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Assertive communication – what is it and why use it?

By Lee Hopkins

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What IS assertive communication?

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Assertive communication is the ability to express positive and negative ideas and feelings in an open, honest and direct way. It recognises our rights whilst still respecting the rights of others. It allows us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions without judging or blaming other people. And it allows us to constructively confront and find a mutually satisfying solution where conflict exists.

So why use assertive communication?

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All of us use assertive behaviour at times... quite often when we feel vulnerable or unsure of ourselves we may resort to submissive, manipulative or aggressive behaviour.

Yet being trained in assertive communication actually increases the appropriate use of this sort of behaviour. It enables us to swap old behaviour patterns for a more positive approach to life. I've found that changing my response to others (be they work colleagues, clients or even my own family) can be exciting and stimulating.

The advantages of assertive communication

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There are many advantages of assertive communication, most notably these:

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- \* It helps us feel good about ourselves and others
- \* It leads to the development of mutual respect with others
- \* It increases our self-esteem
- \* It helps us achieve our goals
- \* It minimises hurting and alienating other people
- \* It reduces anxiety
- \* It protects us from being taken advantage of by others
- \* It enables us to make decisions and free choices in life
- \* It enables us to express, both verbally and non-verbally, a wide range of feelings and thoughts, both positive and negative

There are, of course, disadvantages...

### Disadvantages of assertive communication

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Others may not approve of this style of communication, or may not approve of the views you express. Also, having a healthy regard for another person's rights means that you won't always get what YOU want. You may also find out that you were wrong about a viewpoint that you held. But most importantly, as mentioned earlier, it involves the risk that others may not understand and therefore not accept this style of communication.

What assertive communication is not...

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Assertive communication is definitely NOT a lifestyle! It's NOT a guarantee that you will get what you want. It's definitely NOT an acceptable style of communication with everyone, but at least it's NOT being aggressive.

But it IS about choice

### Four behavioural choices

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There are, as I see it, four choices you can make about which style of communication you can employ. These types are:

direct aggression: bossy, arrogant, bulldozing, intolerant, opinionated, and overbearing

indirect aggression: sarcastic, deceiving, ambiguous, insinuating, manipulative, and guilt-inducing

submissive: wailing, moaning, helpless, passive, indecisive, and apologetic

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assertive: direct, honest, accepting, responsible, and spontaneous

Characteristics of assertive communication

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There are six main characteristics of assertive communication.

These are:

1. eye contact: demonstrates interest, shows sincerity
2. body posture: congruent body language will improve the significance of the message
3. gestures: appropriate gestures help to add emphasis
4. voice: a level, well modulated tone is more convincing and acceptable, and is not intimidating
5. timing: use your judgement to maximise receptivity and impact
6. content: how, where and when you choose to comment is probably more important than WHAT you say

### The importance of "I" statements

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Part of being assertive involves the ability to appropriately express your needs and feelings. You can accomplish this by using "I" statements. These indicate ownership, do not attribute blame, focuses on behaviour, identifies the effect of behaviour, is direct and honest, and contributes to the growth of your relationship with each other.

Strong "I" statements have three specific elements:

1. Behaviour
2. Feeling
3. Tangible effect (consequence to you)

Example: "I feel frustrated when you are late for meetings. I don't like having to repeat information."

Six techniques for assertive communication

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There are six assertive techniques – let's look at each of them

in turn.

1. Behaviour Rehearsal: which is literally practising how you want to look and sound. It is a very useful technique when you first want to use "I" statements, as it helps dissipate any emotion associated with an experience and allows you to accurately identify the behaviour you wish to confront.

2. Repeated Assertion (the 'broken record'): this technique allows you to feel comfortable by ignoring manipulative verbal side traps, argumentative baiting and irrelevant logic while sticking to your point. To most effectively use this technique use calm repetition, and say what you want and stay focused on the issue. You'll find that there is no need to rehearse this technique, and no need to 'hype yourself up' to deal with others.

Example:

"I would like to show you some of our products" "No thank you, I'm not interested" "I really have a great range to offer you"  
"That may be true, but I'm not interested at the moment" "Is

there someone else here who would be interested?" "I don't want any of these products" "Okay, would you take this brochure and think about it?" "Yes, I will take a brochure" "Thank you"  
"You're welcome"

3. Fogging: this technique allows you to receive criticism comfortably, without getting anxious or defensive, and without rewarding manipulative criticism. To do this you need to acknowledge the criticism, agree that there may be some truth to what they say, but remain the judge of your choice of action. An example of this could be, "I agree that there are probably times when I don't give you answers to your questions.

4. Negative enquiry: this technique seeks out criticism about yourself in close relationships by prompting the expression of honest, negative feelings to improve communication. To use it effectively you need to listen for critical comments, clarify your understanding of those criticisms, use the information if it will be helpful or ignore the information if it is manipulative. An example of this technique would be, "So you think/believe that I am not interested?"

5. Negative assertion: this technique lets you look more

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comfortably at negatives in your own behaviour or personality without feeling defensive or anxious, this also reduces your critics' hostility. You should accept your errors or faults, but not apologise. Instead, tentatively and sympathetically agree with hostile criticism of your negative qualities. An example would be, "Yes, you're right. I don't always listen closely to what you have to say."

6. Workable compromise: when you feel that your self-respect is not in question, consider a workable compromise with the other person. You can always bargain for your material goals unless the compromise affects your personal feelings of self-respect. However, if the end goal involves a matter of your self-worth and self-respect, **THERE CAN BE NO COMPROMISE**. An example of this technique would be, "I understand that you have a need to talk and I need to finish what I'm doing. So what about meeting in half an hour?"

### Conclusion

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Assertiveness is a useful communication tool. It's application is contextual and it's not appropriate to be assertive in all situations. Remember, your sudden use of assertiveness may be perceived as an act of aggression by others.

There's also no guarantee of success, even when you use assertive

communication styles appropriately.

"Nothing on earth can stop the individual with the right mental attitude from achieving their goal; nothing on earth can help the individual with the wrong mental attitude" W.W. Ziege

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Assertiveness

By Sue Dyson

Assertiveness by Sue Dyson

We hear it all the time, we've heard it growing up. You need to be assertive in order to achieve your

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goals. How important is it, really, to be assertive in your life? It can't possibly be that critical, can it? Well, the answers to these questions are 'very' and 'yes' and I'll tell you why.

Have you ever been in a situation, where someone is doing something you don't like but you don't bother to communicate this to them? It may seem so much easier to say nothing and hold your feelings in. Or it may seem like too much energy to expend.

Have you ever considered the effect this decision may have on the people involved? Are you aware of any feelings of resentment rising either immediately or later? I'll use an example situation of how this may play out in real life.

Monica finally made time to simply sit down and do nothing. She'd been running around all day without a break. As soon as she became comfortable, her friend Suzy dropped by with her rambunctious kids. Normally, Monica would be thrilled to see her friend. Today, after some trying personal events, all she really wanted and needed was some quiet, alone time.

Monica had three choices in this situation. She could be assertive and state her needs for time to herself. She could choose to remain consciously silent, that is, say nothing and observe her reactions, learning from them. Or she could choose to be unconsciously silent. And yes, making no choice is still a choice.

The problem with the last option, saying nothing and not examining your reaction for doing so, is resentment is bound to build within the relationship. Unless you take care of the energy this resentment creates it will always be there, buried deeper as time passes and this can have detrimental effects on our body, mind and spirit.

Our thoughts are energy. If energy is not expressed, it becomes repressed. It has to go somewhere. In energetic terms, it goes inside and will seek some other way to manifest. It's a force of Nature. When enough repressed energy builds, you may eventually be subjected to dis-ease within your body. This is basically what disease and illness are in our bodies – blocked, unreleased energies.

Referring back to our friend Monica for a moment, if she does not express her feelings to her friend Suzy, as in telling her, gently of course, that she needs time to herself, the energy created by her thoughts will become repressed. This can manifest as illness/disease or even a cold, depression, a bad mood. The energy needs to go somewhere.

Why do we say nothing, anyways? Is it ultimately beneficial to our progression?

We say nothing to avoid pain, to avoid a confrontation. We say nothing to avoid hurting a friend's feelings. We say nothing in a belief that it takes more energy to speak out. We say nothing in a

misguided effort to conserve our already depleted energy.

Carlos Castaneda said, "Whether we improve ourselves or stay the same, it takes the same amount of energy." Since neither option saves energy over the other, why not just do it?

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We are each in control of our own lives. This privilege comes with a responsibility for our actions. To lead a successful life, we need to challenge ourselves. We need to continuously examine our lives and push our limitations.

We are the only ones who can break through our own limitations. It's our own work to do in this world. So by all means, say nothing, have the appearance of being nonassertive, however, if you choose this path, examine your motive, examine your method. Do everything in life on purpose.

Article by Sue Dyson, publisher of SuccessfulMama Ezine, dedicated to empowering women in the creation and pursuit of their personal goals. Sign up for SuccessfulMama Ezine today at:
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