

assertiveness

Learning to communicate assertively is an essential skill, to both get our needs met and to foster healthy relationships. Some of the more common situations where lack of assertiveness is a problem include:

- Saying “no” to others.
- Expressing negative feelings.
- Stating opinions.
- Responding to criticism.
- Asking for favours.
- Returning defective items to a store.
- Asking someone for a date.
- Applying for a job or raise.
- Giving compliments.
- Resisting pressure of a salesperson.
- Turning down a request to borrow money.

coping strategies

Of course, many other situations in everyday life can arise which require assertive skills. Practice the following strategies, to improve your assertiveness.

1 distinguish the types of communication

Assertive

Communicating one’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way that is open, honest and direct, while respecting the rights and needs of the other person. Assertiveness maximizes the likelihood we will experience a win-win situation. We feel confident and in control, the other person feels respected and thus ultimately respect for us.

Passive

Failing to communicate or communicating in a way that disregards your own rights and needs, or allows others to infringe on our rights. The main purpose of passive behavior is to avoid conflict at all cost. Although conflict may be avoided the passive person often feels humiliated, taken advantage of, angry toward others and disgusted at themselves. The other person often feels irritated or disgusted with the passive communicator. This interaction ultimately becomes a lose-win situation, and the passive individual feels like a victim.

Aggressive

Failing to communicate or communicating in a way Expressing one’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way that violates the rights and needs of others. The goal of aggressive behavior is to dominate, put down, or humiliate the other person. We ultimately disrespect the other person, because our needs and wishes become more important than theirs. This results in a win-lose, rather than win-win situation. At the time we may feel superior and self-righteous, but afterwards we often feel guilty and/or fearful of revenge. The other person will feel humiliated, hurt, put down, and angry toward you.

2 identify non-verbal components

Realize that assertiveness involves far more than what we communicate verbally to the other person. Common non-verbal components of assertion include:

- Direct, but not continuous eye contact.
- Voice tone and volume that is well modulated. (i.e., is convincing, but not intimidating)
- Facial expressions that are consistent with the messages being expressed.
- Hand and body gestures which accentuate the message, without being a distraction.
- Body posture which involves facing the other person, and could include leaning in slightly.
- Overall respect for the personal space of the other person.

3 avoid passive non-verbal behaviours

Avoid passive non-verbal behaviors such as:

- Evasive or limited eye contact.
- Hand wringing.
- Lowered head.
- Hiding behind your hair.
- Hands over face or eyes.
- Turning away from the other person.
- Hunching the shoulders.
- Wooden body posture.
- Soft voice.
- Hesitant speech.
- Smiling or laughing, when communicating anger.
- Frequent throat clearing.

4 avoid aggressive non-verbal behaviours

Avoid aggressive non-verbal behaviors such as:

- Eye contact that tries to stare down the other person.
- Excessively loud voice.
- Not respecting a person's personal space.
- A sarcastic or condescending tone of voice.
- Hand or body gestures that are threatening, such as finger pointing or making a fist.
- Angry facial gestures.
- Forcefully touching or pushing the other person.

5 implement assertive rights

Incorporate the following assertive rights into your belief system. **You have the right to:**

- Be treated respectfully and with dignity.

- Make mistakes.
- Say no, without feeling guilty.
- Change your mind.
- Ask for what you want or need.
- Decide what is best for you.
- Ask questions.
- Express your feelings and opinions.
- Protect yourself from either physical or psychological harm.
- Show your weaknesses, without feeling guilt or shame about them.
- Be listened to by others.

6 recognize irrational beliefs & passivity

Identify and challenge any irrational beliefs you hold, which may lead to passivity. Some common irrational beliefs which lead to passivity include:

- I need to be liked and approved by everyone.
- It isn't all right to express negative thoughts or feelings.
- My needs should never come first; this would be selfish.
- People will not like me, or worse will reject me, if I assert myself.
- If I hurt others by expressing my feelings, I am responsible for their feelings.
- I can't say no to other people's requests, they will be angry with me.
- One needs to avoid conflict at all cost.
- Why bother being assertive, since I won't always get what I want anyway.
- If people are angry with me for being assertive, I would be devastated.

7 recognize irrational beliefs & aggressive communication

Identify and challenge irrational beliefs that may lead to aggressive communication. Some common irrational beliefs which promote aggressive communication include:

- To get what you want, you need to demand it.
- People will walk all over you, if you aren't strong and aggressive.
- You need to be aggressive, to survive in this world.
- Other people deserve your aggression, if they have in some way wronged you.
- People will see you as powerful, if you aggressively express yourself.

8 using statements

Use “I” statements to express yourself, particularly when expressing difficult negative emotions. These statements typically involve four parts.

- Feeling I feel...
 (describe the feeling)
- Behavior when...
 (describe the behavior)
- Effect because...
 (describe the specific
 effect of the behavior)
- Preference I'd prefer...
 (describe what you would
 prefer)

Here's an example, of what might be said if a friend frequently shows up late for lunch dates, and you want to respond assertively to the issue:

I feel frustrated and angry
when you show up late for lunch,
because it doesn't leave us enough time to enjoy
our lunch together.
I'd prefer you only set up a lunch date if you are
sure you have the time.

9 what to avoid when speaking assertively

In communicating assertively, try to avoid the following:

- Assumptions (without having checked them out)
- Sarcasm (i.e., Why did you even bother coming?)
- Labeling (i.e., You're an ungrateful pig.)
- Generalizations (i.e., You always treat me this way.)
- Exaggerations (i.e., You never treat me well.)
- Judgments (use factual descriptions instead)
- Statements beginning with “you” (i.e., You are always late for lunch). Use “I” statements instead.
- Threats (unless they are reasonable and you are willing to carry them out)
- Vague words on descriptions (be specific)
- Emotional Outbursts (i.e., You drive me crazy!)

10 practice your assertiveness

Practice your assertive response prior to an encounter by:

- Writing out what you plan to say.
- Visualizing the entire situation in your head, before you encounter it.
- Rehearsing or role-playing the situation, with a friend or family member.

11 be assertive when being challenged

Be prepared to escalate your assertive response if met with resistance. Escalating assertion begins with a minimally assertive statement, which is able to accomplish your goal with the minimum effort necessary. If the other person ignores your initial assertion, you would gradually increase the firmness of your assertion, while still being respectful.