



Assertive Communication

Think about your own communication style by trying this quick quiz:

- Do you always seem to go along with the crowd, even if you'd rather do something different?
- Do you like to keep the peace?
- Do you have trouble saying "no" to certain people?
- Do you find expressing yourself difficult?
- Do you ask for help if you need it?
- Do you ask questions when you're confused?

OR

- Do you like to be in charge and organise things for your family or friends?
- Do you give advice to people whenever they talk to you about a problem?
- Do you get frustrated when people disagree with you?
- Do you lose your temper sometimes with people who don't seem to understand you?

If you answered "yes" to some of these questions, you may have a problem with **being assertive**.

(Questions 1-6 suggest a more passive style, 7-10 a more aggressive style.)

People who act assertively choose what to think and how to behave in different situations. Assertive people believe in their rights and they also respect the rights of others. It includes the ability to express your thoughts and feelings appropriately, openly and honestly, as well as listening to what others have to say. They are willing to give and take.

People who act passively don't believe in their own rights – they think others probably know better. They like to keep the peace and are often uncomfortable telling others how they feel or what they want. As a result they often don't get their needs met or their opinions heard. This can lead to feelings of hurt, resentment, depression.

People who act aggressively recognise their own rights at the expense of others! They like to be in control and often make decisions for others. They like people to agree with their point of view and are not skilled listeners. They tend to have followers, rather than friends.

Assertiveness is not a fixed position in the middle of aggressive/passive. It is feeling comfortable to **choose how to behave** depending on the situation and the nature of the relationship involved. Sometimes you may choose to speak up. If you are doing a group assignment at uni, you may ask a group member to complete a task by a certain date. If they continually postpone its completion, you may become more demanding and insistent in your request. However, in other situations you may decide to think carefully before speaking up. If you and your partner disagree about something, you may choose to take some time to consider your response. This approach may help you to speak up more effectively about your thoughts, feelings and reactions at a later time. Assertiveness is a style of communication which tends to be most effective. You may not

always get what you want by being assertive. Assertive people are willing to give and take.

Communication is a key skill in learning to respond assertively. By learning to express yourself clearly and honestly, you are taking responsibility for your thoughts and feelings and not blaming or attacking anyone else. This means they don't need to defend themselves and are more likely to listen. By clearly stating your own position, thoughts and feelings, others know how their behaviours affect you and what you need or want in a situation. They don't have to guess what's going on for you!

To practise developing assertive responses, try these tips

- Be aware of your thoughts, feelings, beliefs and rights. You have the right to these!
 - Decide what to do or say (To speak or not, to write, to consult a supervisor, to let it go, or any other activity.) The key is to choose.
- If you choose to speak up, communicate without blame by:
 - Choosing your time carefully. Make sure the time to talk suits both/all parties. If one person is watching their favourite TV show, it would not be a good time.
 - Using "I" statements – speak for yourself, state your own position. Imagine hearing these two statements and notice the difference in your reaction to them: "When you talk over me I feel worthless"; and " You always talk over me and make me feel worthless".
 - Being congruent – match your body language with what you are saying.
 - If commenting on another's behaviour, be specific. Compare: "When you do not wash up your dishes, I feel used" and "When you never do any housework, I feel used."
- Be prepared to listen to the other person and acknowledge their feelings.
- Be prepared to negotiate, depending on the seriousness of the behaviour and the nature of the relationship. It is not appropriate to negotiate violent behaviour.
- You may be more prepared to negotiate in a close relationship than in a casual one.

In summary:

- Understand your own feelings.
- Be responsible for them.
- Remember you have the right to your thoughts, feelings and opinions
- There are no right or wrong thoughts, feelings or opinions.
- Respect that others have the right to think and feel differently to you and may have different opinions.
- Speak for yourself.

Produced by the Counselling Service, The University of Newcastle, October 2008.