

Kwantlen Counselling Services Present...

An Introduction to Assertiveness

What is assertiveness? Simply put, it is the direct, honest, appropriate expression of your feelings, thoughts, needs, wants, opinions or rights in a way that respects the rights of others. It's direct - your message is clear and not manipulative; you do not beat around the bush. It's honest - you say what you mean and feel; your body language matches your words. It's appropriate - the other person is open to honest communication; the time and place are right. You always have the choice to respond passively, aggressively or assertively, and each choice has its appropriate times. However, in most situations, you will benefit by choosing assertiveness. There are many areas of life where assertiveness is helpful: refusing requests; giving and receiving compliments; giving and receiving criticism; and asking someone to change their behaviour toward you are a few examples.

The Basic Tenets of an Assertive Philosophy

1. By standing up for our rights we show we respect ourselves and achieve respect from others.
2. By trying to govern our lives so we never hurt anyone, we end up hurting ourselves *and* others.
3. Sacrificing our rights can result in destroying relationships or preventing them from forming.
4. Not letting others know how we feel and what we think is a form of selfishness.
5. Sacrificing our rights usually results in training other people to mistreat us.
6. If we don't tell others how their behaviour negatively affects us, we are denying them an opportunity to change.
7. We can make our own choices and do not have to suffer from the "tyranny of the shoulds".
8. When we do what we think is right for us, we feel better about ourselves and have more authentic and satisfying relationships with others.
9. We all have a natural right to courtesy and respect.
10. We all have a right to express ourselves as long as we don't violate the rights of others.
11. We have much to gain in life by standing up for ourselves and honoring the rights of others.
12. When we are assertive, everyone involved usually benefits.

Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Behaviour

	Passive	Aggressive	Assertive
Communication	shy, closed, inhibited	pushy, loud, explosive	open, honest, direct
Posture	stooped, sagging	stiff, towering, leans forward (threatening)	facing the other, upright, relaxed
Eyes	looking down	staring, glaring	appropriate eye contact
Face	over-smiling, timid, tense, controlled	rigid, tense, uncontrolled	relaxed, appropriate expression
Voice	quiet, whispering	loud, harsh, raspy	firm, moderate volume
Language	filled with excuses and hidden meanings	accusing, attacking, angry words	clear messages, says what is wanted, honest

Emotions	low-key, hidden	high-key, hurtful	appropriate, direct
Choices	follows others	forces choices on others	chooses for self
Personal Rights	violated	violates	respects, accepts
Benefits	avoids risks, stays safe	control over others	self-respect, self-esteem, growth
Results	frustration, depression, unmet needs	frustration, anger, unmet needs	finishes tasks, meets needs

The Process of Assertive Communication

1. **Get in touch with your own objectives and feelings.** Think about what you want to say before you begin talking.
2. **Look for common ground: begin by acknowledging the other person.** Remember and let them know they are okay; identify grounds for agreement.
3. **Describe the situation and how it feels to you.** Describe the behavior or situation rather than blaming them; make your feelings and thoughts known, in a non-judgmental way.
4. **Specify what you want.** Communicate your desire in specific and objective terms; remember: it is okay to want what you want.
5. **Be direct and to the point.** Use simple language and short sentences; use active instead of passive language. Minimize the use of adjectives as they usually dilute the message.
6. **Listen to the other person's response and feedback.** Use listening skills to appreciate their concerns, intentions and feelings.

Choose Assertive Words Carefully

To communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions assertively, choose words that are direct, honest, appropriate and respectful. People avoid being direct and honest because they learned early in life to think it was impolite or pushy. Unfortunately, sometimes we are so "careful" we don't communicate the real message.

1. **Use "I statements" rather than "you statements":** "You always interrupt my stories!" (aggressive) versus "I would like to tell my stories without interruption" (assertive).
2. **Use factual descriptions instead of judgments or exaggerations:** "This is sloppy work!" (aggressive) versus "The punctuation in your report needs work. Also, your headings are spaced inconsistently" (assertive).
3. **Express thoughts, feelings, and opinions reflecting ownership:** "He makes me so angry!" (denies ownership of feelings) versus "I get so angry when he breaks his promises!" (assertive and shows ownership of feelings).
4. **Use clear, direct requests or directives (commands):** "If it's not too much trouble, would you mind taking this to John?" (passive, indirect) versus "Will you please take this to John?" (direct, assertive request) or "Please take this to John." (respectful command).

Final Advice

As you try these skills, expect to feel uncomfortable and awkward at first - it's a natural response to change. Likewise, expect others to be resistant at first to your efforts to change. Go slowly and start small! For more information on this topic, talk to a Kwantlen Counsellor.

Sources: Lloyd, S. R. (1988). *Developing positive assertiveness* and Doty, L. (1987). *Communication and assertion skills for older persons*.

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