National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society

## What is Self Advocacy?

**Self advocacy** means speaking up for yourself. It refers to your ability to effectively communicate an interest, desire, need, or right — and negotiate to get it. It also means making informed decisions and taking responsibility for them. Effective self-advocates understand individual strengths and needs, identify personal goals, and recognize legal rights and responsibilities. The impact of effective self advocacy reaches far beyond the individual; concrete changes and decision-makers with enlightened perspectives can have a lasting impact on many others as well.

### Self advocacy throughout life

This self advocacy guide discusses effective practices and communication styles for you to best represent yourself and your interests throughout life. Whether you or a loved one lives with multiple sclerosis, effective self advocacy is a life skill sure to improve outcomes, regardless of the need or situation. The self advocacy worksheet that accompanies this material is a practical tool to help you turn this information into real-world results.

### Effective practices for self advocacy:

- Assess your situation. **Describe your limitations, your unique needs or your special concerns.**
- Consider and evaluate useful aids, accommodations or solutions for your situation. **Define what will meet your needs or address your concerns.** Identify your desired outcome.
- Research and know your legal rights related to the situation. **Summarize your points for discussion.** Rehearse with a family member or friend.
- Identify those who may have the authority to meet your needs. **Contact or visit the front line for customer service first.** Invite a friend or family member to join you for an in-person meeting.
- **Anticipate the reaction to your request.** Consider potential reasons for resistance to your request. Try to understand the other person's point of view.
- **Be concise.** Describe your unique needs or your special concerns.
- **Remain mindful of your desired outcome.** Stay open to all potential avenues to achieve it.

- Be honest. Share any positive aspects about your situation or your circumstances which you benefit from, appreciate or value. **Cultivating empathetic allies can only help your cause.**

- **Document your discussion.** Record the name of the person you speak with, as well as the date, time, key points and necessary follow-up.

- **Be persistent.** Identify the next level of authority if you are unable to address your unique needs or concerns during negotiations.

- **Request the decision-maker's response in writing.** Know your appeal rights.

- **Be organized in your approach.** Use registered mail, keep copies of documents, track dates, take detailed notes, use checklists and make use of any organizational tools or systems that will help you to be more effective.

**Effective communication styles for self advocacy:**

- **Always tailor your style and message to the perspectives of your audience.**

- **Exhibit self-confidence.** Communicate with conviction. Comprehend the facts.

- Listen and ask questions. **Seek solutions in a collaborative fashion.**

- Conduct a dialogue. **Be conversational.** Pause to hear the other person's point of view. Maintain eye contact and a receptive facial expression.

- Exhibit respect. **Be assertive, but not aggressive.** Avoid accusations, judgments and exaggerations. Attempt to minimize displays of emotion.

- Dress appropriately for the situation. Thank the person for their time. **Be polite.**

- If communicating via letter or e-mail, **use standard spelling and grammar.** Avoid slang. Proofread.

- **Establish mutual accountability.** Determine the next steps, who will complete them, and target dates.