

+Respect: Older Students

The January Character Trait of the Month

It can be hard to stay **respectful** when what you need is at odds with what someone else needs. Life presents us with the same dilemma again and again: should you stand up for what you want, or let other people have what they want? Some people tend toward passivity: they respect other people's rights, but may neglect their own needs. Other people lean toward aggression: they stand up for what they want, but they disrespect other people in the process.

Here's an example: if your friends are talking about a sleepover they're planning without you, you could:

Be **passive**, and keep quiet

OR

Be **aggressive**, and tell them what a bunch of rude jerks they are for leaving you out.

It's easy to see that the aggressive response is disrespectful toward others. The passive response, however, may be just as disrespectful: the person being disrespected is you. If you tend to be passive, you may be so polite and aware of other people's feelings that you choose not to voice your own thoughts and feelings. Passive people have often been praised for their passive behavior. Teachers like them because they quietly get their work done without arguing; peers like them because they're kind and very likely to say "yes" to any request. Unfortunately, there is a downside to passivity. Being too passive (too "nice") can send the message that "What I want doesn't matter." Passive people are vulnerable to neglecting their own needs, and allowing others to hurt them. Passive adults may get passed up for promotions, or get stuck in abusive relationships. Passive people end up getting hurt.

Fortunately, there is a solution. The cure for passivity is not aggression: it's assertiveness. If you imagine a straight line with "Passive" on one side and "Aggressive" on the other, "Assertive" would be the sweet spot right in the middle. Assertiveness is standing up for ourselves, but also respecting the wishes of others. You can think of it like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." If "Passive" is "too soft," and "Aggressive" is "too hard," then "Assertive" is the "just right" place in the middle.

If we go back to the original example of friends discussing an event that you're not invited to, there is a third way to respond. Instead of being passive or aggressive, you could:

Be **assertive**, and tell your friends that it makes you sad to hear them making plans without you, and ask them if they could stop talking about it in front of you.

This is a hard thing for passive people to do. They're afraid of making other people angry, and they're afraid of being rejected. They don't want to get in trouble, and they don't want anyone to think they're being mean. They have trouble saying no, and they have trouble being completely honest about their feelings. Becoming assertive takes practice. If you want to become more assertive, remind yourself that you are worthy of respect, too.

Questions:

1. Is it worse to be too aggressive or too passive? Why?
2. Do you tend to be more passive or aggressive? Would your friends and family agree with your answer?
3. What advice would you give to a passive person who wanted to become more assertive?