

SELF HELP SHEET

Student Counselling Service

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is based on the premise that we are all created equal and should treat each other as such. Assertive interaction allows us to stand up for our rights and ensures that we do not violate the rights of others. Most people are assertive in some situations.

There are three basic interpersonal styles.

Aggressive: Aggressive behaviour involves fighting, blaming, accusing, threatening and a general disregard for other people's feelings or well-being.

Passive: Passive behaviour occurs when people choose not to take responsibility for their own decisions by allowing other people to make decisions for them. Not standing up for your own rights allows others to take advantage of you.

Assertive: Assertive behaviour occurs when people do not let others control them, when they stand up for their rights and when they express their true feelings.

To become more assertive, first the situations where you are behaving non-assertively and would like to change need to be identified. Think of what outcome you want and how you have been unable to achieve this with non-assertive communication. As you start to develop assertive skills, choose simple situations in which you will find it easier to change your behaviour. Deal with major problems when you have built up your skill level.

Some guidelines to help you

These guidelines aim to help you deal with problem situations more assertively.

1. Decide what you want and what you do not want. Notice how you feel. Be clear about exactly what it is you want to say. Write it down if it helps to clarify your thoughts. Try to structure your request in the following way:

When you	(behaviour)
I feel	(your response/emotion)
And	(consequences)
I would prefer that	(desired new behaviour)
If you are able to do this	(positive consequences)
If you are unable to do this	(negative consequences).

A paragraph constructed in this way would look like this. "When you come late to project group meetings I get really angry. It wastes the time of all of us who do get here and we don't get the value of your ideas. I would prefer it if you made it on time or let us know if you are going to be late. If you are able to do this we can get started on time. If you let us know you will be late, we can get your contributions later. If you are unable to join us we will have to go ahead without you".

2. Arrange a time and place to discuss the issue that is convenient for everyone involved.
3. Define the problem situation. Be specific. Describe the facts and share your opinions and beliefs - for example "I won't pass my exams if I go out with you every night". Avoid judgments or interpretations.
4. Acknowledge your own feelings. This means saying for example, "I feel hurt" rather than "You hurt me". "I" messages connect the feeling statement with specific actions of the other person. For example "I feel worried when I don't know you are

going to be late". Talking about your feelings about the other person's actions can be valuable feedback.

5. Be specific about what you would like to happen particularly in relation to the behaviours involved. Describe the positive consequences that will result from the change. State what you intend to do in order to take care of yourself if your wishes are not accommodated.

Assertiveness involves non-verbal behaviour including body language, the ability to listen and to be receptive to another's point of view. It is important to make good use of gestures and facial expressions for emphasis. Maintain firm eye contact without staring. Use a clear and firm voice. These are essential aspects of communicating an assertive attitude. It is important not to pretend to understand what the other person is saying if you don't. Ask for clarification at the same time acknowledging the other person's feelings and position. When there is a conflict between your needs and wishes and those of the other party, finding a solution that totally satisfies both parties will be difficult. Look instead for a workable compromise - a solution that you can both live with.

It is important to prepare yourself against possible aggressive and manipulative attempts to counter your new assertive behaviour. Here are two classic manipulation strategies and some techniques to help you handle them.

Laughing it off

This strategy involves the other person making a joke to trivialise your request for more cooperative behaviour. For example, you have requested the person (using the assertive techniques above) to be at project group meetings on time. In response they joke "I was only two hours late to the last meeting, I've got to work on being less punctual!" Use what is called "the broken record" technique: choose a concise sentence and say it over and over again, calmly and clearly. Briefly acknowledge that you have heard the other person's point and then repeat your statement "Yes, and what I was saying was..."

Accusations and threats

This strategy involves the other person responding to your request for more cooperative behaviour with blaming, personal attacks or threats. Use what is called "fogging". In fogging you acknowledge something in the criticism with which you can agree and ignore the rest, "That may be so. I still need to talk to you about our project." The technique acknowledges someone's right to their position and understanding of their objection, without giving in to it "I can see you're upset and angry and I can understand why."

Another technique is "defusing". In defusing the content of someone's anger is ignored and the possibility of a further response is put off until the other person has calmed down. "I realise you're angry right now. Let's talk about it later this afternoon." If you get further negative feedback at this intervention, return to the other techniques given above.

Further reading

Alberti, R.E. and Emmons, M.E. (1996) *Your perfect right: a guide to assertive living* (6th ed.) San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers

Davis, M., Eshelman, R.E. and McKay, M. (1995) *The relaxation and stress reduction workbook* California: New Harbinger Publications

Smith, M.J. (1975) *When I say no, I feel guilty*. New York: Bantam Books.