

ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness helps to build positive relationships and helps you to work towards productive outcomes from your interactions with others. It is a form of behaviour rather than a type of person or personality, so as with any other form of behaviour, it is something that you can choose to do – or not – in any given circumstance. It is also important to say that the skills that underpin assertiveness need to be learnt and practised just like any other – riding a bike, cooking, learning a language.

The word 'assertive' is often used to mean aggressive and so there is sometimes a reluctance to learn about and practice assertive behaviour.

So let's start by looking at the characteristics of what aggressive and other non-assertive behaviours:

- Aggression can be loud, violent, sarcastic, overbearing, bullying.
- Passivity is the opposite of aggression and can be apologetic, indecisive, saying 'I don't mind', avoiding conflict, not speaking up.
- Lastly passive-aggression is being manipulative, deliberately sending mixed messages.

We all use these kinds of behaviour at one time or another and it can be helpful to reflect on what kind of behaviour habits you have developed in certain situations. Also – how does it feel to behave like this or to experience someone else using these behaviours?

None of these is assertiveness. Assertiveness is a form of behaviour that:

- shows respect for yourself and for others
- works to understand everyone's perspective so as to move forwards in positive ways
- is clear, specific and confident about your own preferences and desired outcomes
- is positive, constructive and flexible in working towards outcomes and solutions

Assertive behaviour consists of these steps:

- Decide the outcome you want
- Be specific about what you want and express it clearly
- Listen
- Demonstrate that you understand the other person's position
- Work on joint solutions

Let's look at these in turn:

Decide the outcome you want: The outcome must be practical and realistic, and the other person must be able to provide what you want. If not, you risk causing confusion and not getting what you want.

Be specific about what you want and express this clearly: If you have already decided on the outcome you want, this step will be straightforward. Make sure you use 'I' statements. Be sure to explain specifically what you want to happen. Aim to focus on the outcome so as not to get stuck in the 'complaining' stage.

Listen: See separate handout

Demonstrate that you understand the other person's position: Reflect back in your own words what you think the other person said, or ask questions for clarification and to deepen your understanding of the situation.

Work on joint solutions: Having ownership in a solution is necessary for there to be commitment to it, so both parties should be happy with whatever solution is agreed. More than that – the more ideas you can pool, the more creative and numerous your solutions are likely to be!

When you practice assertiveness, it is important to include all the steps, although apart from beginning by deciding upon your outcome, you can be flexible about the order in which they happen depending on the circumstances.

A general tip for helping you to consider the benefits of practising assertiveness is to observe and capture the characteristics of your best/ most productive relationships

Being open to and understanding the other person's position is crucial.

It's also important to realise that it's not possible to change other people. But by changing your own attitude, approach and behaviour, you can issue a tacit invitation to them to change. Try not to waste time or energy worrying about them if they decline the invitation. We influence more by concentrating on our own behaviour than by trying to get someone else to change theirs.

Finally - to return to the first point about assertiveness – it is a type of behaviour and set of skills to be learnt and practised. This means that we can choose to use it when appropriate – it is a tool that we can pick up when we need to, not something that we have to 'be' all the time. But like all tools, learning to use it skilfully takes practice and as with learning a new language, we need to start in small ways. So start by practising in safe situations where risk is low, and build up to weightier ones.

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