



ASSERTIVENESS

The day after he took his biology midterm, Marvin is approached by Mindi, who is scheduled to take the same test the next day. Mindi is very attractive and popular--and Marvin has a crush on her. Mindi asks him how he did on the test and then proceeds to question him on its content. She adds, somewhat apologetically, that she was out dancing all night and just hasn't had time to study. She could really use Marvin's help; she would be ever so grateful. Marvin is thrilled and flattered that his dream girl has turned to him for help. But he's also feeling a little resentful. He studied hard for the exam, he didn't go out partying the night before, and helping Mindi might jeopardize his own grade since the professor scores on a curve. He really doesn't want to help her but he's afraid she won't like him if he refuses.

Marvin's got a problem. It's not an uncommon problem. How many times have we said "Yes" when we really wanted to say "No"? Why do we do it?

Does it make us feel guilty if we say "No"?

Do we feel we're a "bad person" if we say "No"?

Do we feel flattered and wanted and worry we won't be liked or asked again if we say "No" in this particular situation?

Let's face it, it's easier to say "Yes" when we mean "No," even though we may regret the consequences and hate ourselves for being a pushover.

There is a way to deal with the kind of problem Marvin is having. He could learn how to be assertive. Assertiveness is not aggressiveness or being hostile. It doesn't involve deliberately hurting or belittling others.

First of all we have to really accept the fact that we have the right to say "No," even though we may have been brought up to always be accommodating. We have to try to be honest with ourselves as to why we say "Yes" instead of "No." For starters it helps to try out being assertive in low risk situations. As we discover it's not fatal to say "No," we can build up self-confidence to apply to more challenging situations.

Let's get back to Marvin and Mindi. Suppose Marvin replied, "If you stopped worrying only about your looks and your popularity all the time and tried opening a book once in a while maybe you wouldn't have to ask for help to pass a test. Forget it; I'm not helping you!" That's not being assertive; that's a hostile attack. An assertive response might be, "I don't want to hurt my grade on this test so I won't tell you the questions. However, if you need help studying for the next test, let me know. I'd love to help."

We can learn to say "No" and do it in an assertive, not aggressive way. Standing our ground is not something to feel guilty about. Assertiveness improves self-esteem and gains respect from others. That way we stand a better chance of being liked for who we are, rather than for the favors we do.

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