

Ten Steps to Being an Effective Self-Advocate

Sometimes you may feel as if you have lost control over your life, your rights and your responsibilities. Regaining your sense of control by successfully advocating for yourself will give you back the hope and self-esteem you need to work toward recovery.

1. Believe in Yourself

You are a unique and valuable person. You are worth the effort it takes to advocate for yourself and protect your rights. You can do it! You may need to work on raising your self-esteem to really believe in yourself and become your own best advocate.

2. Know Your Rights

You are entitled to equality under the law. Some of us who have had mental health challenges erroneously believe that we do not have the same rights as others. I did for a while. I allowed people I did not know well and did not trust to make decisions for me and take control of my life. I now have systems in place so if I am not able to make good decisions for myself, others of my choice will make them for me.

3. Decide What You Want

Clarify for yourself exactly what you need. This will help you set your own goals and help you be clear to others about what it is that you want and need for yourself.

4. Get the Facts

When you advocate for yourself, you need to know what you are talking about or asking for. The internet is an excellent source of information. However, you will need to check its accuracy by looking at several different references to see if they agree. Check with people who have expertise in what you are considering. Ask others who have issues similar to yours. Check references in the library. Contact mental health agencies and organizations for information and support.

5. Planning Strategy

Using the information you have gathered, plan a strategy that you feel will work to get what you need and want for yourself. Think of several ways to address the problem. Ask supporters for suggestions. Get feedback on your ideas. Then choose to take action using the one that you feel has the most chance of being successful.

6. Gather Support

In advocating for what you need and want for yourself, it is helpful to have support from family members, friends and other people who have similar issues.

7. Target Efforts

Who is the person, persons, or organization you need to deal with to get action on this matter? Talk directly with the person who can best assist you. It may take a few phone calls to discover which organization or person can help, or who is in charge, but it is worth the effort. Keep trying until you find the right person. Maybe the right person is your spouse or another family member. Perhaps it is the head of the local housing agency, your doctor, a case manager, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, or a state legislator.

8. Express Yourself Clearly

When you are asking for what you need and want for yourself, be brief. Stick to the point. Don't allow yourself to be diverted or to ramble on with unimportant details. State your concern and how you want things changed. If the other person tries to tell you reasons why you cannot achieve what it is you want for yourself, repeat again what it is you want and expect until they either give it to you, help you get it, or refer you to someone else who may be able to give you what you need. If you feel this may be difficult for you, you may want to role-play different scenarios with a supporter or a counselor.

9. Assert Yourself Clearly

Don't lose your temper and lash out at the other person, their character or the organization. **Speak out, asking for what you need and want and then listen.** Respect the rights of others, but don't let them "put you down" or "walk all over you."

10. Be Firm and Persistent

Don't give up! Keep after what you want. Always follow through on what you say. Dedicate yourself to getting whatever it is you need for yourself.