result, Mike frequently found himself losing his temper at work. He would order his employees around, telling them that they didn't know their jobs. He would shout himself hoarse at least twice a day dealing with suppliers over the phone. And twice recently, he'd angrily ordered important customers out of his office. His staff seemed secretive, turnover was high, and he was beginning to feel the business slipping away from him.

As Mike put it, he had a hard time leaving work at work. At home he behaved in the same angry, demanding manner with his wife and children. Although never physically abusive, he had come perilously close on several occasions. When he wasn't yelling, his anger came out in other ways. He'd impose a "communication embargo" on one or another family member, flatly refusing to speak to them for days on end. He was rigid and authoritarian on disciplinary matters with the children. He was insulting and definitive whenever he expressed his own views, and his wife stated that he was sarcastic and dismissive of her opinions.

As he spoke about his life, Mike began to reveal his fears. He knew that his family was beginning to work around him, communicating behind his back as a way of avoiding his anger. He clearly loved his wife and children but was acutely aware of the dangers of the world. If he didn't protect them, who would? He felt deep discomfort when he saw any member of the family doing, saying, or even thinking anything that he did not agree with. It felt like a loss of control. And if he didn't have control, what might happen?

The situation seemed unlikely to continue, however. If business didn't start going better, the company would go under. If he didn't change his style, he was going to lose his family, too.

Mike overused the aggressive style. Similar to most people with this manner, he saw his behavior as the product of his situation—an effect. He was less aware that his behavior was also a cause; specifically, the cause of many of his problems. Although his style made him look frightening and powerful, it originated, as aggression almost always does, in fear. Mike had a profound fear of what would happen if he was not in control of everyone around him. The aggression was designed to assert control. But as often happens, it was having the effect of causing control to slip away from him.

The aggressive style is the flip side of the passive style. Instead of submitting to others, we try to get others to submit to us. It is important for us to win, regardless of the cost to other people. Our aim is to control the behavior of others through intimidation. Their opinions, boundaries, goals, and requests are stupid or meaningless—barriers to be overcome. We are dominant wolves, bending others to our will.

The funny thing is that aggressive people usually don't feel all that dominant. Instead, they often feel helpless, abused, and the subject of unreasonable and excessive demands. Aggression is almost always the result of feeling threatened. Responding with anger seems perfectly justified.

The Advantages of Aggression

Aggressive behavior is usually ineffective for achieving one's goals in the long run. But in the short term, there are some advantages to the aggressive style:

- Intimidating others into doing what you want *may* get things done for a while (though eventually people will resent you, have little incentive to do things well, and feel little affection or loyalty toward you).
- If others fear you, they may make fewer demands (though they will also make fewer pleasant invitations—and if you were more assertive, you could deal with their unpleasant demands confidently).
- Being aggressive can make you feel powerful (though it makes others feel *worse* and the feeling of power lasts only for a short time, usually followed by more frustration and helplessness).
- Aggression can seem like a good way of getting even for past wrongs done to you (though it usually starts an unpleasant exchange that leaves neither person feeling “even”; and, chances are, you will wind up worse off than you were before).
- Sometimes it feels like you need to blow off steam (though the research suggests that “blowing off steam” makes you *more* angry—not less—in the long run).

After behaving aggressively, the feeling of power and justification usually fades quickly. In its place come guilt for hurting the feelings of others, shame at not being able to deal with situations and people more rationally, and reduced self-esteem. Sometimes these consequences are covered over by long and angry self-justifications for the behavior (“*they really deserved it, because . . .*”). But the situation has usually been made worse, not better. The disagreement between you and the other person is still there, and now they resent you for behaving badly toward them.

Why Do People Act Aggressively?

How does the aggressive style develop? Here are just a few possibilities:

- Having an aggressive parent who serves as a model for you.
“I guess that’s the way to act if you want something.”
- Low self-esteem that causes you to feel threatened by minor difficulties.
“I can’t handle this situation unless I intimidate the other person into silence.”
- Initial experiences of obtaining what you want through aggression.
“Hey, it worked with Mom—I’ve gotta try this more often!”
- Failing to see the negative consequences of aggression.
“I wonder why she’s been so emotionally distant ever since I convinced her to see my way? Maybe it’s time I got angry with her again.”

Mike had grown up in a family somewhat like Nadia’s: with an aggressive father and a passive mother. He had borne the brunt of his father’s anger and had responded by behaving in much the same way with others. Around his father he felt small and powerless. He was determined to avoid feeling that way with anyone else. He would feel anxious whenever anyone had any kind

of power over him, and he would defend himself with rage. Suppliers, employees, and family members all had the potential to affect him, and so they each were potential targets for his aggression.

The Passive-Aggressive Style

"Damn, I forgot them again," said Alan.

Like the week before, Alan had forgotten to bring in the questionnaires he'd been given two weeks previously and that he'd said he had filled out. No matter. The questionnaires weren't essential, and a picture was beginning to emerge without them.

It was clear that Alan was depressed. What was also clear was that Alan experienced a profound fear of others, which he could acknowledge—and considerable anger, which he couldn't.

An unassuming man in his late forties, Alan worked in the public sector as a civil servant. He hated working for the government and dwelt on the office politics that swept through his department on every issue from promotions and important policy matters to who got the corner cubicles near the windows. As he discussed the office atmosphere with his psychotherapist, it became clear that he was intensely caught up in the politics himself. At times he would smile as he reported some background maneuvering he had done that had been successful.

Alan was intensely sarcastic about the managers of the department. When asked whether he had ever raised any of his issues with them, he said that he hadn't. It was no use, for one thing, and he became tongue-tied and incoherent, for another. It was better, he said, to work "behind the scenes." Some tasks could safely be ignored. Others could be done in such a way that you wouldn't be asked to do them again. And you could always relieve your frustration by talking with your coworkers about the person giving you grief.

His strategizing had not seemed to work as well as he'd wished, however. Alan had repeatedly been passed over for promotion, despite knowing more about the organization than anyone else. Though he was prized for his inside knowledge by some of his coworkers, he was emotionally close to none of them and held a lingering resentment toward those who slighted him.

His private life was also unsatisfactory. He'd remained single since getting a divorce in his late twenties. He was profoundly lonely but feared rejection. He knew one of his best traits was his wickedly funny sense of humor, but he also knew that he sometimes used it to keep people at arm's length. His friendships didn't seem to last.

Although he denied being a particularly angry person, Alan did admit to being disappointed by others and to feeling resentful about some of the things that had happened to him. He could never bring himself to express his views honestly to the people involved, however. What if they got angry? What if they retaliated? No, it was better to keep a lid on his frustrations.

Alan was a master of the passive-aggressive style. He experienced intense anger but had difficulty acknowledging it even to himself. Instead, anger became "disappointment" or "frustration." He was intensely fearful of the consequences of stating his point of view directly. As a result, he seldom declined unwelcome projects or spoke openly about his workload. Instead, he would adopt an indirect strategy that would get him his way without necessitating an open and candid discussion. This strategy enabled him to attack others without ever having to take responsibility for his behavior.

As the name suggests, the passive-aggressive style combines elements of both the passive and the aggressive styles. The anger of the aggressive style and the fear of the passive style both have an influence. The anger makes you want to "get" the other person, but the fear holds you back from doing it directly. When we are passive-aggressive we disguise our aggression so that we can avoid taking responsibility for it.

Consider an example. Your employer has asked for a report by noon Friday, despite the fact that you are already overloaded with work. Rather than yelling at her (aggressive), staying all night to finish it (passive), or explaining the situation (assertive), you simply "forget" to do the report. You get your way, frustrate the boss, and remain able to deny responsibility for your actions (after all, *anyone* can forget things now and then).

Here are some more examples of passive-aggressive behavior:

- Undermining coworkers by bad-mouthing them to the boss.
- "Accidentally" dropping a can of paint all over the basement floor.
- Not being able to find time to do the favor you promised.
- Routinely showing up late for appointments, always with an excuse in hand.
- Developing a "headache" just when you were supposed to go to your spouse's office party.
- Doing a household chore badly enough that someone else takes over.

In all cases you get your own way, but you have a plausible excuse that allows you to escape taking responsibility for your actions. You manage to avoid being confronted by others who are affected. If they try to confront you, you can always deny any intent ("No, I really wanted to be on time, but the bus was late").

Not every mistake, missed appointment, or late arrival is passive-aggressive. Some people really are busy, sometimes we really do forget, and some jobs really are unexpectedly difficult. The question is whether at some level we *intended* the bad outcome to happen.

This can be hard to figure out. We may think our intentions were honorable. But was there a hint of satisfaction when things went wrong? Do we *routinely* do the same things, even though they always turn out awkwardly for someone else? Are we almost *always* late? Do we *repeatedly* take on projects that we should know we will never complete? If so, we may be using a passive-aggressive style without knowing it.

The passive-aggressive style is based on a misperception: the idea that there are no consequences of deniable aggression. But there are. Eventually others begin to see us as unreliable, irresponsible, disorganized, or inconsiderate. Although they may never be able to point to specific examples, their general opinion of us will decline. In Alan's case, he began to get passed over for promotion.

The emotional consequences combine the worst of both the passive and aggressive styles. Self-esteem drops. Anxiety builds because we never know when someone will see through our passivity and confront us. We feel that we

are not in control of our own lives. And shame and guilt can build up from constantly letting others down.

The Origin of the Passive-Aggressive Style

Where does the passive-aggressive style come from? Usually the person who overuses this style has a history that includes elements of both the passive and the aggressive styles. They experience significant anger and a desire for control, but they fear the consequences of expressing themselves directly. Openly assertive or aggressive behavior may have been punished in the past. There may also be a desire for rescue. "*If I behave helplessly enough, surely someone will come and help me.*"

Alan was the youngest in a large family. He got the attention of his parents and his older siblings, some of whom faintly resented his status as the baby and, therefore, star of the family show. He learned early that if he ever got into trouble someone would help him out or take over. This encouraged him to look more helpless than he really was. If others annoyed him, he would go behind their backs to get them into trouble or get his own way. His style served him well as a child. When he reached adulthood, however, this style turned out to be less effective.

The Assertive Style

None of the styles above is very satisfying. All have negative effects on our relationships. None involve an open and honest exchange in which everyone's wishes and desires are respected. Surely there is some way for us to be in a relationship without denying either others or ourselves. This is the goal of the assertive style.

Assertiveness is not a strategy for getting your own way. Instead, it recognizes that you are in charge of your own behavior and that *you* decide what you will and will not do. Similarly, the assertive style involves recognizing that other people are in charge of *their* own behavior and does not attempt to take that control from them. When we behave assertively, we are able to acknowledge our own thoughts and wishes honestly, without the expectation that others will automatically give in to us. We express respect for the feelings and opinions of others without necessarily adopting their opinions or doing what they expect or demand.

This does not mean that we become inconsiderate of the wishes of others. We listen to their wishes and expectations, then we decide whether or not to go along with them. We might choose to do so even if we would prefer to do something else. But it is *our* choice. Whenever we go along with others it is our decision to do so anyway. But we can often feel helpless because we forget that we are under our own control.

If we are being assertive we may also express our preferences for the behavior of others. We might assertively request that someone speak to us in a kinder way, or do a favor for us, or complete a task that they have undertaken. But we will acknowledge that whether they do any of these things is up to them—as indeed it is.

Assertiveness skills can be difficult to learn. Many of us grow up without learning to use them effectively. As well, assertiveness sometimes goes against our temptations. Sometimes we want to push other people to do our bidding. Sometimes we are desperately afraid of conflict. Assertiveness may mean holding ourselves back from our automatic ways of doing things. It doesn't come easily.

And yet assertiveness offers many benefits:

- It allows us to relate to others with less conflict, anxiety, and resentment.
- It allows us to be relaxed around others, because we know that we will be able to handle most situations reasonably well.
- It helps us to focus on the present situation, rather than allowing our communication to be contaminated by old resentments from the past ("This is just like the time you . . .") or unrealistic fears about the future ("I can't set a precedent by giving in . . ." "What if she takes this to mean . . .").
- It allows us to retain our self-respect without trampling that of others. Although it allows others to think whatever they want to think about us, it tends to build their respect for us as well.
- It increases self-confidence by reducing our attempts to live up to the standards of others and by reducing the need for approval.
- It acknowledges the right of other people to live their lives, with the result that they feel less resentment toward us for trying to control them.
- It gives us control over our own lives and, by reducing helplessness, assertiveness may reduce depression.
- It is the only strategy that really allows us and others to fully *be* in the relationship.

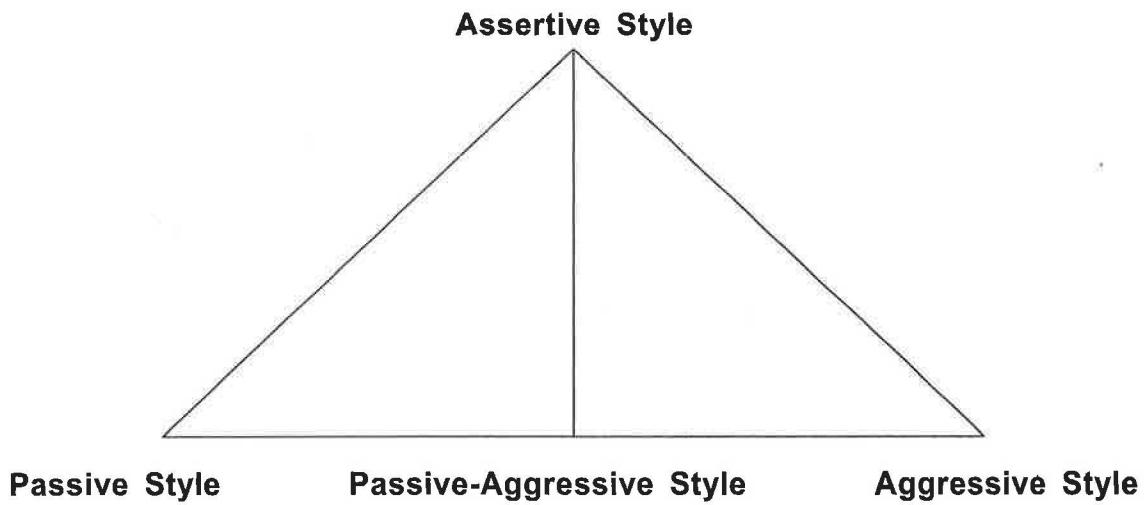
That's a fairly brief description of the assertive style, isn't it? Shouldn't it be spelled out a little more clearly? Well, yes. That's the topic of the rest of the book.

How Do the Styles Connect?

Some people think of assertiveness as a middle ground between passivity and aggressiveness. That is, some believe that assertiveness is more aggressive than the passive style but more passive than the aggressive style.

This leads some people to worry that they will "overshoot" when they try to become more assertive. Maybe they will become too aggressive (if they used to be too passive) or too passive (if they used to be aggressive). It also leaves us wondering where the passive-aggressive style fits in. Here's a better way of looking at it:

In this diagram the passive-aggressive style is shown as a combination of the passive style and the aggressive style. The assertive style is elevated above all



of the rest to reflect the fact that it usually is the most effective. The lines show that the assertive style is distinct but related to all the others.

One More Style: The Alternator

"Sometimes I'm passive. Sometimes I'm aggressive. Does that make me passive-aggressive?"

Some people notice that they alternate between the passive and aggressive styles. Most of the time, they keep their opinions to themselves and behave passively. Then, every so often they explode with aggression. This is normal to an extent. Most of us use all of the styles at least some of the time. But some people find that they swing from passive to aggressive with some regularity. What's the problem here?

People who behave in this alternating style are *not* being passive-aggressive. The passive-aggressive style involves being both passive and aggressive *at the same time*. For example, being late means that you simultaneously inconvenience the other person (aggressive) while avoiding responsibility for your actions (passive).

The main problem for people who swing from the passive to the aggressive style is usually that they are too passive. They behave passively and they get frustrated. This is the normal result of being too passive. Eventually the frustration builds up until they cannot stand it anymore. The straw breaks the camel's back, so to speak, and then they explode. They have a huge aggressive outburst that looks like a temper tantrum. Then they go back to being passive—until the next time. People start to view those who act in this manner as ticking time bombs.

The solution for people who alternate is the same as for those who overuse each of the other styles: learn better assertiveness skills. If these individuals became more assertive, they would feel less frustration and helplessness. The pressure would not build up in the same way and they would not reach the point of exploding. Of course, a little stress management and anger control training wouldn't hurt either.

Checkpoint: Where Are You?

Again, most people use all of the styles. You are *already* assertive. And aggressive. And passive. And passive-aggressive. But you may be using one of the styles much more than the others. Which one?

To give you an idea, consult the table on the next page. There are four columns: one for each of the styles. There are five rows. These represent the behavior, nonverbal style, beliefs, emotions, and goals associated with each style.

In each row place a checkmark in the column that describes your usual style the best. When you are done, look to see which column has the most checkmarks. Although this is not a formal psychological assessment, there is a good chance that the style with the most checkmarks is the one you use most often.

Which Category Received the Most Checkmarks?

- Passive.** Better assertiveness skills may be exactly what you need. It will be a good idea for you to pay special attention to chapters 2 through 5, which explore some of the barriers to assertive behavior. You probably have some negative beliefs about assertiveness that may be holding you back.
- Aggressive.** This workbook may be very helpful for you. The material on tolerating differences and allowing others to control their own behavior (chapters 4, 5, and 14) may be particularly important. Pay special attention to the material on anger (particularly chapter 2).
- Passive-Aggressive.** You may be able to pursue your needs and interests, but you have some difficulty being open about it. This difficulty may stem from a fear of conflict. The material on giving your opinion openly (chapter 8), saying "no" (chapter 13), and handling confrontations (chapters 15 and 16) may be particularly valuable for you.
- Assertive.** Excellent. If the exercise is accurate, you may already be using your assertiveness skills much of the time. We can all learn more, however. As you go through the workbook, try to identify the skills that still give you trouble. Focus your efforts on these areas.

Three Journeys toward Assertiveness

Let's take a look back at the three case histories that began the sections on the passive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive styles. Each of these people made a personal commitment to learn better assertiveness skills. None found the task easy. Each found it valuable. If you saw parts of yourself in their histories, perhaps you will see parts of your future in their journeys.

	Passive	Aggressive	Passive-Aggressive	Assertive
Behavior	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep quiet. Don't say what you feel, need, or want. Put yourself down frequently. Apologize when you express yourself. Deny that you disagree with others or feel differently.	<input type="checkbox"/> Express your feelings and wants as though any other view is unreasonable or stupid. Dismiss, ignore, or insult the needs, wants, and opinions of others.	<input type="checkbox"/> Failure to meet the expectations of others through "deniable" means: forgetting, being delayed, and so on. Deny personal responsibility for your actions.	<input type="checkbox"/> Express your needs, wants, and feelings directly and honestly. Don't assume you are correct or that everyone will feel the same way. Allow others to hold other views without dismissing or insulting them.
Nonverbal	<input type="checkbox"/> Make yourself small. Look down, hunch your shoulders, avoid eye contact. Speak softly.	<input type="checkbox"/> Make yourself large and threatening. Eye contact is fixed and penetrating. Voice is loud, perhaps shouting.	<input type="checkbox"/> Usually mimics the passive style.	<input type="checkbox"/> Body is relaxed, movements are casual. Eye contact is frequent, but not glaring.
Beliefs	<input type="checkbox"/> Others' needs are more important than yours. They have rights; you don't. Their contributions are valuable. Yours are worthless.	<input type="checkbox"/> Your needs are more important and more justified than theirs. You have rights, they don't. Your contributions are valuable. Theirs are silly, wrong, or worthless.	<input type="checkbox"/> You are entitled to get your own way, even after making commitments to others. You are not responsible for your actions.	<input type="checkbox"/> Your needs and those of others are equally important. You have equal rights to express yourselves. You both have something valuable to contribute. You are responsible for your behavior.
Emotions	<input type="checkbox"/> Fear of rejection. Helplessness, frustration, and anger. Resentment toward others who "use" you. Reduced self-respect.	<input type="checkbox"/> Angry or powerful at the time, and victorious when you win. Afterward: remorse, guilt, or self-hatred for hurting others.	<input type="checkbox"/> Fear that you would be rejected if you were more assertive. Resentment at the demands of others. Fear of being confronted.	<input type="checkbox"/> You feel positive about yourself and the way you treat others. Self-esteem rises.
Goals	<input type="checkbox"/> Avoid conflict. Please others at any expense to yourself. Give others control over you.	<input type="checkbox"/> Win at any expense to others. Gain control over them.	<input type="checkbox"/> Get your own way without having to take responsibility.	<input type="checkbox"/> Both you and others keep your self-respect. Express yourself without having to win all the time. No one controls anyone else.

Nadia's Story—From Passive to Assertive

Nadia believed that the problems she faced were in the world around her. Her family and work were simply too demanding. To the extent that she saw herself as the problem, it was only that she was inadequate. She felt she always had been.

The idea that her communication style might be the cause of some of her life's distressing situations was a new one. And yet, when she reviewed each of the communication styles, she had little trouble identifying the one she used the most: the passive style. For a time, Nadia teetered on the edge of using this revelation as yet another way to undermine her own self-esteem. "Not only do I have all these problems, but I'm at fault for creating them!"

Then Nadia began to recognize where the style had come from. As the eldest daughter in a large family, responsibility for her sisters had fallen to her when her father became seriously ill and her mother had had to care for him. Nadia had seen it as her job to keep things together. She remembered once telling her mother that she wanted to go out with a boyfriend. Her exhausted mother had snapped that Nadia didn't care whether her father lived or died. Doing things for herself had seemed unforgivable after that. Life improved when she got married, but gradually she fell into her old style, taking on more and more responsibility and expressing herself less and less.

Nadia began by working on her relationship with her mother. By monitoring their discussions, Nadia realized, with shock, that her mother seldom asked her to do anything. She would talk about something that needed to be done, and Nadia would volunteer to do it. She never waited to be asked. She decided that her first change would be to stop volunteering. She would wait to be asked. At first, her mother's hints became more and more obvious, and, sure enough, she made a number of requests—but fewer than Nadia had expected. Her mother began doing some things for herself and reported seeing other people more often. Nadia began to wonder whether some of her "help" had actually undermined her mother's confidence and ability to do things for herself. She resolved to continue caring for her mother, but at the level that her mother actually needed.

At work, Nadia kept a record of her activities and was surprised to see how much she was really doing. She realized that no matter how efficient she became she would never be able to complete everything. She started the process of change by asking those who gave her work to prioritize the tasks. It didn't work. Everything was given top priority. As a result, she began giving estimates of when she could complete each task. If there were objections, she would offer to move a task up the priority list, ahead of other tasks from that same person. Her employers began to see that she was swamped with work. Eventually she asked for a meeting to review her job, and she presented her concerns. She expected to be fired at once. She wasn't. With better communication and clear feedback from her, things began to improve.

With her son, Nadia came to realize that her task as a mother was not only to provide support, but also to prepare him for independent life as an adult. Catering to him, requiring nothing, and accepting all of his demands and criticism were not helping. She stopped making his bed. She struggled to keep from giving in or justifying herself when he was critical. She placed a box in the basement and announced that she would put anything found on the floor or otherwise out of place in the box. At first her son was enraged and became even messier. Gradually he began to remember to pick up his things, however, and Nadia responded by easing up on the speed with which his possessions vanished into the basement.

She drew up a list of all of the chores that needed doing on a regular basis and convened a family meeting to ask for input on a reasonable division of responsibilities. Her son suggested that he be responsible for making his own bed (which in itself was a surprise) but that she should do almost everything else. She was able to state that this didn't seem fair to her. He reluctantly agreed to take on a few more tasks, which he promptly forgot to do. Nadia was able to keep herself from doing them instead and, as agreed, stopped making desserts and buying snack food. Slowly, shakily, things began to get back on track.

Her husband responded the same way, reluctantly agreeing to do more around the house, forgetting, and then gradually beginning to do some of them. It wasn't perfect, and the family went through a period of tension. It was a surprise to Nadia when the tension began to decline and the family began to get along better than they had before. She identified a few personal interests that she had not had the energy to pursue and began indulging them. She felt that she was getting her own life back after a long time.

By the end of therapy, Nadia did not have perfect assertiveness skills. But she didn't need them to be perfect. They were working reasonably well. As she continued to practice, she continued to improve.

Mike's Story—From Aggressive to Assertive

As long as Mike focussed on his anger and frustration with his work and family, he couldn't address the real problem. Once he began to see the fear that lay behind the anger (fear of losing his family and his business, fear of being left alone), he could see more clearly what needed to be done. He started out by keeping Assertiveness Scorecards (see the Introduction for more information) for every aggressive exchange, including the immediate and longer-term effects. He realized that he was right: his aggressive manner was effective. It got things done in the short-term. But when he looked at the impact on his emotions, the emotions of other people, and the longer-term outcomes, he realized that his style was failing badly.

Mike couldn't change his style overnight. He began by cutting down on his coffee and doing regular relaxation exercises. Then he identified a few specific suppliers to try out a new style on. At first, he communicated with them mainly by letter and email, which enabled him to think about what he was saying before delivering the message. He felt as though he was just suppressing his anger and play-acting being "nice." But he noticed that the new style was just as effective as his rants, and he didn't feel as embarrassed or guilty afterward. Next, he focused on changing his communication style with a few employees and experienced positive results. As the weeks passed, Mike began to notice that those suppliers and those employees were actually performing better than they had before. The atmosphere of tension around the car dealership began to subside ever so slightly. He had moments when he was actually having fun at work.

When he drove home, Mike would sit in his car in the garage and do a relaxation exercise before going into the house. It felt like a punctuation mark between his work and his home life, and he felt more able to distinguish between the two. He asked the family not to give him any issues to deal with for at least fifteen minutes after arriving home, and he was able to admit to them that it was because he was often tense. His Assertiveness Scorecards revealed the issues that tended to trigger his anger with his wife and children. When these issues came up he inserted a break before responding. His family teased him for taking so many walks around the block.

Things didn't change overnight. Mike and his wife attended several joint therapy sessions during which they would practice specific communication skills. In one of the exercises his wife would express an opinion that she knew he did not share, and he would slowly and painfully frame his response (including reflective listening and non-aggressively stating his own view) line-by-line, with many missteps along the way. His wife was installed temporarily as the sole disciplinarian in the house while he practiced his new skills. He worked at clarifying his own standards for his children's behavior. The family met to discuss the standards they agreed on and came up with specific consequences (none involving yelling) that would come into play if the rules were broken. Gradually, Mike was brought back into the process on an equal footing with his wife.

Mike had been so aggressive for so long that he feared he could never change. What he hadn't counted on was that the new style would have rewards that would help him keep going. The family home became a place that he enjoyed. Work improved. The feeling that everything was slipping away began to subside.

Alan's Story—From Passive-Aggressive to Assertive

Alan's predominantly passive-aggressive style had become so automatic that most of the time he didn't realize what he was doing. The style is intended to hide aggression from others, but it can also hide it from oneself. By reading about the passive-aggressive style and keeping Assertiveness Scorecards, Alan realized he was trying to attack others without being caught. He found this realization unflattering.

Like Nadia, it helped Alan to consider where his style had come from. On the few occasions when he had behaved aggressively in his childhood he had been harshly punished. As one of the smallest children in his grade at school, he had been pushed around a lot. His rage combined with a fear of being attacked had led him to find a way of expressing both at once. He had become a very funny satirist, the class clown, and had been adept at manipulating the world from behind the scenes. He saw the reasons for his behavior, and he began to see its effects as well.

For Alan, overcoming the passive-aggressive style meant both becoming assertive and, oddly enough, giving up. He practiced assertiveness skills in safe situations, despite deep misgivings about their likely effectiveness. His dissatisfaction with his life enabled him to push past his reluctance, however. He began being assertive in minor situations: requesting supplies, discussing small issues with supervisors, communicating clearly with coworkers. Despite some unsatisfying outcomes, he had enough successes to keep going. He began to feel more relaxed around work.

Giving up meant playing a less central role in office politics and not trying to control others. He withdrew from several committees and identified certain issues about which he would not gossip. Gradually, some of these issues began to seem less important to him. For a while he feared that he was "losing his edge," but his job performance was improving. He tried refusing tasks that he knew he would never complete, and he attempted to fulfill the obligations he accepted. Despite improvements, he realized that he was not really suited to a large government office and began to contemplate a career change.

It was more difficult for Alan to practice assertiveness skills in social situations, since he had virtually no social life. He joined a local hiking group. This gave him the opportunity to socialize along the trail. He tried to keep himself from speaking about anyone in the group behind their back. His sense of humor was a major point in his

favor, but he labored to keep from using it as a weapon. He began to feel less isolated. By the end of therapy he had several friends and was preparing to begin dating again.

Light had appeared in the tunnel.

Checkpoint: A Self-Assessment

Take some time now to explore your reasons for holding this book in your hands. Based on what you already know about assertiveness, what do you think of your own abilities?

Make a mark on the line below to indicate where you think you are now.

Not very good.

Much less assertive
than most people.

So-so.

About as assertive
as most people.

Great.

More assertive
than most people.

Where do you hope to be when you finish this workbook? Mark the line with an X.

Briefly list three situations in your life in which you would like to be more assertive.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now take some time to complete the following sentences:

I get most passive when _____

I often become aggressive when _____

My biggest fear of being assertive is _____

The two people in my life that I find it hardest to be assertive with are _____

I am already quite assertive when _____

Keep these answers in mind as you consider the barriers to assertive behavior covered in the next three chapters.