

# **SPEAK UP, SPEAK OUT!**

## *Assertiveness*



The American Heritage Dictionary defines assertiveness training as “a method of training a person to become more self-confident and boldly affirmative in his or her interpersonal relationships.” The key to this definition is self-confidence. Being self-confident allows you to value yourself and therefore recognize your own importance. Self-confidence also allows you to respect others’ rights as well. The balance between self-respect and respect for others encourages harmony. This is the foundation for assertiveness – it allows you to express your rights and to avoid violating the rights of others.

### **PASSIVE COMMUNICATION**

Passive communication means not expressing yourself and your rights to be heard. Sometimes it is a reasonable strategy to be more passive and not express yourself. Other times, being passive means you are not given the respect you deserve in an interaction or relationship. If you find yourself never expressing yourself or asserting your rights, you may develop some strong negative feelings of resentment toward others or even toward yourself for not being more assertive. Sometimes people are passive because they do not see the difference between aggression and assertiveness or do not believe that they deserve to be heard and respected. For instance, if a roommate is keeping you up late by being loud and inviting friends back to your room on a continuous basis, you may choose to ignore the behavior to keep the peace because he has bullied you in the past. With that said, you have the right to be angry, to be respected, and feel comfortable in your own room, but you’re ignoring these rights to “keep the peace.” The “peace” brought on by passive communication is, however, an



illusion because you only continue to feel resentful and may lose self-respect. Furthermore, the resentment building up inside of you represents an unstable element which will likely explode into some form of aggressive or violent behavior in the future. Thus, the very behavior you seek to avoid by being passive may be the result of being passive.

## **AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION**

Aggressive behavior is at the other extreme from passive behavior. In aggressive behavior, the individual expresses feelings, either ignoring or squashing the rights of others. Those who have self-respect yet feel entitled or believe that their rights are more important than the rights of others, tend to exhibit aggressive communication. While some of us often mistake assertiveness for aggressiveness, it is important to recognize the difference. Aggressive communication is used by individuals who either lack the understanding and/or respect for the rights of other individuals, while assertiveness recognizes that differences exist but that the rights of all have to be heard and considered to resolve differences.

## **MOVING TO ASSERTIVENESS**

Developing a new skill is difficult enough. Kicking a bad habit can seem almost impossible. Learning assertive communication can, therefore, be difficult for a variety of reasons. Any skill must be practiced to create proficiency. Until assertive communication has been used for a period of time, it may bring about feelings of discomfort and awkwardness. Keep practicing because the right words will come. Continue to recognize your anxiety and find ways to work through it, such as deep breathing and positive statements. When learning to be assertive you might be afraid of hurting others or being rejected. It is important to remember that creating boundaries out of respect and honesty leads to healthier relationships.

Learning to be assertive may mean changing some very strong and embedded ways of thinking about yourself, about others, and how you relate to them. You may need to challenge yourself when you find you do not like the way you are being treated by someone else but it just feels easier to accept their behavior even though you are angry or hurt.



When developing the ability to be assertive, you will find that you are much more comfortable with yourself and those around you. You will have the ability to be adaptable – sometimes choosing to be more quiet but knowing that you can speak up for yourself when you feel it is important and that you will do it in a way that does not intimidate or hurt those who are important to you.

The first step in developing assertiveness skills is to assess your behavior in situations you have encountered. Identify some times when you have second guessed yourself and said, “I wish I had said something rather than let them get their way.” What were you thinking to yourself about the other person? What were you afraid would happen if you spoke up? What did you do instead of speaking up? Afterward how did you feel about yourself? How did you feel about the other person? As you reflect on the situation, what was likely to be the worst thing that could have happened if you had expressed yourself?

Identify a time when you said to yourself, “I wish I had not been so pushy in that situation,” or you felt that others stepped back from you. What happened that you question how you might have been too pushy? How did the other person respond to your behavior? If you got what you wanted at that time, what was the longer term impact of what happened?

It is important to consider the rights and feelings of other people in your communications. If you always put yourself aside and go along with the other person, your behavior may be too passive. Think of a relationship where this pattern fits. What do you think of this relationship? Is it what you would like? Is it satisfying to you? Does it feel balanced, or do you feel like you give too much, perhaps harboring some resentment toward this person? Do you sometimes lose your temper with this person for some little thing they do? You may be “gunny sacking” or storing up all your resentment until you cannot hold it any longer. How does this feel afterward?

If you always discount or ignore the other person’s rights, preferences, or feelings, and have little empathy for them, your behavior may be too aggressive. Think of a relationship that fits this pattern. What do you think of the relationship? Is it what you would like? What do you think they would like? Is it satisfying to you to be in control most of the time? What is it like for them not to have much say or control in the relationship? What are they likely to think over time as this pattern continues? Does the



other person sometimes get very angry at you for something little? Do they withdraw and say less to you over time?

Are you able to express yourself in constructive ways and hear what the other person is saying? Are you able to be flexible in your interactions with this person – hearing them. You may not always be able to give everyone what they want but you can let others know that you hear and respect them. This is assertive behavior.

If you were to replay each of these situations, how could you behave differently that would show you hear and respect the rights of others? Sometimes it helps to actually write down what you might have done in this situation and practice it with someone you trust and respect. What are the thoughts that might keep you from being assertive? Are you afraid you might hurt someone's feelings? Are you afraid you might not get your way or feel in control? Identify what you can tell yourself instead of these thoughts. Certified counselors can help you identify ways of thinking that will prevent you from exhibiting behaviors that are too passive or too aggressive.

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