

WELLNESS TIPS

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

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Assertive communication is a style of directly communicating your needs and desires. It conveys your belief that you have the right to do so, while also respecting the rights of others to request that their needs and desires also be met.

Assertively communicating contributes to one's feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, recognizing that you are acting in your own best interests.

An example of an assertive request: Asking a small group to consider meeting at another time because it works better for your schedule, while recognizing that others may have different preferences and conveying the message that you are willing to negotiate.

Assertive communication can help reduce stress in several ways: by setting limits on what you agree to take on to avoid becoming overloaded, asking for assistance when needed in a direct way, and not taking on responsibility for others' feelings or how they react to your assertiveness.

Assertiveness benefits relationships (personal, intimate, school, work) because it tends to be fair and supports balance in the relationship. By communicating your desires and needs, the other person doesn't have to guess or make assumptions about what you are thinking. Setting boundaries communicates with others what is acceptable and expected. It conveys a willingness to acknowledge the needs of the other person.

PASSIVE COMMUNICATION

Passive Communication is a communication style that is imbalanced in that more respect is given to the needs and desires of others rather than oneself. The passive communicator tends to say yes, typically agreeing to requests no matter if it is in their best interest or not. The message is that others' needs and desires are more important and take priority. One's own needs aren't considered and therefore may not be considered by others.

Examples: agreeing to talk with a friend who repeatedly calls at 7PM to discuss concerns, which is disruptive to your study routine. But you don't feel free to set limits on when or how long you can talk. You also don't feel free to ask this friend to talk about your concerns at other times. Or: when asked, a person who passively communicates has a pattern of not giving a preference for a restaurant to or what activity to pursue, typically accommodating the other person's preferences.

Passive communication can result in increased stress when someone becomes overloaded or overwhelmed with commitments because of inability to set limits on requests made of them. They may also engage in negative self-criticism, which contributes to feelings of low self-esteem. When one's needs are consistently not met, resentment and feeling taken advantage of can occur, which are harmful to relationships.

AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

People with an aggressive communication style act to meet their own needs. But they tend to do so by putting their needs above those of others, which conveys a lack of respect for others' rights to have their needs and desires considered.

Aggressive people tend to be focused on getting their own way and can be rude, pushy, and take what they want without asking. This communication style is problematic for relationships, conveying a lack of consideration and respect for others.

ADVANTAGES OF ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Using assertive communication doesn't guarantee you get what you have requested, but it increases the chances of it happening. It contributes to mutuality in relationships by considering each person's needs.

Remember, the difference between these types of communication is the degree of respect for oneself and the other person. Assertive communication aims for a balance.

Assertive behavior may look different in different circumstances, depending on the relationship and situation. For example, in some cases, declining a request once may be sufficient. Also, assertive behavior does not depend on the other person's agreeing with your reasons or rationale. Someone who is aggressive, for example, may be critical and discount or try to override what you are saying. Be prepared to set limits and stay the course. A technique called the broken record technique may be useful. This technique involves calmly repeating the same statement, such as "I'm not able to do that at this time", when your initial response is not accepted.

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

1. Focus on events/facts/behaviors.
"Arriving late has resulted in our having less time to work on the project."
2. Avoid using negative labels (for example - jerk, rude, lazy). They put the person on the defensive.
3. Avoid using judgmental labels or exaggerating when discussing an incident or something you don't like. Instead of saying "You always", you can say "This has happened the 3 times in the past week".
4. Keep things simple.
5. Using "I" statements is helpful.

In accepting responsibility for meeting your own needs, “I” statements focus on you and not the other person. You are taking ownership for your thoughts and feelings and how you are affected by what has happened.

“I think . . .”, “I feel . . . when”, “I would like. . .”,

“I would like you to . . .”, “I need . . .”

Because it is not placing blame or attacking the other person, it is less likely to put someone on the defensive than these comments:

“You need to . . .” or “You shouldn’t. . .” and you are more likely to have a productive discussion.

Other forms of “I” statements that focus on how you are impacted:

“when you . . . (results of the behavior), I feel”

Examples:

“When you aren’t ready to go at the agreed-on time, we arrive late, and I feel annoyed”

“When you cancel at the last minute, I am left without plans for the evening, and I feel disappointed and irritated”

6. Try to find a win-win solution.
Is there a compromise that will work for you both?
7. Use body language consistent with what you are saying.
Present yourself in a confident manner with open posture, while maintaining direct eye contact, neutral facial expression and neutral tone of voice.
8. Saying “no” is an assertive communication skill (see previous Wellness Tips).

Learning assertive communication takes practice. If someone tends to be passive, using assertive communication can initially feel aggressive because acting in one’s own interests is not yet a comfortable skill and one isn’t accustomed to acknowledging one’s rights to make requests. And receiving an assertive message may also feel aggressive as one hasn’t yet become comfortable in setting limits or saying no to requests.

Some circumstances may be more difficult for you communicate assertively. Begin practicing with easier situations. Ask someone to problem-solve how you could respond and role-play if that would be helpful.

There may be situations in which actively deciding not to be assertive is a reasonable decision.

Cruz, Zach M. Assertiveness Training: Mastering Assertive Communication to Learn How to be Yourself and Still Manage to Win the Respect of Others. Freedom Bound Publishing. 2019.

Mayo Clinic Healthy Lifestyle. "Being Assertive: Reduce Stress, Communicate Better." May 29, 2020.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/assertive/art-20044644>

Mind Tools. How to be Assertive: Asking for What You Want Firmly and Fairly.

<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Assertiveness.htm>

Paterson, Randy. The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships. New Harbinger Publications. 2000.

Verywell Mind. "Learn Assertive Communication in 5 Simple Steps." Elizabeth Scott. February 13, 2020.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/learn-assertive-communication-in-five-simple-steps-3144969>

If you would like assistance with becoming more skilled using assertive communication or have other concerns, feel free to contact an MSCC counselor.

Stay well and stay healthy!

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If you would like to review previous Wellness Tips, check the CCOM Medical Student Counseling Center Website:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>