

Assertive Communication

Assertiveness is a key skill in maintaining healthy relationships. It can be defined as the direct and honest communication of your needs in a way that acknowledges and respects the needs and rights of the other person.

Without assertiveness skills, people often fall into patterns of either aggressive or passive communication. Both these are destructive to relationships by undermining trust and intimacy.

Generally speaking, communication can be characterised by four different styles. See if you can identify your own style from those outlined below:

1. Passive communication

- Not standing up for your rights
- Not setting limits or boundaries on another's behaviour
- Continually putting others needs before your own
- Taking on the role of "martyr"
- Not being able to say "no"

2. Aggressive Communication

- Bullying and intimidating others to get what you want
- Threatening people
- Ignoring needs and rights of others
- Shouting, yelling, screaming or physically abusing others

3. Passive-Aggressive Communication

- Indirectly communicating – eg, saying something that is designed for the other person to hear without saying it to them directly
- Withdrawing love and affection
- Using sarcasm/put downs
- Using humour to be nasty or hurtful

4. Assertive Communication

- Being direct and honest
- Being able to negotiate – having a sense of give and take

- Asking for your own needs to be met, while respecting needs of others
- Being able to say “no” and set limits
- Being able to acknowledge when you are in the wrong

Assertiveness is best learned by using a simple “recipe”, as shown below. It will help give you structure to what you want to say and keep you focused. It also has the advantage of letting you work out what you want to say in advance and delivering it with greater confidence.

Simple Recipe for Making “I” Statements

There are three ingredients used in making “I” statements:

1. The activity
2. How it is affecting you
3. What you would prefer to happen

This can be phrased as:

When

I feel.....

What I would like is.....

For example:

When you don’t let me know where you are

I feel very worried about you

I would like it if in future you could call me and tell me you are going to be late

Consider the difference between the two types of message below:

Blaming/Critical Messages vs “I” Statements

Blaming Messages	Assertive “I” Statements
You’re so inconsiderate, not showing up for dinner after I’ve gone to the trouble of cooking for you.	When you don’t turn up for dinner I feel hurt. Could you please call me in future?
You’re an accident waiting to happen	I feel really concerned about the risks

when you use ice.	you take when you use ice.
You're a disgusting slob.	It's important to me to have a tidy living space. Can you please put your things away?
You're completely selfish and a bad example to your son.	When you use drugs in front of your son I feel worried that he might think this is normal and want to try them too. I would like you to use in private.

Exercise: Develop your own assertiveness script below. Start by identifying a situation in which something feels wrong and you want things to change. You can write in the space below:

1. The problem

.....
.....
.....

2. What I would like changed

.....
.....
.....

Now turn this into a script:

When you.....

I feel.....

What I would like to happen is.....

.....