**Steps to Being an Effective Self-Advocate**

**Believe in yourself.**
The first in becoming an effective self-advocate is to believe in yourself. Believing in yourself means you are aware of your strengths, know that you are worthwhile, and are willing to take good care of yourself. Many people struggle with self-esteem. To ask for what you need and want and to protect yourself when others treat you badly, you will need to support your self-worth.

You will want to assess, appreciate, support, and improve the way you feel about yourself.

* **Assess:** On a 1-10 scale, what is your self-esteem? If you're undecided, give yourself a 5.
* **Appreciate:** Give yourself credit for as much self-esteem as you do have. It can be really hard to hold one's own in the world, and you deserve appreciation for every point you've been able to hold on to. Forgive yourself for the points that lie between you and a 10. You've done the best you can. Also give yourself credit for reading this booklet.
* **Support:** What do you do for yourself that supports your well-being? Write down those things, like eating well, making sure you have fun regularly, or pursuing your goals. Write only the good things you do right now, appreciate yourself for them, and vow to continue.
* **Improve:** Think of something you'd like to change to improve your well-being. It can be just one small thing that's easy for you that you'd like to stop doing or begin to do such as exercising more, signing up for a class, or watching less television. It may even be getting out of bed. Sometimes deciding is enough, but here, it is helpful to make a step-by-step plan of how you are going to change if you need to.

**Exercises to raise Self-esteem**

* Get together with a trusted friend. Divide a block of time in half, for instance, 20 minutes divided in half would be 10 minutes each. Then, take turns telling the other person everything good about them. Just think, 10 minutes of compliments!
* Go to the library and get a book on building self-esteem. Do any of the suggested activities that feel right to you.
* Repeat over and over the affirmation: *I am a unique and valuable person. I am worth the effort it takes to advocate for myself, to get what I want and need for myself, to protect my rights and to insist that others treat me well.* Think of other affirmations that you could say to yourself.
* Set a timer for 10 minutes. Then, write everything good you can think of about yourself. After your time is up, read what you have written. Then, fold it up, and put it in a convenient place, like in your pocket, purse, or next to your bed. Then, read it over before you go to bed, when you get up in the morning and every time you have a spare moment. If you can't think of enough things to write in this exercise, ask your friends for ideas before you begin.
* Do something nice for someone else or for your community. Take fresh flowers to a friend, visit a person in the hospital or in a nursing home, or clean up the trash in a park.

If you don't believe in yourself because you are feeling so badly, have a trusted friend or health care provider remind you that they believe in you.

**Decide what you want or what needs to change.**

Think about your life. What is it that you need and want for yourself? Make a list of these things. For instance, you may want to:

* get a job, or a better job
* find housing in a safe neighborhood
* take some educational courses or go back to school
* change your medications or treatments
* make more money
* get a raise
* lose weight
* buy a new car
* have a partner
* take some sick time
* be treated as an equal by your health care provider
* not be subjected to inappropriate sexual talk in your workplace

Your list may be very long. Review the list. Which of these things could you achieve, or try to achieve by advocating or speaking out for yourself? Circle those. Which of your circled needs and wants is most important to you? Put #1 beside that want or need. Number the others in order of priority. For instance, your #1 might be going back to school. Your #2 might be getting a better job and #3 might be making more money.

Through this simple process you have identified your needs or goals and how important they are to you in your life. It would be a lot of work to begin working on all of your goals at the same time. Start working on meeting these needs and goals by beginning with your top priority-#1. After you have met that goal, or are coming along well with that one, you can begin using the steps in this booklet to begin work on another need or goal. Keep in mind that your needs and goals may change from time to time. What seems like a high priority now may not seem like such a high priority in several months when something else may have taken precedence over it.

**Get the facts.**
When you speak up for yourself, you need to know what you are talking about. You need to gather information and make sure the information you have is accurate. There are many ways to get information:

* ask people who have done something similar or who have been in a similar situation—a peer, co-worker, or friend
* ask someone who has special expertise in the area you are working on. (For instance, if you want to go back to college, go visit with a college advisor, disability official, or a student support program. If you need safe housing, talk to someone in the housing authority in your town.)
* study books and other resources you can access through your library, related organizations and agencies, or the Internet
* contact various agencies and organizations, especially those that specialize in advocacy and education and that serve people with disabilities

If this is hard for you to do, ask someone you trust to help you—like a friend, family member, or health care provider. Once you have the facts you think you need, write them down or make copies and keep them in a file or other safe place where you know you can find the information when you need it.

Use your own common sense to decide whether a source of information should be believed. If you are unclear, ask someone you trust or someone with expertise in the area to help you decide if the information you have found is accurate.

**Plan your strategy.**
Now that you know what you want and you have information about it, what do you think is your best strategy for getting what you want or for achieving your goal? What steps would you need to take? You may want to set a timeline and even small goals to achieve by certain dates. You may want to think of several ways to address the problem in case one way doesn't work out. Ask supporters for suggestions. Get feedback on your ideas. Then choose the strategy or strategies

**Ask for what you want.**
Make an appointment to see the person or people who can help you get what you want. Don't just show up. Once you have made the appointment, be sure to keep it. If something comes up so you can't make it, call ahead and reschedule.

Dress neatly for the appointment. This gives the person the message that this is an important meeting. Be on time. Look the person in the eye and shake hands firmly in greeting. Call the person by name. How you say something often makes a greater impression than what you say. Use the person's formal name (Mr. Jones or Mrs. Corey) or ask them how they would like to be addressed.

When you are asking for what you want and need, be brief and concise. Say what you need to say as clearly and with as few words as possible. Give only the information that the other person needs. Don't confuse them with things they don't need to know. Don't go on and on about it–just say it. Stick to the point. Don't allow yourself to be diverted. State your concern and how you want things changed.

State your message clearly and simply. Tell the person exactly what you want from them. Explain why you need it. Tell them why it is in their best interest to respond to your request. Speak loudly enough to be heard, without shouting. Expect a positive response. Plan ahead of time what points you need to make. Practice with the help of friends, tape recorders, or mirrors if you feel unsure of yourself. Consider the following good examples of a person telling someone else what it is they need or want

Source:

Mary Ellen Copeland, M.S., M.A.

Jan 06, 2009

Center for Mental Health Services/Healthy Place.Com