

Assertiveness

By being assertive, not only are we being more effective in communicating but we also gain greater feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Assertiveness is a learned art. It feels good to stand up for what we believe and to do so with a positive and responsible style. Assertiveness is not just an issue for troubled people; it is an issue for everybody.

Ways People Deal With Issues

- **Passive** - involves ignoring our own rights to express honest feelings, thoughts and beliefs and consequently permitting others to take advantage. Or, it may be expressing one's thoughts and feelings in such an apologetic, putting oneself down manner that others can easily disregard them. Here the total message communicated is - *I do not count. My feelings do not matter, only yours do. My thoughts are not important; yours are the only ones worth listening to. I am nothing, you are superior.* Body posture is usually slouched and timid. Voice is weak and ineffectual.
- **Aggressive** - involves directly standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way that is often dishonest, usually inappropriate and violates the rights of the other person. The usual goal of aggression is dominating and winning, forcing the other person to lose. Winning is assured by humiliating, degrading, belittling, or overpowering other people so they become weaker and less able to express and defend their needs and rights. The basic message is - *This is what I think, you are stupid for believing otherwise. This is what I want, what you want is not important. This is what I feel; your feelings do not count.* Body posture is usually tight. Voice is usually loud, accusing and strained.
- **Assertive** - involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways that do not violate another person's rights. The basic message is - *This is what I think. This is what I feel. This is how I see the situation.* This message expresses who the person is and is said without dominating, humiliating, or degrading the other person. Body posture is erect, with eye contact. Voice is clear and audible.



Steps In Assertive Communication

When we are in the thick of a stressful situation it is often difficult to recall the new methods we have learned. Instead, the natural response is to let anxiety take over and go back to our usual habits (eg running away, losing our temper, having a drink, etc).

Here is a little trick to help you remember the principles of assertiveness. Think of the word **ARISE**. No matter how panicky or stressed you might feel, you have time to recall one word. Remembering this word gives you an extra bit of control. Each first letter of the words is a reminder of the basic steps of assertiveness-

Assess the situation and your feelings. Clarify your perceptions. Review your assumptions. It can be as simple as asking - *What did you say?* Take stock of your feelings. You can privately acknowledge your anger, fear, or tension and still be in enough control to assertively deal with the situation.

Recognize your rights. What do you want? Acknowledge your right to express an opinion, to make a request or a refusal. In most cases you have the right to not be rushed; likewise you do not have to explain all the whys of your opinion.

I statements - speak directly, honestly, clearly, and **for yourself**. It is your feeling. It is your opinion. Own it. Keep it simple and stay on topic. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by irrelevant information or side issues.

Style - look directly at the other person and even though frightened, stand erect. Even if angry, do not shout and do use clear words.

Equality of others should be respected. Others have a right to request or refuse too! Be responsible with your assertion. If you are respectful, there is no reason to feel guilty about being assertive, no matter how they react. Humiliation or trying to get the upper hand is irresponsible and cruel. Listen to the other person. Acknowledge their feelings. It is possible to honestly offer something positive to the other person yet still be in disagreement. For example, *I know you worked hard on this project, but I see things that I think need to be changed.*

Common Obstacles To Assertiveness

Why should I change? It is not my personality to be assertive.

I am afraid to be assertive

It does not always work.

Some responses to these obstacles include -

- You are the expert on whether you should be assertive. Ask yourself the question, *Am I satisfied with my communication skills?*
- Everyone is afraid to one degree or another, but by being assertive our fears decrease.
- No one said that assertiveness guarantees getting what you want. What assertiveness does guarantee is that you have made a sincere and effective effort at communicating and/or solving a problem.
- Assertiveness always succeeds in maintaining self-respect.

Try being assertive. Make note of your experience and the reaction of others.