

DECISION MAKING

Assertiveness

Assertiveness means demonstrating respect for yourself by standing up for yourself in a fair way, while respecting others by ensuring we don't hurt them. Some examples of this are:

- Expressing your own personal opinions and feelings
- Saying 'no' without feeling guilty
- Refusing to be used or taken for granted
- Asking for what you want
- Deciding not to voice anything, when you feel it's more appropriate to keep quiet

You may want to practise being more assertive if you find:

- It's difficult to do any of the above
- You have feelings of self-blame, depression and anxiety, frequently asking yourself, '*Why didn't I say.../If only I'd...*'
- You keep your annoyance inside, until one day it suddenly all bursts out, and people are shocked with your reaction (including yourself)

There are 3 basic styles of responses: passive, aggressive and assertive. Below are examples of each in response to a friend asking for help with their essay:

Passive – '*Sure, I'll help you with your essay!*' (while thinking about your own upcoming deadline)

Aggressive – '*You must be joking!*'

Assertive – '*Well, I'm busy now, but I'll have a look at it with you for half an hour, after lunch.*'

Being assertive means recognising yourself as an equal to others, treating yourself with the respect that you deserve, and thereby showing others how you'd like to be treated.

Problems with being passive

- Perhaps you react passively because you hope this will make people like you. You probably put yourself down: '*I never know what to do*'
- You stop yourself from expressing your opinion: '*I don't know/I don't mind/You choose*' and then you find that other people take the initiative and make decisions for you.
- Saying yes to requests becomes a default position.
- You often feel you're not being true to yourself.
- You feel 'used' by other people, and angry: '*Why do they always ask me to do it?*'

The underlying cause of behaving passively is often due to low self-confidence and self-esteem. Behaving passively actively invites others to believe you have no wishes or needs of your own. The way they will treat you then easily leads to feeling inferior. This negative self-perception is part of a vicious circle you can choose to opt out of.

Problems with being aggressive

The obvious aggressive responses are – shouting, swearing, pushing, bullying others. However, there are other responses which are much more subtle forms of aggression, for example: rushing someone into deciding; pressurising them to act in a certain way; telling them rather than asking; ignoring them; manipulating; and many other forms. Sometimes this is passed off as 'humour', but still has the same end effect. When someone is aggressive, the rights and self-esteem of others are ignored.

How do I start behaving assertively?

Here are some techniques to help you build your assertiveness.

Expressing emotion

Let the other person know how you feel, using 'I feel (+ an emotion)' statements. You can use the following statements to help build your conversation:

- Feeling: *"I feel/felt (annoyed/hurt/embarrassed/angry/sad....)"*
- Situation: *when you (speak to me like that/smoke round me/left without me...)*
- Suggestion: *I'd like it if/Let's/Could you (+ suggested solution)*
- Checking: *Is that OK with you?"*

If you react with an aggressive response to a stressful situation, it's very likely the other person will feel threatened and will react defensively.

Repeat, repeat, repeat

Keeping calm about your message, repeat it until the other person really listens and hopefully acts. For example:

A: *'You know that DVD I lent you last month? I want to watch it this evening. Can I have it back this afternoon, please?'*

B: *'I don't know where it is right now... somewhere in all this mess....'*

A: *'Can I have it back this afternoon, please?'*

B: *'Oh, I'm doing an assignment and haven't got time to look for it'*

A: *'Can I have it back this afternoon, please?'*

B: *'OK, hang on....'*

Planning and rehearsing

This stage is important. Using one of the techniques above, consider what you would like to say. Find a friend who's willing to listen, and practise saying it to them, until you feel you can do it 'live'. Of course, you'll be nervous, but that's natural as you're trying out new behaviour. Remember to:

- Keep it simple.
- Look the other person in the eye – this makes you more convincing.
- Keep your tone of voice consistent and calm.
- Don't apologise – unless you know you're in the wrong.

Once you've had a go, congratulate yourself on having tried and acknowledge your success.

Assertiveness means standing up for yourself, being open and honest about your needs and wishes. This communicates to others that you'd like to be respected. Equally, assertiveness means respecting the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people.

And it doesn't *always* get you what you want! It can enable you to choose relationships you feel good about, recognising that not everyone in the world will be caring towards you. You can have more control over your life and feel more relaxed and confident.

