

Understanding Assertiveness Through the lens of equality and inclusivity

This pre-course reading is designed to help you explore some of the wider issues and influences when we consider assertiveness. These perspectives are important to consider when we are trying to create inclusive, respectful, and empowering environments where everyone can thrive.

Gender Stereotypes and Assertiveness:

Assertiveness is often judged through a gendered lens, with research showing that men and women are evaluated differently for the same behaviours. While assertiveness in men is typically associated with confidence and leadership, women displaying similar behaviours may be perceived as aggressive, bossy, or unfeminine.

Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, in *The Gender Bias*, highlights how women are often penalised for assertive behaviour due to entrenched gender stereotypes, drawing on research such as Caleo & Heilman (2013), which shows that women face a “double bind”: they must be assertive to lead, but are judged harshly when they do. This aligns with findings from the *Harvard Business Review* article “How Confidence Is Weaponized Against Women,” which explains how assertive women are often perceived as abrasive, while men are rewarded for the same traits. These biases contribute to slower promotion rates, vague feedback, and limited access to leadership roles for women. Cohen-Hatton’s work, alongside mainstream research, underscores the need to challenge these stereotypes to enable equitable career progression

For men, societal expectations to be assertive, dominant, and emotionally restrained can create internal conflict, especially in environments that value collaboration and emotional intelligence. When men feel unable to express vulnerability or uncertainty without risking their perceived masculinity, it can contribute to stress, isolation, and poor mental health outcomes. A 2020 report by mental health charity MIND ([get-it-off-your-chest_a4_final.pdf](#)) summarised research that linked rigid gender norms to higher rates of depression and suicide among men, particularly when they feel they cannot meet these expectations.

Assertiveness Across Global Cultures

Source: [Does Culture Influence Assertiveness In People \(culturallyyours.com\)](#)

This article explores how assertiveness is not a one-size-fits-all concept. In fact, what is considered assertive in one culture may be seen as aggressive or even disrespectful in another. Key takeaways include:

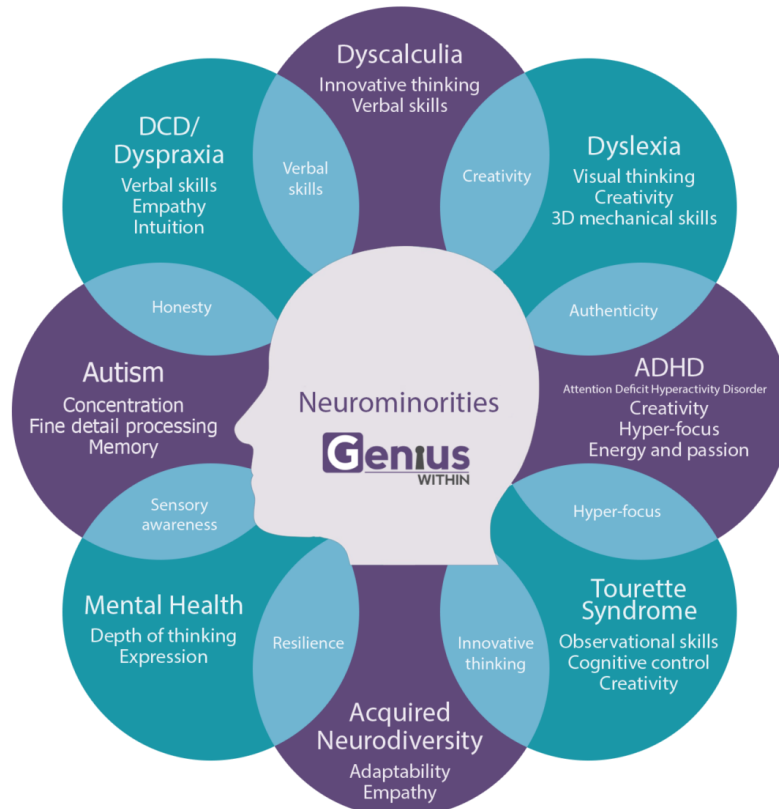
- **Cultural norms shape communication styles.** For example, Western cultures often value directness and self-expression, while many Eastern cultures may prioritize harmony, indirectness, and group consensus.

- **Assertiveness is context-dependent.** In some cultures, speaking up may be encouraged in professional settings but discouraged in family or social contexts.
- **Misunderstandings can arise.** When people from different cultural backgrounds interact, differences in assertiveness styles can lead to misinterpretation or conflict.
- **Cultural humility is key.** Being open to learning about others' communication preferences helps build trust and mutual respect.

This perspective encourages us to approach assertiveness with curiosity and flexibility, recognizing that there are many valid ways to express oneself.

[Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions](#) is a framework for understanding how cultural values influence behaviours in the workplace and beyond. Developed by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, it identifies six key dimensions that describe national cultures. Having an appreciation of this can further aid our understanding of how different cultures experience and practice assertiveness in the workplace.

Neurodiversity and communication



It is estimated that 1 in 7 people in the UK are neurodivergent (ACAS, 2019) and feedback from our own students and staff tells us that there are steps we can take to make the world more accessible and understanding. You may be reading this and have first-hand experience of the frustrations of a world that only sees things through a neurotypical lens.

This Psychology Today article (Taylor, 2022) [Communication Styles, Counseling, and Neurodiversity | Psychology Today](#) highlights how neurodivergent individuals—such as those with autism, ADHD, or other cognitive differences—may experience and express communication, including assertiveness in unique ways. Key insights include:

- **Directness vs. indirectness.** Many neurodivergent people communicate in a direct, literal way, which can be misread as blunt or overly assertive by neurotypical standards.
- **Sensory and emotional regulation.** Challenges with sensory processing or emotional expression can affect how assertiveness is perceived or practiced.
- **Masking and burnout.** Some neurodivergent individuals may suppress their natural communication style to fit in, which can lead to stress and exhaustion.
- **Inclusive communication matters.** Creating space for different styles of expression—whether verbal, written, or nonverbal—supports psychological safety and authentic participation.

A 2024 Neurodiversity in Business: Research Report ([NiB and University of Birkbeck, Research Report 2024 - Neurodiversity in Business](#)) highlighted neurodivergent strengths such as frankness and honesty, critical thinking and analysis, advocacy for others and resilience and tenacity.

How can we support neurodivergent colleagues to use their strengths and practice assertive behaviours in the workplace? What good practice are you aware of from your own experiences that could be beneficial to share with colleagues?

Final Thoughts

Assertiveness is not about fitting into a single mould—it's about finding ways to express needs, boundaries, and ideas that feel authentic and respectful.