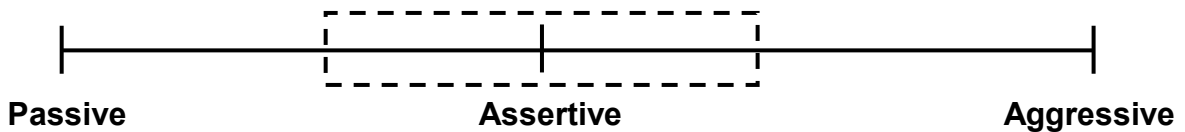


ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING: HOW TO BECOME MORE ASSERTIVE IN ORDER TO MAXIMIZE THE CHANCE OF GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?



There are three basic interpersonal styles that we can use when interacting with people. These are: passive, aggressive and assertive. The relationship between these three interpersonal interaction styles is demonstrated in the figure below. Take a look at the continuum graph. Did you think that behaving assertively would actually be at the extreme right-end of this spectrum rather than in the middle?



Many people believe that assertiveness is an interaction style in which you try to get your way all the time at the expense of other peoples' rights, opinions, and feelings. It is important that you start to realize that this type of behaviour is aggressive rather than assertive. Before I discuss assertiveness in more depth, let me briefly describe the passive and aggressive interaction styles. Does the passive or aggressive style describe how you consistently behave? Do you suffer from any of the consequences outlined below?

THE PASSIVE INTERACTION STYLE



At the extreme left of the continuum is passive behaviour. Passive people value themselves less than others. They feel that their rights, opinions, and feelings are unimportant, and consequently their needs are rarely met. If you consistently behave passively, chances are you may not feel good about yourself. Consequently, you may have developed negative beliefs about yourself (e.g. "I'll never be able to do this", or "I'm such a loser") and negative beliefs about other people (e.g. "He/she doesn't care about me" or "People always screw with me").

Let's take a look at some of the negative consequences of behaving passively all the time. If you don't voice your needs, chances are they will never be met. Besides feeling bad about this, you may feel guilty since you never communicate your needs. You may feel taken advantage of since others may make decisions for you, even if you do not agree with them. Another possibility is that you may feel exploited by others since they may push extra demands on you. Some people develop a passive-aggressive interaction style to deal with their lack of assertiveness. For example, they may try to manipulate others, or display anger to get a specific need met. However, in the long run, passive-aggressiveness is not productive since people will not trust you or want to be around you. This could reinforce any negative beliefs you have about yourself or others. Another consequence of being passive is

that you might eventually become angry and ‘blow up’ if your needs are not met. In the long run, others may prefer not to be around you or you might feel guilty if you expressed anger at a loved one. A final consequence of behaving passively is that you may resent other people because they continually place extra demands on you, which you cannot meet. These extra demands might make you feel stressed, which could adversely impact your health in the long run (e.g. increased blood pressure requiring medication). Are there any other negative consequences that you can think of that I did not mention? If so, I’d be interested in discussing them with you.

The important point to retain from this section is that if you behave passively most of the time, you are less likely to achieve your goals. If you have been using this interaction style consistently throughout your life, has it worked for you? In addition, consider how it makes you feel about yourself and other people. Consider completing a Cost Benefit Analysis Worksheet of using the passive interaction style – ask me how to perform this exercise if I haven’t shown you yet! A final important point to realize is that **you cannot expect others to implicitly know what you think, feel, and need unless you express it**; this type of behaviour is assertive.

THE AGGRESSIVE INTERACTION STYLE



At the opposite end of the interpersonal continuum is aggressive behaviour. This is an interaction style whereby you trample on the rights, needs, and feelings of others and do not respect them. Aggressive people value themselves more than others and hold other people in low esteem.

Let’s take a look at the consequences of behaving aggressively. Chances are that the majority of interactions with other people are explosive and confrontational. Although being aggressive may help you attain your goals in the short run, chances are you will alienate people in the long run, which will prevent you from eventually attaining your needs. Some other negative consequences include the possibility that you will feel stressed since you have to continually be defensive and ‘on guard’; how does it feel to be stressed all the time? You may feel guilty if you have been aggressive towards another person, especially if it is a loved one. Finally, you may have bad feelings about yourself since you consistently humiliate and demean other people. Are there any other negative consequences that you can think of that I did not mention? If so, I’d be interested in discussing them with you.

The important point to retain from this section is that behaving aggressively will help you attain your goals for a short period of time only. Ask yourself whether in the long run this type of behaviour will help you obtain what you want. If you have been using this interaction style, has it worked for you and how does it make you feel? Once again, consider completing a Cost Benefit Analysis Worksheet of using an aggressive interaction style.

THE ASSERTIVE INTERACTION STYLE



Assertiveness is the balanced way to act (the middle of the continuum). Assertiveness is both an attitude and a set of acquired skills. It is the attitude that you are worth what others are worth, as well as a set of skills to implement the attitude. At its core, assertiveness means

that you simply express your opinions, needs, and feelings. Behaving assertively means that you have the following rights:

- to say “I don’t know”;
- to say “No”;
- to have an opinion and express it;
- to have feelings and express them;
- to make your own decisions and deal with their consequences;
- to change you mind;
- to choose how to spend your time;
- to make mistakes and;
- is there anything else you would like to add to the list (e.g. my right to free time)? If so, do it!



Hint: If assertive is a problem for you, some people find it useful to make a personal ‘Bill of Rights’ that they can carry with them and review. Use the rights mentioned above and construct one for yourself if you think it would useful to you.

Assertiveness involves a degree of reciprocity between our selves and other people. This means that our opinions, needs, and feelings are no less nor more important than those of others. It is also important to understand that acting assertively means that you value people even if you do not agree with them. When we act assertively, interactions are expressive and collaborative and you end up feeling self-confident and satisfied since your opinions, needs, and feelings and those of the other person are respected. Assertiveness also helps us solve problems since the needs of both parties are taken into account. In addition, assertiveness makes us flexible. Finally, and very critical, if others do not like your opinions, needs, or feelings, it is **their problem and not yours!** Remember, you are not forcing others to agree with you, you are simply stating your needs. If you feel guilty after being assertive, complete a Thought Record to objectively re-appraise this feeling and any other emotions you may have felt.

Finally, note the dotted box in the continuum above. This box was included to demonstrate that in certain situations we might behave slightly more aggressively or passively, but that we should rarely, if ever, behave completely passively or aggressively - remember that assertiveness makes us flexible!

HOW TO BECOME ASSERTIVE: A PROCESS FOR CHANGE.

Learning to become assertive is challenging. With practice and perseverance, it will pay off. Consider writing down the costs and benefits of becoming assertive (use the preceding material to help you out). Here are some helpful hints to help get you on your way to becoming assertive:

1. Make sure to start with situations or people with whom it would be easier to become assertive with. Increase the level of difficulty when you have had some success and your confidence has increased. The toolkit on Exposure Therapy will be useful here.

2. Focus on becoming assertive in one area (e.g. work or home) or with one person (e.g. boss or wife). Don't try to become assertive in all aspects of your life at once. Think of the analogy of climbing a ladder. You want to climb one rung at a time and not try to reach for the top rung right away.

3. Complete a Thought Record to objectively re-appraise any negative thought(s) that are bothering you and preventing you from becoming more assertive.

4. Be aware that some situations will be more difficult, or that you will not be as successful as you wanted. If it didn't go well, learn from it and then forget it, that is "**Bury the judge within you!**"

5. Try to use the unselfish "I" as much as possible. Avoid "You" statements, which will only make the other person defensive. Avoid put-downs and threats – again, the other person will probably feel defensive. Take a quick look at the Developing Effective Communication Skills toolkit.

6. Know what you want, what you need, and what your feelings are about a situation. Stick to the important point. Express your request in one or two clear and easy to understand sentences. A group of weak arguments or statements do not add up to one good one. If anything this may confuse your message. Use the following analogy: You want a tight sealed water bucket and not a leaky one.

7. There is no one right way to be assertive. It depends on the situation, the person, and what you want.

8. Be aware of your non-verbal behaviour. Look in the person's eye, but do not stare (aggressive!) or look down and away from the person (passive!). Maintain an assertive body posture: hold yourself up straight and don't stand far away (passive!) or too close (aggressive!). Try to maintain a clear tone in your voice, don't whine or be apologetic (passive!) or be loud and abusive (aggressive!). Use gestures and facial expression for emphasis if necessary. If you like, you could try these out in a mirror. For example, practice being passive, aggressive, and then assertive in the mirror so you can get feedback on your non-verbal behaviour.

USEFUL TECHNIQUES TO HELP YOU BECOME MORE ASSERTIVE



Here is a list of what I will call 'techniques' that you can use to become assertive. These are more applicable in situations that are more conflictual, but can be used anytime. In the next section, I'll go over specific situations in which these techniques can be used. Note that the purpose of these techniques is not to memorize them and become an 'assertive techniques expert', but to show you how you can become more assertive.

1. Broken Record: Simply keep repeating what you have said and include slight variations if you like. For example, "Yes, I know, but, like I just said ...", then, "No. I really can't".

2. Content-To-Process Shift: If you stray from the topic, you need to get back on track. For example, “We’ve drifted away from our discussion, which is that ... Let’s focus back on that topic”.

3. Defusing: Try to de-escalate the situation if tension is rising. For example, “I can see that you’re upset, and I’m also getting angry. Let’s delay this ... “.

4. Assertiveness Agreement: “You’re right. I botched it. I’ll try again”.

5. Clouding: Make it seem like you agree. For example, “If I were late as often as you say, it would certainly be a problem”.

6. Assertive Inquiry: Simply ask for clarification. For example, “I can see you’re upset. What is it about my behaviour that made you angry?”

7. Assertive Empathy: Validate how the other person is feeling. For example, “I know that this is unpleasant for you but I really think you should do it”.

8. Self-Disclosure: Disclose information about how you feel. For example, “I’m embarrassed to admit this but ... “.

9. Cutting The Sound: If leaving is impossible, let the other talk without paying attention.

APPLYING THE TECHNIQUES TO SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

Here are a few situations that people find particularly hard and how some of the techniques above can be applied.



Responding to criticism: If you are labeled or criticized (e.g. “You always make no sense when you talk”), you could reply with the ‘assertiveness agreement’. For example, “Sometimes some of the things I say may not make sense”. Another option is to use ‘clouding’. For example, “It’s true that if I never made sense it would be difficult to understand what I say”. If you are criticized for a specific behaviour and the other person is right, you can agree with the critic and apologize. For example, if the person says, “You’re always late” you could reply with, “Sorry I am late. I’ll try to be early next time”. Another alternative is to ask for clarification (assertive inquiry). If someone states, “You’re so disorganized” you could reply with, “What makes you say that?” or “What would you like me to do different?”



Making a complaint: 1) Arrange or choose a convenient time and place to discuss the problem; 2) Define the problem situation as clearly as possible – be specific (name the problem, be clear and brief, and do not judge the other person’s intent); 3) State your opinions or feelings. Stick to your own feeling and opinions (i.e. self-disclosure) and don’t exaggerate. Do not use “You” to try to blame or shame the other person. Use the unselfish “I”; 4) Specify what you want. Be specific and outline each request one at a time (make sure you don’t go overboard) and the request should be possible and reasonable. Here is an example: “Our meeting has started late the past three times and we finish after work hours (the

problem is specified). I'd like to finish on time and get home and see my family (self-disclosure). Could you be on time? Or if you prefer, we could reschedule or meetings earlier in the day if you are busy at this time (specifying what you want). What do you think (assertive inquiry)?"



Saying "No": One option is to make it clear you liked being asked, "Thanks for asking me, but it is not possible" or "I'm pleased you asked, but I cannot". You could acknowledge the other person's needs (assertive inquiry or assertive empathy): "I know this is important and it bothers you". You can give a clear reason for why you are saying no. For example, "I have too much work" or "I already made a commitment". You can make a suggestion to help resolve their difficulty: "Maybe you could do it tomorrow". If the person keeps requesting over and over, use the 'broken record': "Like I said, I have no time", then, "I'm too busy", then, "Maybe next time". If they still continue, use 'cutting the sound'.



A word of caution:

Learning to be assertive can be a challenging endeavour, especially when the interaction is more confrontational. Remember that there is no one right way to be assertive. Keep practicing until it becomes easier. Not all the techniques above will be useful in all situations. Also remember that some situations or periods of time will be more difficult than others - this is normal. Try to learn from these experience and then, "**Bury the judge within you!**"

A FINAL WORD

I hope you will find this primer on assertiveness useful. My goal was to provide you with a quick and comprehensive reference in case you wanted to review this material, or if I was not available for consultation. I'd also like to mention that assertiveness is not 'out of bounds' in therapy just because I provided you with this handout. In fact, I'd like it to be an important part of our sessions and a goal that we work towards weekly, if this is important to you. Finally, please ask me any questions you may have if any of the material in this handout is not clear.