About Assertiveness Welcome

“I found the conversation itself particularly stressful, but I did my best to politely and honestly explain the situation. My friend took it pretty well! I felt surprisingly good after the conversation as I am not usually assertive in such situations. In hindsight, being assertive was so simple and practical, it was a bit of a revelation.”

Participant

Assertiveness is a style of communicating with people where one says what one really wants, while respecting the rights of others. Assertiveness is an important communication skill which helps us to be more independent and more responsible for ourselves and our emotions. Everyone benefits from learning about assertive communication, but this is particularly important for people with depression, some of whom have never learned these skills.

Assertiveness is different to aggressive behaviour, which involves disrespect towards others. And, assertiveness is different to passive behaviour, which is when people don’t say what they want. Here are some more examples.

Styles of Communication

Passive Communication

People who act passively don’t express their opinions, they defer to others’ choices, they apologise unnecessarily, and they ignore their own feelings and wishes. Consequently, they don’t have their needs met, they feel hurt, frustrated and resentful, and tend to have low self esteem.

Aggressive Communication

People who act aggressively tend to express their opinions forcefully and rudely, they make choices for others, and they ignore others’ feelings & wishes. Consequently, they get their “own way”, but hurt and alienate others. Some people confuse this for assertive communication when it isn’t.

Assertive Communication

People who act assertively express their opinions respectfully. They make their own choices, while considering themselves and others. They also allow others to make their own choices. As a consequence; they usually have their needs met, they feel empowered and confident, they get along with others, and have they have healthy self-esteem.
Let’s look at an example:

Imagine that a friend of yours asks you to look after her children this coming Saturday while she goes to lunch with some other friends. You do not have any particular plans. However, you were hoping to catch up with some of your friends or go for a walk after a stressful week at work.

What would you say to your friend?

RESPONSE A.

“Umm.. sure, ok.”

Even though you feel a little irritated that she has assumed you do not have any plans and expects that you give up your Saturday, you say nothing and agree to look after her children.

RESPONSE B.

“What am I? A baby-sitter? You should really think about hiring someone rather than asking your friend's to give up their social lives! I’ve got better things to do than look after your children.”

RESPONSE C.

“I understand that you’d like me to look after your kids on Saturday. I was thinking about catching up with some friends or taking some time for myself as I’ve had a really hard week at work. Is there someone else you could ask?”

Which response is most helpful?

Was your response passive, aggressive or assertive?

Remember, if you make no response or do something when you don’t want to it is a passive response, no matter how you may justify it!

Obviously Response A was passive, Response B was aggressive and Response C was assertive (and the best response!)

You may find the idea of being assertive a little daunting at first, but this guide will provide you with the skills needed to respect yourself and others while communicating effectively.
How Do You Communicate?

We are all able to communicate using these three different styles, and often, we’ll act differently depending on who we’re talking to. But, if you use the passive or aggressive style of communication more than assertiveness, you might find it harder to get-on with other people. This can impact on your emotional wellbeing and keep the symptoms of depression and anxiety going.

It’s often useful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What style of communication do I usually use (passive, aggressive, or assertive)?
- How does that tend to make me feel?
- Do I want to communicate in another way?

Depression, Anxiety and Assertiveness

Often, people with depression and anxiety don’t consistently act in an assertive way. This often results in feeling frustrated, feeling resentful (of themselves and others), and reduces self-esteem.

So, why do people with depression and anxiety have difficulty acting assertively? Well, it seems that it is because they fear that it will lead to a negative response from the other person. As you know, in some situations, people with depression and anxiety sometimes have different thoughts compared to other people who don’t have depression and anxiety.

For example, people with depression and anxiety often think the following:

- “If I say that, they’ll get really angry”
- “If I say no to their request then they will think I am selfish”
- “If I disagree they will question me and I won’t know what to say”
- “My opinion doesn’t count – they won’t listen to me”
- “If this turns into an argument, I will freeze up and look weak”
- “If I say how I really feel, it will hurt their feelings”
- “People don’t listen to me, so why bother?”

These kinds of predictions can prevent people from being assertive, which can in turn lead to a build up of frustration and resentment, and a loss of self-esteem.

Such predictions are not only unhelpful, they are often also unrealistic. They commonly include thinking errors (such as “all or nothing” thinking, or jumping to conclusions) and can be challenged just like other negative predictions.

You can look at the following points to help you consider how to communicate effectively with others, and to think more realistically about being assertive:
1. Just like everyone else, you have the right to behave assertively. You can choose to communicate directly, honestly and respectfully – it is up to you to consider the situation and decide if this is what you want to do.

2. Other people cannot read your mind, and should not be expected to. If you want other people to consider your point of view, you must let them know what your point of view is, openly and honestly.

3. You cannot read others’ minds, and should not be expected to. It is not up to you to anticipate other people’s feelings and reactions. If someone else is unhappy with your behaviour it is up to them to tell you so.

4. Other people’s feelings are not your responsibility. People’s feelings are based on their own individual thoughts and interpretations, which are not something that you can control. It is your responsibility to be polite and respectful – but this will not guarantee that others will never feel hurt or angry.

5. You cannot control how other people will respond to you. Even if you are assertive it does not mean that others will respect your feelings or do what you would like. If this is the case, you will need to respect their feelings as well as your own, and perhaps make another attempt to resolve the issue when you are both feeling calm. At the very least, you will know that you have made a reasonable attempt to solve the problem.

6. Sometimes when people start to be assertive for the first time their family members, friends and colleagues do not respond positively. They may interpret your behaviour as aggressive simply because it is different from your behaviour in the past. If this happens to you, remember that others are probably surprised by your new way of relating, and will adjust to it in time.

Assertiveness is a skill
And, like other skills, it takes practice. But, if you practice, you will get better at it. And, there will be some times when it doesn’t seem to work, while at other times you’ll probably be very pleased with how effective and successful it is.

Tips for Acting Assertively

Other Tips for Acting Assertively
If someone says or does something that you don’t like, it can sometimes be difficult to think about what to say and how to say it. You can speak assertively to people by using the following formula:

1. Say what the problem is and how you felt about it
2. Say what you would like them to do about it
3. Say what the consequences will be

Example 1
If your co-worker makes a decision about an important project that you’re both involved in, using the formula above, you could say the following:

- When you “did not consult with me about that issue” I felt disrespected and upset.
- I would like you to consider my opinion in the future.
- If you do that, we’ll get on better, if you don’t there will probably be tension between us and the project will suffer.

**Example 2**

If someone says something rude or inappropriate to you, for example, “You don’t know what you’re talking about”, using the formula above, you could say the following:

- When you said “I don’t know what I’m talking about” I felt dismissed and angry.
- I don’t want to be treated like that in the future.
- If you can respect my opinion, even if you don’t agree with it, we’ll get on better. If you don’t there will probably be tension between us.

Some key things to remember when practicing assertiveness include:

- **Be specific**, that is, what exactly is the problem?
- **Talk about solutions**, that is, what exactly you want done about it
- **Be objective**, that is, tell the person how you feel and why, remembering that you have the right to express your feelings
- Remember that they don’t have to do what you want, but it’s important that you know that you have the right to an opinion as well

Finally, please remember that being assertive is a skill that requires practice. Don’t expect that you’ll become good at being assertive overnight, but do practice regularly, and you’ll see and experience the benefits!

Good luck!

The team from THIS WAY UP Clinic