



## **Self Respect - the key to being more Assertive?**

Why are some of us more inclined than others to stick up for ourselves, not aggressively, but assertively. Assertive people let others know when they feel mistreated and they're confident saying "no" to unwanted demands.

Presumably it has to do with how we see ourselves, yet past research has established that two key aspects of the self-concept – good feelings about the self ("self-liking" or "self-confidence") and seeing oneself as competent – are not strongly related to assertive behaviour.

Daniela Renger, a researcher at the Institute of Psychology at Kiel University in Germany, believes this is because most relevant to assertiveness is self-respect – "a person's conviction that they possess the universal dignity of persons and basic moral human rights and equality". Across three studies published in *Self and Identity*, Renger shows that self-respect is a distinct psychological concept and that it is uniquely correlated with assertive behaviour.

For her studies, Renger devised a new, four-item self-report measure of self-respect. Participants rated their strength of agreement with:

- In everyday life I always see myself as a person with equal rights
- I always see myself as a person of equal worth compared with other people in my life
- I am always aware that I have the same dignity as all other human beings
- If I look at myself, I see a person who is equally worthy compared with others

Based on her analysis of the participants' answers to the various measures, including the correlations within and between them, Renger concluded that self-competence, self-confidence and self-respect are distinct aspects of the self-concept. Also, whilst all three factors correlated with assertiveness, only self-respect had a unique association with assertiveness when accounting for the other two factors.

Finally, there was some tentative causal evidence: having greater self-respect at Time 1 correlated with increased assertiveness as measured 9 months later, but the reverse was not true (having greater assertiveness initially was not associated with increased self-respect).

After completing these questionnaires, the participants considered scenarios in which they had suffered an indignity (such as a medical receptionist blurting out the participant's private problem) or a violation of their property (such as a colleague damaging the participant's new notebook), and they stated how likely it was that they would respond assertively (e.g. telling the receptionist in private that his or her words were inappropriate) or aggressively (e.g. making a public joke about the receptionist's appearance).

Once again, self-respect was correlated with assertiveness, above and beyond the contribution of self-confidence, self-competence, psychological entitlement, self-acceptance and self-esteem (and self-respect was the only factor that remained related to assertiveness after accounting for all the others). In contrast, unlike psychological entitlement, self-respect was not related to aggressiveness.

A final study confirmed these patterns with an English-speaking sample of 60 participants, the majority resident in the US. Again, self-respect correlated with assertive behaviour as revealed in participants' responses to various hypothetical scenarios, whereas psychological entitlement correlated with both assertive and aggressive behaviour.

"The aim of the present contribution is to introduce self-respect as a novel concept to psychological research," Renger concluded. Her studies have some obvious limitations, perhaps most significant being the lack of any behavioural measure of real-life assertiveness. However, she has highlighted a potentially useful aspect of the self-concept that appears to have been overlooked before now.

It will be interesting for future research to explore why some people have more self-respect than others, and how self-respect might influence behaviours beyond everyday assertiveness, such as a willingness and desire to take part in political protest.

<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2017/12/07/what-is-the-secret-to-being-more-assertive-having-self-respect/#more-32857>

Christian Jarrett BPS Dec 2017

[Christian Jarrett \(@Psych Writer\)](#) is Editor of [BPS Research Digest](#)