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INSIGHT INTO

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# **ASSERTIVENESS**



WAVERLEY ABBEY INSIGHT SERIES



INSIGHT INTO  
**ASSERTIVENESS**

Chris Ledger and Christine Orme

**CWR**

## WAVERLEY ABBEY INSIGHT SERIES

The Waverley Abbey Insight Series has been developed in response to the great need to help people understand and face some key issues that many of us struggle with today. CWR's ministry spans teaching, training and publishing, and this series draws on all of these areas of ministry.

Sourced from material first presented on Insight Days by CWR at their base, Waverley Abbey House, presenters and authors have worked in close co-operation to bring this series together, offering clear insight, teaching and help on a broad range of subjects and issues. Bringing biblical understanding and godly insight, these books are written both for those who help others and those who face these issues themselves.

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# CONTENTS

Introduction	6
1 What's the problem?	9
2 The origins of non-assertive behaviour	21
3 Our beliefs affect our behaviour	33
4 Unhelpful thought patterns	47
5 Approval addiction and self-defeating behaviour	55
6 Avoiding uncomfortable emotions	65
7 Learning how to become assertive	83
8 The spiritual dimension	99
Notes	108

## INTRODUCTION

There are times when we can be too nice for our own good! Like most ‘people-pleasers’ we are often plagued by an overwhelming need to say yes to every request and end up looking after other people’s needs to the detriment of our own. We’re careful not to hurt the feelings of others by saying no, because we are really nice people, but we can then feel resentful towards those who make demands upon us. Keeping the lid firmly shut on our hidden frustration and anger when we are treated like doormats can lead to health problems. Sadly, we haven’t learnt the importance of being assertive.

I first recognised my own people-pleasing tendencies when I started training as a counsellor. In spite of experiencing a loving, secure family, I had learnt to handle my dominant twin sister and mother (whose ‘bark was worse than her bite’) by means of the strategy ‘peace at any price’. Being known as a people-pleaser was a badge I proudly wore. However, as I began to recognise that this behaviour was just as ‘wrong’ in God’s eyes as being verbally abusive, I learned to change. My husband laughs when he remarks that I have become more assertive after my counselling training – quickly adding that this is a good thing!

Having counselled many people over the past twenty years, I have found that people-pleasing is like a psychological disease which can affect us in many distressing ways. Learning to say no where appropriate and developing assertiveness skills can be a tough task because first of all we have to identify the things that have kept us locked into this people-pleasing habit, and then learn a new language of relating. I hope this book will help you on your journey of understanding as you learn a new skill.

## INTRODUCTION

I am delighted that Chris Orme agreed to work with me in putting this book together, because as a friend and well-established author she has always encouraged me in all my writing.

We have changed names and some details of people's stories to preserve anonymity.

Chris Ledger

It has taken me more years than I care to admit to acknowledge that I have been a people-pleaser for a very long time. Helping with the school trip? Of course! Backstage at my daughters' ballet show? Naturally! Making mince pies for the carol service? Put my name on the list! Distributing boxes after the harvest service? Count me in! Delivering leaflets? Why not? Giving students Sunday lunch? Certainly! School newsletter for ex-pupils? Yes – well, someone has to ... Fair Trade stall in the local supermarket? I'm up for it. Volunteers needed for something at church? My hand would be the first to go up (unless it was something I'm really hopeless at – like flower-arranging; even I wasn't daft enough to offer for that!). As time passed, I was no longer asked to help with school-related activities, but still there were constant requests for me to do all sorts of other 'worthy' things – and I couldn't say no.

I felt I had to say yes if *anyone* asked me to do anything legal – and even if they didn't ask personally, I felt obliged to sign up. Why? Well, I never really analysed the reason because, as I mentioned above, for years I was in denial about my lack of assertiveness. As a result I was often stressed and overtired and had no time for things that would renew and restore me. Slowly

## INSIGHT INTO ASSERTIVENESS

it dawned on me that I had problems in this area, so when Chris Ledger, a dear friend, asked me to co-author this volume with her, I jumped at the chance. This was partly because of the opportunity to see Chris (we are both so busy that we communicate mainly by email), but mostly because I recognised that I needed to be more assertive and felt this was an ideal opportunity to learn how!

Working through Chris's seminar notes, developing her ideas and relating them to the guidelines in God's Word have been such a blessing to me. I have come to understand where my people-pleasing habits originated and why, and as a result I am challenging my own flawed thinking in certain areas. I can already see a difference, both in my thinking and in the way I behave and react. I'm learning to be assertive without being aggressive – at last.

Christine Orme



## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

I've always felt the need to make people feel nice and warm ... at the expense sometimes of ... my own wellbeing.

(British actress Sienna Miller –  
interview in *The Times*, February 2008)

Finding it hard to be assertive, to say no to other people's requests, or their sometimes unreasonable or inappropriate demands, is a very common problem. Type 'people-pleasing' into Google and you will instantly get approximately 4,630,000 references.

Do you find it difficult to be assertive? Are you a people-pleaser? Read the following statements and mark those with which you identify most closely.

## INSIGHT INTO ASSERTIVENESS

- I feel guilty when I say no to requests.
- I feel obliged to please other people even when I know it will affect my health.
- I need to be needed so I'm nice to everyone, and can't say no.
- I feel anxious, even physically sick, at the prospect of confrontation and conflict.
- I feel I must never let people down, even when their demands are unreasonable.
- It's important to please people, to be accepted.
- I find it difficult to express constructive criticism because I'm afraid I'll make others angry and then not cope with their anger.
- I believe that good Christians are 'nice' people.
- I'm hooked on always doing things for others to please them.
- I feel worthless unless I am liked by everyone.
- I rarely delegate.
- I think I'm a bad person if I don't always please those around me.
- I believe it's important always to put others' demands and interests before my own.
- I never disagree in a meeting for fear that others won't like me, or will think me stupid.
- I have always needed other people's approval.
- I believe that conflict is bad and nothing good can come from it.
- I find it hard to express my true feelings to other people, in case they reject me.
- I realise that I fear people more than I fear God.

If you marked more than two of the above, you are almost certainly non-assertive. You find it hard to say no – to refuse a request from someone else – and you feel guilty if you do. You are, or you are in the process of becoming, a people-pleaser.

## **WHY CAN'T WE SAY NO?**

We shall come back to this question a number of times, but one of the main reasons why we find it difficult or even impossible to say no is because of *fear*. We fear the possible consequences of saying no: we are afraid of being rejected, or of causing pain to others; we are afraid of feeling guilty; we fear conflict, afraid that other people will be angry with us if we say no to a request. We fear that not pleasing people will mean they don't value us; we're afraid that if we don't do what others want we are worthless people. And the result? Something within us drives us relentlessly to please other people at the expense of our own health and wellbeing.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF BEING UNABLE TO SAY NO**

There are two aspects to this: the more obvious is that we find ourselves constantly saying yes to others' demands or requests and thus feel out of control because of the pressure on our lives; a less obvious, but nevertheless very real, aspect may be that we get to a point where we can't say no to the demands we are placing on *ourselves*. It was a long time before Chris O finally recognised this and made a conscious decision to take some time each day to do something she *wanted* to do, rather than driving herself to do all the 'worthy' things she thought she *ought* to be doing. The following are other consequences of being unable to say no:

- I take on too much resulting in exhaustion and, eventually, 'burnout'.
- I don't ever say what *I* want, so finally reach a point where I don't even *know* what I want!
- I tell 'little white lies'.

## INSIGHT INTO ASSERTIVENESS

- I feel I have to 'rescue' others.
- I allow others to impose their will on me.
- I feel I have to protect others from pain (even if doing so causes *me* pain).
- I suppress uncomfortable feelings of fear, anger and guilt.
- I am left feeling frustrated with myself.
- My most important relationships are affected.
- I lose touch with the person God wants me to be.
- My behaviour becomes self-defeating:
  - I say yes when no would be more appropriate.
  - I please others because I want to be thought of as 'nice'.
  - I become a compulsive people-pleaser.
  - I adopt a philosophy of 'peace at any price'.
  - I pretend to be calm or OK when inside I'm really angry.

### **BOUNDARIES**

One reason why some of us have difficulty in being assertive and saying no to unreasonable demands or inappropriate requests is that we have difficulty in setting or keeping boundaries. What do we mean by that?

We see boundaries everywhere: fences, hedges and walls around gardens, fields and parks, moats around castles. They spell out a message: 'The area within this boundary is my property or territory.' In our emotional and spiritual world, boundaries are just as real but often harder to see. They define us, identifying where we end and someone else begins, and they help us to know what we own and hence for what we are responsible. We are responsible *to* others and *for* ourselves. Boundaries therefore help us to distinguish our property. (If you find this concept difficult, try using the word 'limit' instead of boundaries.)

## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Most boundaries are not impenetrable: castles have moats and walls, but they also have drawbridges and gateways; fields with fences round them have gates, and houses without doors would be useless. Boundaries, as Drs Henry Cloud and John Townsend, who have written several books on the topic, point out, are to 'keep the good (or the desirable) in and the bad (the undesirable) out'<sup>1</sup>. We can see how this applies in the visible world: the walls of our homes offer us protection and safety in our family life; they keep out intruders – those who would steal and destroy.

One of the best and most basic ways of maintaining our spiritual and emotional boundaries is by saying no. We have to say it to our children as they grow up and explore – and don't they test the boundaries we set!

### WE SAY NO:

*to keep them safe:*

- Don't touch the hot stove.
- Don't play with the sharp knife.
- Don't go near the edge.

*or to maintain our sanity:*

- No, you can't get up and come downstairs; it's bedtime and Mummy and Daddy need some space and quiet.
- No, Mummy has a headache so you can't play your drum now.

*or because it will throw our schedule:*

- No, I won't take you to the park right now – I have to get dinner.
- No, you can't watch your *Bob the Builder* DVD now because we have to take your sisters to school.

*or because it could spoil something of value:*

- No, you can't play with my special necklace because you might damage it.

If we can set and maintain boundaries with our children, why do we find it so hard to say no to others? We sometimes speak of people 'trampling' all over others, and people who have difficulties in maintaining their boundaries – in other words, people who find it hard to set limits – are in fact letting others into their territory, their garden, and allowing them to trample all over the flowers and plants of their inner world. Another word for people who can't set boundaries by saying no is 'non-assertive'.

## **JESUS**

As we look at the life of Jesus we see that He set boundaries. He *could* say no. He could be assertive, doing only what His Father wanted Him to do (John 5:19) rather than being pulled this way and that by the demands of individuals and crowds. If we are prone to people-pleasing we sometimes give in to 'the tyranny of the urgent': someone asks us to do something for them and they want it done *right away*. They imply that we really have to drop everything and do it *now* – and we do, even though we may have been doing something important or legitimate for ourselves. Jesus was never at the mercy of 'the urgent'; when He was asked to go and heal Jairus's daughter, who was dying, He set off with Jairus through a great crowd that had gathered to see Him. As He moved through the crowd He realised that someone had touched Him for healing. Although He knew that person had been healed because power had gone out of Him (see Luke 8:46), he stopped, realising that the woman in question needed more than just the physical healing of a chronic haemorrhage; she also needed His

## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

compassionate love and affirmation: 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace' (v.48).

### **WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?**

Assertiveness is the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings and desires in a way that doesn't abuse others. It is appropriate, direct, honest and open communication and, most importantly, *assertiveness is a skill that can be learnt.*

Learning to be assertive will help us to grow in self-confidence and will enhance our relationships because it gains respect from others. Assertiveness helps maintain the healthy view that in God's sight we are all of equal worth. This means that others are not better or worse than we are, but that we are all equally deserving of being listened to and having our preferences considered. In short, assertiveness allows us to state our own needs and desires, whilst at the same time acknowledging that those of others may be of equal importance.

Many people – particularly women – find it difficult to be assertive without first working themselves up into a state of aggressiveness. They confuse the two, believing that assertiveness means standing one's ground, arguing a point and winning. However, assertiveness is not about winning or losing. Rather, it's about finding a compromise so that the end result of any difference of opinion or conflict is a win/win situation, not a win/lose one. Assertiveness comes midway between passivity (being a 'doormat') and aggressiveness. We might summarise the results of the three positions as follows:

- Aggressiveness resorts to bullying tactics and destroys relationships.

## INSIGHT INTO ASSERTIVENESS

- Passivity avoids conflict of any kind, but at a price – it leaves the passive person with a sense of deep-seated helplessness, powerlessness – and sometimes hopelessness too. Indeed, the passive person, because they do not know how to express their anger appropriately, may cope with it by ‘stuffing it down’, letting it turn into resentment and bitterness.
- Assertiveness builds self-confidence, releases us to be the people God has made us to be, enhances relationships and reduces conflict.

### **AGGRESSION**

### **ASSERTIVENESS**

### **PASSIVITY**

×—————×

Where do you think you come on the Aggressiveness to Passivity scale? Remember that although we can learn to be assertive, some of us may find it harder than others and may need a lot of practice!

### **EXERCISE**

Read through the scenarios below and identify, by ticking the appropriate box, whether the response is aggressive, passive or assertive. Then ask yourself, ‘How would I respond in that situation?’ and decide what kind of response you have identified as your own.

#### **SCENARIO A**

At 4.30pm, only half an hour before John is due to finish work, his boss gives him a very important project which will entail at least two hours’ work and which has to be completed that day. However, John wants to leave on time because he is planning to meet his fiancée after work to go and choose an engagement ring.