

Assertiveness

When communicating with other people, it helps to keep in mind not only what you are experiencing (thoughts, feelings, behaviours) but also what they might be experiencing, which might be similar, different, or completely opposite to your experience (and anywhere in-between!). Just because you believe they're thinking something about you, that doesn't necessarily make it true – our minds are continually trying to make sense of our world, but our minds do not always get it right.

Our thoughts and emotions can get in the way of effective communication, and we end up making things worse and messing things up. This awareness of our own reactions, together with an understanding and awareness of how the other person might be reacting (their thoughts, feelings and responses) will give us important knowledge and help us to respond in a more helpful and effective way.

It's so easy to get things wrong, misunderstand what the other person is saying, we react to what we think they mean, they react to what they think we mean....and so it goes on



We can learn to be more assertive and effective in communicating what we really want to say, without upsetting the other person, and reduce misunderstandings on both sides.



The aim is to practice behaving and communicating more assertively, and to reduce acting and communicating in passive and aggressive ways, which usually result in distress.

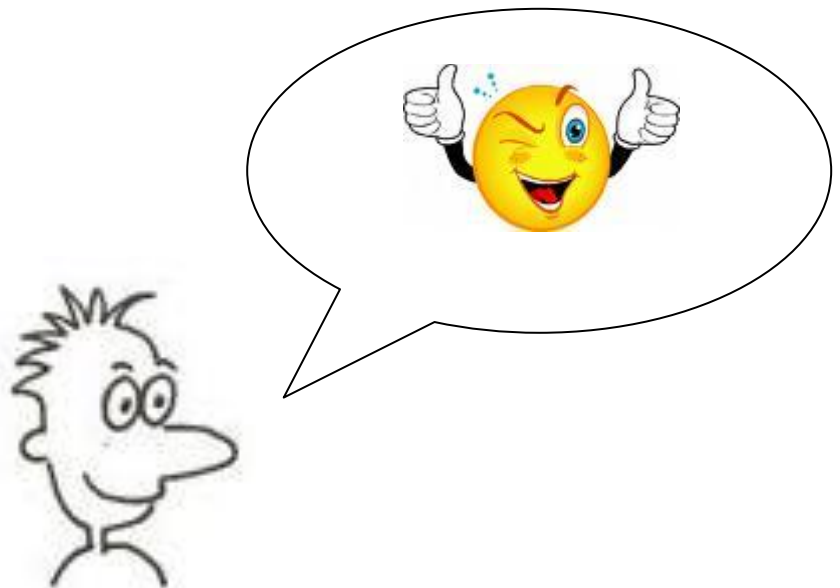


It can help to think about a person who you respect and who you believe acts and communicates effectively and assertively, respecting others and themselves, who is warm and friendly. This can be a person who is known personally to you, or a famous person, or perhaps a fictional character.



You can model yourself on that person – imagine them dealing with particular situations and how they would do it, what that would look like. Then imagine yourself acting in a similar way – and do it. Practice it often.

Initially, it doesn't matter if you don't feel like being assertive, just practice it anyway. When you notice yourself acting aggressively or passively, just notice, then change your posture, expression and behaviour to as though you were being assertive. It works!



Communication Styles

Passive



Assertive



Aggressive



General

Compliant, submissive, talks little, vague non-committal communication, puts self down, praises others

"I don't mind...that's fine....yes alright"

Actions and expressions fit with words spoken, firm but polite and clear messages, respectful of self and others

"That's a good idea, and how about if we did this too..." or "I can see that, but I'd really like..."

Sarcastic, harsh, always right, superior, know it all, interrupts, talks over others, critical, put-downs, patronising, disrespectful of others

"This is what we're doing, if you don't like it, tough"

Beliefs

You're okay, I'm not

Has no opinion other than that the other person/s are always more important, so it doesn't matter what they think anyway

I'm okay, you're okay

Believes or acts as if all the individuals involved are equal, each deserving of respect, and no more entitled than the other to have things done their way

I'm okay, you're not

Believe they are entitled to have things done their way, the way they want it to be done, because they are right, and others (and their needs) are less important

Eyes

Avoids eye contact, looks down, teary, pleading

Warm, welcoming, friendly, comfortable eye contact

Narrow, emotion-less, staring, expressionless

Posture

Makes body smaller – stooped, leaning, hunched shoulders

Relaxed, open, welcoming

Makes body bigger – upright, head high, shoulders out, hands on hips, feet apart

Hands

Together, fidgety, clammy

Open, friendly and appropriate gestures

Pointing fingers, making fists, clenched, hands on hips

Consequences

Give in to others, don't get what we want or need, self-critical thoughts, miserable

Good relationships with others, happy with outcome and to compromise

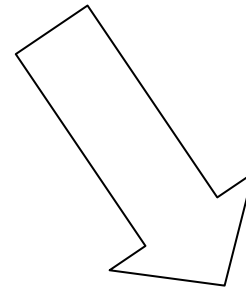
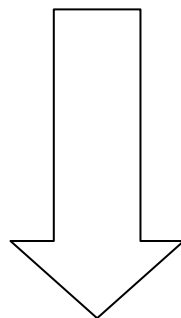
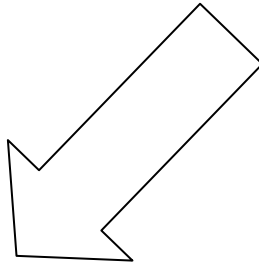
Make enemies, upset others and self, feel angry and resentful

Responding to Criticism

When we hear others being critical of something we've done, we tend to believe that they are being critical of 'us' rather than our actions. This may be because we've been criticised in an unhelpful way in the past, which resulted in feeling blamed, rejected or unwanted. However, very often the person offering criticism is intending the criticism to be helpful to us – pointing out the affect of our actions. If we were able to accept that criticism in the spirit in which it was intended, then we could make positive helpful changes.



"That was okay, but it might have been better if you had....."



PASSIVE



PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE



AGGRESSIVE



"I'm so sorry – you're right, it's all my fault. I'm so stupid and useless"

*"Sorry".
(Thinks: "Huh. It's not my fault! I'll get you back later")*

"What?! You can talk! How dare you"

Whereas, if we were able to consider the criticism in a different way, then maybe something positive could come out of it. When you receive criticism, consider whether the criticism is:

- ❖ True
- ❖ Not true
- ❖ Partly true

Assertive response to criticism

Criticism is true



Agree

Yes, I can be like that sometimes. How has that affected you? What would have been a more helpful way of doing things? I'm sorry if it upset you.

Criticism is not true



Disagree

I disagree, I don't think that's right, and I feel a bit upset that you can say that. Can you explain what you mean a bit more?

Criticism partly true



Partially agree

I accept that I didn't do that well. I made a mistake, but I disagree with your comments about me personally. Can you explain what you mean a bit more?

Saying "No"

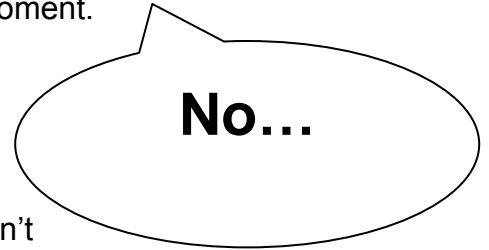
It can very often be difficult to say no to people who make demands of us, and if we say no, we can get caught up in self-critical thoughts leading us to feel guilty. To avoid feeling guilty, we just keep on saying "yes" to every request.

Someone asks us to do something:



We can learn ways of saying “No” that don’t lead us to think self-critically or feel guilty. For example:

- ❖ I’m sorry but I really can’t take on anything else at the moment.
- ❖ I’m quite busy right now. Perhaps another time.
- ❖ I’d like to help you out, but I just don’t feel up to it at the moment.
- ❖ I don’t need a new roof (double glazing, vacuum cleaner etc). I’m happy with what I have thank you.
- ❖ Thank you for asking me. You’re a nice person, but I don’t want to go out with you.



If the person seems to have trouble accepting your “No”, then just keep repeating yourself, over and over if necessary. You might have to add the word “No” to the beginning of those statements, perhaps with some emphasis on that word. For example:

- ❖ **No.** I’m sorry but I really can’t at the moment.

Be wary of those self-critical thoughts afterwards. Practice challenging and/or dismissing them, by telling yourself:



- ❖ I explained to them why I couldn’t do it
- ❖ It’s not my responsibility
- ❖ It would only end up upsetting me if I agreed to it – this is best for me. If I feel less tired and not resentful, then I might be a better position to help them out next time
- ❖ They’re just thoughts – I don’t need to pay them any attention (then put your focus of attention on something else)

Telling others what we want

When we want something, we use all sorts of messages to try to let others know, such as hints, expressions and gestures, hidden meanings in what we say.

But the only way to ensure that someone has really understood what you want, is to be clear in what you say:

- ❖ I'd like you to give me a hug
- ❖ I want to be your friend, but not your girlfriend
- ❖ I want to talk to someone...
- ❖ I'd like to leave now



It may not always be possible to get what we want or feel we need, perhaps because that would impact on other people. Having said what you'd like, then we need to consider the response according to the rights of the other person too. It's often possible to compromise, which can respect the rights of all those involved: Give and take.

GIVE  **TAKE**