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# **SELF-ADVOCACY**

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# SELF-ADVOCACY

## BY MADELINE SEVERY



*It takes me three days to write an email. It takes twice as long to hear back.*

*The message is three lines, maybe four. I ask only what I need: support, care, help, acknowledgement. Anything.*

Self-advocacy manifests itself differently for everyone, but it all comes from the same human need for support.

*support (v): to endure bravely or quietly*

There is a human need for support, and a human need for community. Everyone, regardless of identity or lived experience, needs to feel supported. Self-advocacy manifests itself in the absence of support.

*self-advocacy (v): the act of representing oneself*

The act of self-advocacy is much different than the concept. For one, Merriam-Webster's definition leaves out the fear that comes with being a self-advocate. Without the proper tools and resources, self-advocacy is daunting. Broadcasting your needs to the world—even if the world can help—is simply terrifying. Often, self-advocacy is an expected characteristic, not a taught skill. But with the proper tools and some bravery, everyone can become a self-advocate.

Because everyone deserves support.

## BECOMING SELF-ADVOCATES

Like many others, my journey with self-advocacy began with my family. Both Julia and I were raised in academic households that encouraged us to seek help when we needed it. For some, however, families can act against self-advocacy, too: Despite growing up in a similar academic environment to Julia and myself, Emunah's conservative religious culture discouraged her advocacy.

In the vernacular, self-advocacy is used to describe the work of disabled people to fight discrimination and gain independence. This idea has grown into a movement, with nearly 800 self-advocacy groups emerging in the United States since 1968 [3].

In smaller settings—in everyday personal, social, and professional settings—every person becomes a self-advocate. For Julia, self-advocacy helped her receive the proper accommodations in school for her ADHD. Emunah advocated for her mental health in school, against the wishes of her conservative school board. And I advocated for my educational opportunities in a new school district.

For all of us, self-advocacy first came from a sense of necessity. Something had to break the ice, and it wasn't a small nuisance. The ability to have mental health support, educational resources, and disability accommodations was crucial to our daily existence. Without self-advocacy, we could not have functioned.

But it's difficult to become a self-advocate when the things you need to advocate for are not life-altering or world-changing. At least, not to the person you need to advocate to. But for yourself, anything worth becoming a self-advocate for is world-changing and life-altering. Emunah, Julia, and I were spurred into action out of necessity, but by then it was too late. The "small" things—small being a relative term, and only relative if you are on the receiving end of self-advocacy—had already become big things.

Self-advocacy is scary, it's important, and for a lot of us, it needs to happen sooner.

## THE DRAMATIC DOUBLE STANDARD

For many feminine individuals, self-advocacy is difficult because it comes with the risk of being labeled “dramatic” or “emotional.”

*“But I’ve learned that I can’t be quite so passionate in my presentation. I love to wave my arms, but apparently that’s a little bit scary to people. And I can’t yell too much. It comes across as ‘too loud’ or ‘too shrill’ or ‘too this’ or ‘too that.’”*

– Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Vox, 2016 [1]

For many, self-advocacy is a vulnerable act. Worry over image or “looking stupid” hinders our ability to advocate for what we need. But for feminine individuals, appearing “too emotional” makes this worry about image exponentially more important.

Passion makes women seem unlikeable [2]. But passion gets things done. Self-advocacy gets things done.

It is time to reconstruct the double standard. To become self-advocates, we must ignore what we think our image is. Self-advocacy transcends social standards, and when it is time to become a self-advocate, our actions must reflect that.

## BREAKING THE ICE

My self-advocacy began too late. By the time I had learned to talk to The Higher-Ups, my small problem had exploded into a crucial issue. If I had the tools, the knowledge, and the encouragement to stand up for myself, maybe it would have happened sooner. So I want to give those tools to you.

- A good email goes a long way. Introduce yourself, state the issue, and clearly state how the person you are emailing can help. Don't forget your contact information at the bottom.
- If you sound too “forward” or “demanding,” you are doing it right. Especially if you are concerned about sounding that way.
- The Higher-Ups are humans too. They experience human problems. If you tell them often enough and well enough, they have the capacity to understand your human problem.
- You already have what you need to succeed: skills, confidence, and self-worth. Understand that self-advocacy is a habit—anyone can develop it with the right resources.
- **Do it afraid.**

## REFERENCES

- Crockett, Emily. "Hillary Clinton: "I had to learn as a young woman to control my emotions."" Vox, 8 September 2016.
- Rudman, Laurie A., and Julie E. Phelan. "Backlash Effects for Disconfirming Gender Stereotypes in Organizations." *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 28, 2008.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and Mair Hall. "National Resource Center Fact Sheet: The Self-Advocacy Movement."

**We offer workshops by our staff on self-advocacy at no cost. If you are interested, please contact [info@ruthproj.org](mailto:info@ruthproj.org) or contact us through our website.**