

Learning Unit 1 / Activity 1.5: **Annex 2****Assertiveness**

This page provides some simple tips and techniques that you can use to improve your assertiveness skills and also help others to express themselves in a more assertive way.

Being assertive can help us to feel better about ourselves - [improving self-esteem](#) and [personal confidence](#).

Sometimes the way we react and respond to others can make us feel inadequate, guilty or regretful. These may be signs of passive behaviour. We may also feel angry and critical of others during conversations - this may be a sign of more aggressive behaviour.

This page details some ways that both passive and aggressive communication can be reduced and replaced with assertive communication, which in turn will lead to more positive interpersonal interactions.

When practising these assertiveness techniques it is important to remember what assertiveness is and its importance in the communication process.

Being assertive is not the same as being aggressive; on the contrary, assertiveness means standing up for what you believe.

Assertiveness is expressing your thoughts, emotions, beliefs and opinions in an honest and appropriate way. As assertiveness should be encouraged in others it is also important to remember that we should always respect the thoughts, feelings, opinions and beliefs of other people.

Assertiveness allows individuals to assert their personal rights without undermining the rights of others. Assertiveness is considered a balanced response, being neither passive nor aggressive, with self-confidence playing an important part. An assertive person responds as an equal to others and aims to be open in expressing their wishes, thoughts and feelings.

General Techniques of Assertiveness

Two key techniques that can aid assertiveness are known as "Fogging" and the "Stuck Record" technique.

Fogging

Fogging is a useful technique if people are behaving in a manipulative or aggressive way.

Rather than arguing back, fogging aims to give a minimal, calm response using terms that are placating but not defensive, while at the same time not agreeing to meet demands.

Fogging involves agreeing with any truth that may be contained within statements, even if critical. By not responding in the expected way, in other words by being defensive or argumentative, the other person will cease confrontation as the desired effect is not being achieved. When the atmosphere is less heated, it will be possible to discuss the issues more reasonably.

Fogging is so termed because the individual acts like a 'wall of fog' into which arguments are thrown, but not returned.

Example Situation

"What time do you call this? You're nearly half an hour late, I'm fed up with you letting me down all the time."

Fogging response:

"Yes, I am later than I hoped to be and I can see this has annoyed you."

"Annoyed? Of course I'm annoyed, I've been waiting for ages. You really should try to think about other people a bit more."

Fogging response:

"Yes, I was concerned that you would be left waiting for almost half an hour."

"Well... why were you late?"

The Stuck Record Technique

The Stuck Record technique employs the key assertive skill of '*calm persistence*'.

It involves repeating what you want, time and time again, without raising the tone of your voice, becoming angry, irritated, or involved in side issues.

Example Situation

Imagine that you are returning something that is faulty to a store. The conversation may go as follows.

"I bought these shoes last week and the heels have fallen off. I would like a refund please."

"It looks like they've been worn a lot and these shoes were only designed for occasional wear."

Stuck Record technique response:

"I have only had them a week and they are faulty. I would like a refund please."

"You cannot expect me to give you your money back after you've worn them out."

Stuck Record technique response:

"The heels have fallen off after only a week and I would like a refund please."

... and so on.

Continually repeating a request will ensure the discussion does not become side-tracked and involved in irrelevant argument. The key is to stay calm, be very clear in what you want, stick to the point and not give up.

Accept a compromise only if you are happy with the outcome.

Positive and Negative Enquiry

Positive Enquiry

Positive enquiry is a simple technique for handling positive comments such as praise and compliments.

People often struggle with responding to praise and compliments, especially those with lower self-esteem as they may feel inadequate or that the positive comments are not justified. It is important to give positive feedback to others when appropriate but also to react appropriately to positive feedback that you receive.

Positive enquiry is used to find out more details about the compliment or praise given, and agree with it:

Example Situation

Sender:

"You made an excellent meal tonight, it was delicious!"

Receiver:

"Thanks. Yes, it was good. What did you like about it in particular?"

This is different from a passive response that may have been:

"It was no effort" or "It was just a standard recipe"

Negative Enquiry

The opposite of positive enquiry is negative enquiry. Negative enquiry is a way to respond to more negative exchanges such as receiving criticism.

Dealing with criticism can be difficult, remember that any criticism received is just somebody's opinion.

Negative enquiry is used to find out more about critical comments and is a good alternative to more aggressive or angry responses to criticism.

Example Situation

Sender:

"That meal was practically inedible, I can't remember the last time I ate something so awful"

Receiver:

"It wasn't the best, exactly what didn't you like about it?"

This is different from an aggressive response that may have been:

"How dare you, I spent all afternoon preparing that meal" or "Well that's the last time I cook for you"

Why people are not assertive

There are many reasons why people may act and respond in a non-assertive way and this pages examines some of the most common.

When people are not assertive they can suffer from a loss of confidence and self-esteem, which is more likely to make them less assertive in the future. It is therefore important to break the cycle and learn to be more assertive, whilst at the same time respecting the views and opinions of other people. We all have a right to express our feelings, values and opinions.

Reasons People are Not Assertive

Low Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

Feelings of low self-esteem or self-worth often lead to individuals dealing with other people in a passive way.

By not asserting their rights, expressing their feelings or stating clearly what they want, those with low self-esteem or self-confidence may invite others to treat them in the same way. Low self-esteem is reinforced in a vicious circle of passive response and reduced self-confidence.

Roles

Certain roles are associated with non-assertive behaviour, for example low status work roles or the traditional role of women. Stereotypically, women are seen as passive, while men are expected to be more aggressive.

There can be great pressure on people to conform to the roles that are placed upon them. You may be less likely to be assertive to your boss at work than you would be to a colleague or co-worker who you considered to be at an equal or lower level than you in the organisation.

Past Experience

Many people learn to respond in a non-assertive way through experience or through modelling their behaviour on that of parents or other role models. Learnt behaviour can be difficult to unlearn and the help of a counsellor may be needed.

Stress

When people are stressed they often feel like they have little or no control over the events their lives.

People who are stressed or anxious can often resort to passive or aggressive behaviour when expressing their thoughts and feelings. This is likely to increase the feelings of stress and potentially make others feel stressed or anxious as a result.

Personality Traits

Some people believe they are either passive or aggressive by nature, in other words that they were born with certain traits and that there is little they can do to change their form of response.

This is very nearly always an incorrect assumption since everybody can learn to be more assertive even if their natural tendencies are passive or aggressive.

Assertiveness Rights and Responsibilities

To be assertive is to understand that everyone has basic human rights that should be respected and upheld.

Responding passively can allow such rights to be neglected or ignored. In contrast, when behaving aggressively the rights of others can be abused.

Rights that are considered 'personal rights' will vary from person to person and will differ from culture to culture.

An individual's assertive rights should always include:

- The right to express feelings, opinions, values and beliefs.
- The right to change one's mind.
- The right to make decisions.
- The right to say "*I don't know*" and/or "*I don't understand*".
- The right to say "*no*" without feeling bad or guilty.
- The right to be non-assertive.
- The right to personal freedom, to be one's self.
- The right to privacy, to be alone and independent.

It is often necessary to balance the needs of others against our own. Consideration needs to be given as to when it is appropriate to assert personal rights and when it is not.

Dealing with non-assertiveness

Learning how to behave assertively is all very well but how do you deal with non-assertive behaviour in others?

Every interaction is at least two-way, and learning how to deal assertively with others' non-assertive behaviour is an important skill.

The temptation is to respond aggressively or passively to other people's passive or aggressive behaviour. This may be particularly the case if they make you angry.

This page, however, explains how to deal effectively and assertively with both passive and aggressive behaviour.

Dealing with Passive Behaviour

People often behave in a passive way because of low self-esteem or confidence. By behaving assertively, you should aim to make clear that the other person's contributions are valued, and therefore improve their confidence and self-esteem.

Remember that it is possible to value someone's contribution without necessarily agreeing with it.

As well as being more assertive ourselves, assertiveness should also be encouraged in others so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions freely without feeling under pressure to say certain things.

Assertiveness in others can be encouraged by using well-honed interpersonal skills such as listening, questioning, reflection and clarification.

Some ways to demonstrate that you value the other person's contribution:

- Encourage their contribution through open questioning, by asking their opinions, and by drawing people into the discussion in group situations.
- Listen closely to what someone has to say before continuing the conversation. If necessary, use questioning techniques to clarify their opinion before responding with your own.
- Show that you are interested in what someone has to say through appropriate questioning, reflecting, clarification and summarising skills.
- Show that you value the other person's contribution through the use of appropriate verbal and non-verbal communications such as nodding, smiling, good eye contact and encouraging language.
- Encourage people to be more open in voicing their feelings, wishes and ideas.
- Do not allow yourself to take responsibility for decisions that should be made jointly. Instead, support others to make their contribution to the discussion.

The more a person is able to contribute and feel that their contribution is valued, the more they will feel valued as an individual. The experience of positive feedback will help to increase a person's self-confidence. The whole chain of events should enable the person concerned to overcome any passive reactions and behave more assertively.

Top Tip!

If you know that someone tends to behave passively in a discussion or decision-making group, then take time beforehand to discuss their views with them. If you know how they feel, you can help them to express those views in the group.

Dealing with Aggressive Behaviour

Handling aggressive behaviour in others is particularly difficult when it is accompanied by negative attitudes.

To avoid responding defensively or aggressively, **self-control** is required. It should be noted that aggressive behaviour here refers to verbal and non-verbal messages and not to any form of physical violence.

Key strategies that can help to deal with aggressive behaviour:

- Maintain self-control. Although anger can sometimes be a positive force, responding in a similarly angry manner will do little to discourage aggression. If appropriate, be prepared to take time to think over issues before entering into discussion. It might be helpful to say something like, *“I need time to think about that”* or *“Can we talk about this tomorrow when we have more time?”*.
- Remember that other people have a right to their emotions, including anger. Acknowledge their anger, for example, by saying *‘I can see that this has really upset you, and you’re very angry about it’*.
- Pausing, or counting to ten, before responding to an outburst can help to avoid answering in an automatic, defensive or aggressive way.
- Avoid argument and defensiveness and try to maintain calm.
- Try to find areas of agreement with the other person, rather than focusing on the disagreements.
- Find and demonstrate ways in which decisions and solutions can be shared, e.g. *“How can we find a solution to this?”*
- Try to show some empathy with the other person; how do **you** feel when you are angry with others?

Assertiveness is a useful communication tool. It's application is contextual and it's not appropriate to be assertive in all situations. Remember, your sudden use of assertiveness may be perceived as an act of aggression by others.

There's also no guarantee of success, even when you use assertive communication styles appropriately.

Examples

1. Scenario: Your mother wants you to come over to her house right away so you can help her sort through items she wants to sell at a garage sale. You had planned to spend the evening relaxing, taking a soothing bath, and just lounging around because you've had a rough week at work.

“I understand you need help, and I would like to help you. Today, I need to take care of myself because I'm very run-down. I can better help you tomorrow. Would that work for you?”

Part of being assertive is caring for yourself and valuing your needs just as much as the other person's needs. An assertive person says, “I am worthy of this. I deserve this”.

2. Scenario: You planned to meet up with your girlfriend to have a nice meal at a restaurant. You get there, but she's late – again. Every time you make plans, she seems to leave you waiting while she shows up 20-30 minutes after the scheduled meeting time.

“Did something happen unexpectedly that made you late? I feel hurt when I have to wait time and time again because you are often late. It makes me feel anxious and like I'm not a priority. Is there something I can do to help you fix this problem?”

Assertive people use “I” statements instead of hurling blame or insults at the other person. Offering to help come up with a solution lets the other person know that you care.

3. Scenario: Every day when you come home from work, your husband and kids ignore you and continue doing whatever they're doing. No one acknowledges you or asks you how your day was.

“I feel sad when I come home and no one seems happy to see me or asks how my day was. I feel lonely and not appreciated.”

Assertive people always state what the problem is instead of assuming that others know what they think, feel, or need.

4. Scenario: Your teenage son is known to get angry every time you try to tell him to clean up his room or help out around the house.

“I feel overburdened when you don’t pitch in and help keep the house clean and tidy. I understand that you don’t like having me remind you to clean your room, but it’s a task that needs to be done, and everyone needs to do their part.”

Sometimes we don’t express ourselves because we’re afraid of how the other person will react (Will he get angry? Will he not like me if I say this?). Assertive people understand that they have no responsibility for how the other person chooses to react – that’s on them. A normal human being will understand that we all have needs and desires and should be allowed to express them freely.

5. Scenario: Your boss wants you to do your co-worker’s report because she has fallen behind schedule, and he knows you work efficiently. This has happened frequently.

“This is the fourth time this month that I’ve been given extra work because Suzie has fallen behind. I want to be a team player, but I feel stressed when I’m overburdened. What can we do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

Stating the facts and expressing your own feelings helps avoid making the other person get their defenses up. Offering to help solve the problem expresses your concerns.

6. Scenario: You work full-time, have 3 small kids at home, and you teach yoga classes two nights a week. Some members of your church are badgering you to get involved in a fundraiser they’re having that requires a lot of work.

“This is not a priority for me. I will help out on the next fundraiser if I have time.”

Assertive people know that it’s perfectly fine to say no to something you don’t want to do. Explaining why you’re declining may be helpful, but it’s not necessary. Acquiescing doesn’t do anybody any good.

7. Scenario: Your brother-in-law asks to borrow \$500 and you doubt he has a history of defaulting on his financial obligations.

“My policy is to never lend money to friends or family members”.

Using a “policy statement” is a good way to express your core beliefs and delineate what you will and won’t do.

8. Scenario: Your spouse is yelling and complaining that you’re not devoting enough time and attention to the household. He launches into a long list of what he perceives to be your character flaws.

**“I see you are angry. I hear you saying that you think I should spend more time doing ____.
However, I disagree with you, and here’s why.”**

Assertive people don’t get caught up in anger or strong emotions. They acknowledge the other person’s thoughts and feelings, but then honestly express their own as well.

9. Scenario: Someone in the car you are riding in decides to sing offkey and continues doing it for 20 minutes. It begins to get on your nerves and you politely ask her to stop, but she doesn’t.

“I know you like to sing, but I simply can’t tolerate it right now. If you don’t stop, I’m going to stop the car and get out.”

Sometimes being assertive involves telling the other person the consequences of their actions. It’s alright to assert your needs and follow through with action that solidifies your own beliefs and desires.

Being assertive is something everyone gets better at the more they practice. No one responds assertively 100% of the time. When we get angry, we might slip into an aggressive mode. When we find ourselves in a situation where we face authoritative people, we might slip into passive mode. Your goal should be to practice your assertiveness skills and bring them into your relationships more and more. Maybe you have no problem being assertive with your family, but you have trouble with it at work. The most important part of being assertive is taking the time to notice how you feel and realize that you have the right to be true to yourself and express your thoughts and desires honestly.