

Assertive Communication

Do you have trouble saying no, even when you really should?

Do you feel like people walk all over you?

Do you have trouble keeping your temper under control?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, you might find it really helpful to learn about assertive communication. Read on ...

I. What is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is the ability to honestly express your opinions, feelings, attitudes, and rights, *without undue anxiety*, in a way that doesn't infringe on the rights of others.

- It's not aggressiveness, it's a middle ground between being a bully and a doormat.
- It's dependent on a feeling of self-efficacy, a sense that if you behave in a certain way, something predictable will occur.
- Where does non-assertive behavior come from? Many of us are taught that we should always please and/or defer to others, that it is not nice to consider our own needs above those of others, or that we shouldn't "make waves", that if someone says or does something that we don't like, we should just be quiet and try to stay away from that person in the future.

II. Why is Assertiveness Important?

If you don't know how to be assertive, you might experience ---

- Depression. From anger turned inward, a sense of being helpless, hopeless, with no control over your life.
- Resentment. Anger at others for manipulating or taking advantage of me.
- Frustration. How could I be such a wimp? Why did I let someone victimize me?
- Temper/violence. If you can't express anger appropriately, it builds up until it blows.
- Anxiety, which leads to avoidance. If you begin to avoid situations or people that you know will make you uncomfortable, you may miss out on fun activities, job opportunities, relationships, and lots of other good stuff.
- Poor relationships of all kinds. Non-assertive people are often unable to express emotions of any kind, negative OR positive. It's murder for a relationship when the partners can't tell each other what they want and need and how the other person affects them. No one is a mind reader. The same is true for friendships and work relationships.
- Physical complaints. Headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure. We all know what stress does to

our bodies, and assertiveness, when it becomes a habit, is a great stress reliever.

- Parenting problems. Kids are born knowing how to test the limits their parents set for them. If parents aren't assertive and firm, their kids will walk all over them!

A note about selective assertiveness:

Most people find it easier to be assertive in some situations than in others. This makes perfect sense. It's a lot easier to hold your ground with a stranger than with someone you love who might get angry if you express your true feelings. But the more important the relationship is to you, the more important it is to be assertive. Assertive behaviors lead to increased respect from others, their willingness to see you as a person who respects him/herself, a *worthwhile* person, a more loveable person!

Is assertiveness always the best way to go? Before you decide to act assertively in a given situation, you have to decide if you can live with the consequences. Although assertive behavior usually will result in a positive response, some people might react negatively to it. For example, if your boss is completely unreasonable and is known to go ballistic if anyone dares question his orders, even non-aggressive, respectful, assertive behavior might set him off and you could lose your job. If that's your situation, then you may decide you can't afford to be assertive, and learn other stress management techniques.

Setting the stage: If you're planning to try assertive behavior, remember that the other person is used to your behaving in a certain way, and may be thrown for a loop or thoroughly confused when you change your communication style. Why not tell the other person up front what you're trying to do? It helps to choose a peaceful moment for this. Then you might say something like

"I need to tell you something and I'd like you to hear me out before you comment. I've noticed lately that after we've been working on a project together, I find myself feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. I've been thinking about it and I've realized that I often go along with your ideas, without insisting on considering some of my ideas as well, because I'm afraid of upsetting you. From now on I'm going to try something different. When I start to get those frustrated feelings, I'm going to ask that we stop before making a final decision and be sure we have considered all the options. I know that will be a change for you, but I really think it's fair and I know I'll do a better job and feel better about myself if I can tell you about my ideas." How can anyone argue with that statement?

III. Techniques:

Okay, here's another example of an assertive communication. Read it, and then we'll discuss the different parts of it.

"I've noticed that whenever we're preparing to go somewhere, you start rushing me to finish dressing as soon as you're ready, even if it's not yet the time we had planned to leave. I know you get anxious when you're all ready to go and I'm not, but when you do that, I get all flustered and take even more time. By the time we get in the car, we're mad at each other and not much in the mood to have a good time. From now on, let's be sure we know what time we want to leave, and if you're ready before I am, will you please just go to another room and read the paper or watch TV? From now on, if you come into the bedroom or bathroom before it's time to leave and start asking me to hurry up, I'm just going to remind you of the time, ask you to go to another room, and close the door until I'm ready. I know this is going to seem weird at first, but I bet we'll enjoy our outings a lot more over the long run."

A: There are three parts of each assertive intervention:

1. **empathy/validation:** Try to say something that shows your understanding of the other person's feelings. This shows them that you're not trying to pick a fight, and it takes the wind out of their sails. From the above example, "I know that you get anxious when you're all ready to go and I'm not"

2. **statement of problem:** This piece describes your difficulty/dissatisfaction, tells why you need something to change. For example, "... but when you do that, I get all flustered and take even more time. By the time we get in the car, we're mad at each other and not much in the mood to have a good time."

3. **statement of what you want:** This is a specific request for a specific change in the other person's behavior. For example, "From now on, let's be sure we know what time we want to leave, and if you're ready before I am, will you please just go to another room and read the paper or watch TV?"

B: How to be effectively assertive:

- Use assertive body language. Face the other person, stand or sit straight, don't use dismissive gestures, be sure you have a pleasant, but serious facial expression, keep your voice calm and soft, not whiney or abrasive.
- Use "I" statements. Keep the focus on the problem you're having, not on accusing or blaming the other person. **Example:** "I'd like to be able to tell my stories without interruption." instead of "You're always interrupting my stories!"
- Use facts, not judgments. **Example:** "Your punctuation needs work and your formatting is inconsistent" instead of "This is sloppy work." or "Did you know that shirt has some spots?" instead of "You're not going out looking like THAT, are you?"
- Express ownership of your thoughts, feeling, and opinions. **Example:** "I get angry when he breaks his promises." instead of "He makes me angry." or "I believe the best policy is to..." instead of "The only sensible thing is to ..."
- Make clear, direct, requests. Don't invite the person to say no. **Example:** "Will you please ... ?" instead of "Would you mind ... ?" or "Why don't you ... ?"
- Special techniques for difficult situations:
 - **Broken record:** Keep repeating your point, using a low level, pleasant voice. Don't get pulled into arguing or trying to explain yourself. This lets you ignore manipulation, baiting, and irrelevant logic. **Example:** You are taking something back to a store that you know gives refunds, but the clerk first questions your decision, tries to imply that there's something wrong with you because you changed your mind, tells you that she can only give a store credit, etc. Using the *broken record*, you walk into the store and say "I decided I don't need this and I'd like my money back." Then no matter what the clerk says, you keep repeating "I decided I don't need this and I'd like my money back." If she doesn't get it, simply ask to speak to a manager and say the same thing. Trust me, it works!
 - **Fogging:** This is a way to deflect negative, manipulative criticism. You agree with some of the fact, but retain the right to choose your behavior. **Example:** *Mom:* "Your skirt is awfully short, don't you think you should wear longer skirts? They're the style now." *You:* "You're right, skirts are longer now." Agree with as much of the facts as you want to, but don't agree to change your skirt length. *Fogging* is great for avoiding fights and making people stop criticizing. With significant others, when you need to keep living together, it's best to quietly hear them out, then assertively give your response.
 - **Content to Process Shift:** This means that you stop talking about the problem and bring up, instead, how the other person is behaving RIGHT NOW. Use it when someone's not listening or trying to use humor or a distraction to avoid the issue. **Example:** "You're getting off the point. I'm starting to feel frustrated because I feel like you're not listening."
 - **Defusing:** Letting someone cool down before discussing an issue. **Example:** "I can see that

you're upset, and I can even understand part of your reaction. Let's talk about this later." Also, if they try to stay with it, you always have the right to walk away.

- **Assertive inquiry/stop action:** This is similar to the content to process shift. "Let's hold it for a minute, something isn't working, what just happened?, how did we get into this argument?" This helps to identify the real issue when the argument is actually about something bigger than the immediate topic.

Example:

- "Can you help me with this statistics problem?"
 - Man, will you just get off my back? You know how much I have to do today!
 - Why is it such a problem to take 15 minutes to help me with this? You told me last night that you would!
 - I get so tired of you always asking me to do these things right when I'm in the middle of something!
 - Whoa, let's take a break here. How did we get from my stats problem to you being tired of my interruptions?"
- The real problem is not the stats problem, it's timing. Now that topic is open for discussion and they're becoming aware of how their arguments escalate.
 - **Summarization:** This helps to make sure you're understanding the other person. **Example:** "So what you're trying to tell me is"
 - **Specificity:** It's really important to be very clear about what you want done. This helps prevent distractions. **Example:** "The thing I really wish is that you'd pick your clothes up off the floor."

IV. Some Final Points:

One of the most common problems in communications is caused by trying to read people's minds or expecting them to read yours. If you want people to respond to your ideas and needs, you have to be able to say what they are, and say it in a way that will make others want to respond nicely. Do you remember the self-efficacy part from the beginning of this piece? The belief that if you do something in a particular way, you will be effective? Even if you don't believe that now, but you muster your courage and try some of these techniques in situations that are not hugely threatening, the results will probably be so encouraging that you will begin to believe in your effectiveness. If it's really scary to think about being assertive, try it first with people you don't know. Think of someone you know who is assertive and pretend you are that person. Once you become comfortable with assertive behaviors in less threatening situations, you can crank it up a notch and use it all the time. When assertiveness becomes a habit, you will wonder how you ever got along before you started using it. The nicest thing about all of this is that after you've become truly assertive, you probably won't need to use these techniques very much. As people practice assertive communication, you can almost see that little spark of self-respect glimmer, flicker, take hold, and burst into flame. People can sense it when you respect yourself, and they will treat you with respect. And that is the ultimate goal of assertive communication.

Here are some very good books about assertiveness:

Alberti, Robert E., and Emmons, Michael. *Your Perfect Right*. Revised edition. San Luis Obispo, CA: IMPACT, 1990.

Bower, Sharon, and Bower, Gordon. *Asserting Yourself*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1976.

Bramson, Robert M. *Coping with Difficult People*. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981

Butler, Pamela. *Self-assertion for Women*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981.

Smith, Manual J. *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*. New York: The Dial Press, 1975.

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