

# Dealing Effectively with Authority Figures

**Objective: To feel more empowered to deal effectively with those in authority by practicing assertiveness skills.**

## **You Should Know**

For many people, especially those with social anxiety, interactions with authority figures can be fraught with worry. You may fear that you are being perceived as bad or incompetent. You may fear that you will be criticized or berated in private or in public. You may even “fear the fear” associated with dealing with authority figures. For instance, many people are afraid that the physical symptoms that accompany their anxiety will be noticed by others. These can include blushing, sweating, fast heartbeat, dizziness, or stammering.

Facing an authority figure can feel intimidating, and even paralyzing, especially if that authority figure has some control over your future, such as a boss who is in a position to fire you.

Some people are simply born more fearful than others. However, many timid children grow out of this innate character trait, given the right support.

Some people were not born timid but grew up in homes where there was a significant amount of criticism, yelling, and even abuse. This type of family environment can affect people for a lifetime.

In this worksheet, you will identify the authority figures in your past as well as your present. Then you will learn about simple strategies for assertive interactions with authority figures.

*Note: If you are currently dealing with an authority figure who is verbally or physically harassing or mistreating you, ask for help immediately from a safe person (friend, family, professional), consult with your Human Resources Department if the problem is at work, or, if necessary, call the police.*

## **What to Do**

To raise your awareness about your anxiety in dealing with authority figures, write down the names and/or the role of authority figures in your past, such as parents, step-parents, grandparents, older siblings, other relatives, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and so on.

Next to each name, write down what it was like to interact with them. For example: “I felt safe with my father,” or “I felt intimidated by my teacher,” or “I felt angry and sad about my older brother, who bullied me.”



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What are some *fears* about your interactions with the authority figures in your present life?

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What difficulties have you encountered in *actual* interactions with authority figures? What happens to you physically? Emotionally? Describe below.

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Now that you are more aware of what happens to you with authority figures in your current life, here are some strategies for dealing with them more effectively. It may take some practice to feel more comfortable, but be persistent. What you carry with you from your past does not need to be repeated in the present.

**Strategies for More Assertive Communication with Authority Figures**

- Realize that authority figures are people too, with vulnerabilities and soft spots.
- Check your posture. If you are slumping, straighten your body and hold your head high.
- Make eye contact, even if it's hard.
- Speak with a confident voice.
- Listen actively, making sure not to interrupt or talk over the other person's words.
- Control your breathing as best you can. Take deep, diaphragmatic breaths to stay cool.
- Be aware of when you feel defensive about something. Try to hear both sides.
- Be open to receiving suggestions and advice.

- If you feel paralyzed by a question, say, “I need to think about that and I’ll get back to you.”
- Recognize that authority figures have to do a tough job sometimes by setting limits or sharing bad news. Try not to take it personally.
- Share your feedback or point of view openly and honestly. Take your time.
- If you feel yourself shutting down or wanting to escape, take a moment to collect yourself, perhaps grounding yourself in your feet or taking a few breaths.
- Be kind to yourself if you have visible anxiety symptoms. Everyone gets nervous with authority figures. It is not a sign of a character flaw. It is not the end of the world.
- Think positively before or during a meeting: “I can do this,” “I have a right to stand up for myself,” “I am competent and trustworthy,” “I am open to feedback and constructive criticism.”

Now it’s your turn to write down some positive strategies that you would like to use the next time you have to encounter an authority figure. Be creative. Be realistic. And be patient with yourself.

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**More to Think About**

1. From the lists above, identify which strategies seem the hardest for you and why.

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2. Which strategies are ones you think you could use? Why? Commit to trying one each time you ae with an authority figure.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

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