

Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

NEWSLETTER

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Kit Hennessy, LPC, CEAP
Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

Ever end up frustrated after a conversation with someone because you didn't feel like you communicated as well as you would have liked? Ever walk away from a conversation asking yourself what just happened?

Assertiveness is a style of communication that greatly enhances our effectiveness with others and produces the most positive outcomes. Assertiveness can enhance the following:

Improve interpersonal relationships
Enhance self esteem
Minimize stress
Reduce feelings of helplessness/depression

Reduce conflicts/anxiety
Retrain self respect
Treats others respectfully
Gives a sense of control

Generally, there are 4 styles of communication.

1. PASSIVE
2. AGGRESSIVE
3. PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE
4. ASSERTIVE



A person operating from the *Passive* style tends to avoid conflict at all costs. This person will internalize discomfort rather than risk upsetting others. This style tends to result in a lose-win situation, and results in feelings of victimization, resentment, and a loss of a sense of control.

A person who uses this style in many of his daily interactions has the underlying belief that other peoples' needs are more important than their own, and that if he speaks up, others will ignore or reject him. This individual usually has a low sense of self-esteem, and has a difficult time recognizing his/her own needs and knowing how to get them met more appropriately.

The *Aggressive* person creates a win-lose situation. This individual uses intimidation and control to get his/her needs met, and is disrespectful and hurtful to others in

communications. This person has the underlying beliefs that power and control are the only way to get needs met. This person operates from a real sense of inadequacy and may have a lack of empathy for others.

The *Passive-Aggressive* person incorporates elements of both of the previous styles. He tends to use procrastination, forgetfulness, and intentional inefficiency rather than being direct in his communications with others.

The *Assertive* person is direct with the goal of creating a win-win situation. This style respects one's own rights and opinions, as well as those of the other person. This individual operates from the belief that each of us is responsible for solving our own problems, and neither party in communication has to justify themselves to each



other. This person takes responsibility for his own decisions and actions.

Our “preferred” style is influenced by a number of factors. Gender roles often influence our style. Little boys are sometimes culturally conditioned to be “strong”, and that winning is what matters most. Little girls are sometimes taught that it is their primary role is to serve others, be nice at all costs, and that self worth is defined by relationships with others. Our parents, our role models, the media, and our own personality all play a role in our communication with others.

WHAT DOES ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION LOOK LIKE?

Much of our communication is **non-verbal**. A person with an assertive communication style has a body language that conveys openness and receptiveness. Posture is upright, movements are fluid and relaxed, tone of voice is clear and with inflection. An assertive person makes good eye contact, and is aware of personal space.

When **giving opinions**, an assertive person is willing to express his opinion, and also is open to hearing other’s points of view. He is direct, but not argumentative or threatening. He does not use sarcasm or gossip as a way to communicate. He does not silently sit back out of fear of not being liked.

When an assertive person receives **feedback from others**, she is able to listen and accept what the other person has to say, even if she doesn’t agree. Many people have a hard time receiving feedback, even if it’s positive. How many times has someone paid you a compliment and you simply dismiss it, or minimize it rather than hearing it and simply saying “thanks”! No one likes to hear negative feedback, but an assertive person does not react to criticism by counter-attacking, denying, or feeling anxious or inadequate. She makes conscious choices about how to respond the criticism.

She may ask for clarification to make sure she is really hearing what the other person is saying. She can validate the others’ feelings, without necessarily agreeing with the person’s feedback. If the negative feedback is valid, she accepts responsibility.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

- ❖ Watch your body posture – practice using an open, assertive body language and voice.
- ❖ Think before you speak. Take a few seconds to make sure you are conveying the right message, and in the way you want to convey it.
- ❖ Don’t apologize if it’s not warranted.
- ❖ Remember it is ok to say “no”.
- ❖ Remember everyone is entitled to an opinion, and don’t try to convince others that yours is the “right” one. Also know that you don’t have to apologize or make excuses.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- ✓ Be patient – learning new behaviors takes time, and it will feel awkward at first.



- ✓ Practice leads to improvement.
- ✓ Expect some resistance from others.
- ✓ Becoming assertive may never feel as comfortable as being passive or aggressive, if that’s your learned style, but the rewards are worth the effort.
- ✓ Recognize and validate yourself for improvement.

Scheduling an appointment with an EAP Consultant is easy. Just call (434) 243-2643 or email dds4e@virginia.edu. Long Distance callers may dial (800) 847-9355. Validated parking is available.