Being Assertive: Reduce Stress and Communicate Better

Being assertive is a core communication skill. Being assertive means that you express yourself effectively and stand up for your point of view, while also respecting the rights and beliefs of others. Being assertive can also help boost your self-esteem and earn others' respect. Assertive communication is the ability to speak and interact in a manner that considers and respects the rights and opinions of others while also standing up for your own rights, needs and personal boundaries. Assertive communication creates opportunities for open discussion with a variety of opinions, needs and choices to be respectfully heard and considered in order to achieve a win-win solution to problems rather than selfishly (aggressively) demanding to “get my own way”.

This can help with stress management, especially if you tend to take on too many responsibilities because you have a hard time saying no. Some people seem to be naturally assertive. But if you're not one of them, you can learn to be more assertive.

Why Assertive Communication Makes Sense

Because assertiveness is based on mutual respect, it's an effective and diplomatic communication style. Being assertive shows that you respect yourself, because you're willing to stand up for your interests and express your thoughts and feelings. It also demonstrates that you're aware of the rights of others and are willing to work on resolving conflicts.

Of course, it's not just what you say — your message — but also how you say it that's important. Assertive communication is direct and respectful. Being assertive gives you the best chance of successfully delivering your message. If you communicate in a way that's too passive or too aggressive, your message may get lost because people are too busy reacting to your delivery.

Assertive vs. Passive Behavior

If your style is passive, you may seem to be shy or overly easygoing. You may routinely say things such as, "I'll just go with whatever the group decides." You tend to avoid conflict. Why is that a problem? Because the message you're sending is that your thoughts and feelings aren't as important as those of other people. In essence, when you're too passive, you give others the license to disregard your wants and needs.

Consider this example: You say yes when a colleague asks you to take over a project, even though your plate is full and the extra works means you'll have to work overtime and miss your daughter's soccer game. Your intention may be to keep the peace. But always saying yes can poison your relationships. And worse, it may cause you internal conflict because your needs and those of your family always come second.

The internal conflict that can be created by passive behavior can lead to:

- Stress
- Resentment
- Seething anger
- Feelings of victimization
- Desire to exact revenge
- Assertive vs. aggressive behavior

Now consider the flip side. If your style is aggressive, you may come across as a bully who disregards the needs, feelings and opinions of others. You may appear self-righteous or superior. Very aggressive people humiliate and intimidate others, and may even be physically threatening.

You may think that being aggressive gets you what you want. However, it comes at a cost. Aggression undercuts trust and mutual respect. Others may come to resent you, leading them to avoid or oppose you.

Assertive vs. Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Now consider passive-aggressive behavior. If you communicate in a passive-aggressive manner, you may say yes when you want to say no. You may be sarcastic or complain about others behind their backs. You may have developed a passive-aggressive style because you're uncomfortable being direct about your needs and feelings.

What are the drawbacks of a passive-aggressive communication style? Over time, passive-aggressive behavior damages relationships and undercuts mutual respect, making it difficult for you to get your goals and needs met.

The Benefits of Being Assertive

Being assertive is typically viewed as a healthier communication style. Being assertive offers many benefits. It helps you keep people from walking all over you. On the flip side, it can also help you from steamrolling others.

Behaving assertively can help you:

- Gain self-confidence and self-esteem
- Understand and recognize your feelings
- Earn respect from others
- Improve communication
- Create win-win situations
- Improve your decision-making skills
- Create honest relationships
- Gain more job satisfaction

Some research even suggests that learning to be more assertive can help people cope with mental health problems, such as depression, anorexia, bulimia, social anxiety disorder and schizophrenia.

Learning to Be More Assertive

People develop different styles of communication based on their life experiences. Your style may be so ingrained that you're not even aware of what it is. People tend to stick to the same communication style over time. But if you want to change your communication style, you can learn to communicate in healthier and more effective ways.

Here are some tips to help you become more assertive:

- **Assess your style**. Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Do you say yes to additional work even when your plate is full? Are you quick to judge or blame? Do people seem to dread or fear talking to you? Understand your style before you begin making changes.
- **Use 'I' statements**. Using "I" statements lets others know what you're thinking without sounding accusatory. For instance, say, "I disagree," rather than, "You're wrong."
- **Practice saying no**. If you have a hard time turning down requests, try saying, "No, I can't do that now." Don't beat around the bush — be direct. If an explanation is appropriate, keep it brief.
- **Rehearse what you want to say**. If it's challenging to say what you want or think, practice typical scenarios you encounter. Say what you want to say out loud. It may help to write it out first, too, so you can practice from a script. Consider role playing with a friend or colleague and ask for blunt feedback.

- **Use body language**. Communication isn't just verbal. Act confident even if you aren't feeling it. Keep an upright posture, but lean forward a bit. Make regular eye contact. Maintain a neutral or positive facial expression. Don't wring your hands or use dramatic gestures. Practice assertive body language in front of a mirror or with a friend or colleague.
- **Keep emotions in check**. Conflict is hard for most people. Maybe you get angry or frustrated, or maybe you feel like crying. Although these feelings are normal, they can get in the way of resolving conflict. If you feel too emotional going into a situation, wait a bit if possible. Then work on remaining calm. Breathe slowly. Keep your voice even and firm.
- **Start small**. At first, practice your new skills in situations that are low risk. For instance, try out your assertiveness on a partner or friend before tackling a difficult situation at work. Evaluate yourself afterward and tweak your approach as necessary.

When you Need Help Being Assertive

Remember, learning to be assertive takes time and practice. If you've spent years silencing yourself, becoming more assertive probably won't happen overnight. Or if anger leads you to be too aggressive, you may need to learn some anger management techniques.

If despite your best efforts you're not making progress toward becoming more assertive, consider formal assertiveness training. And if issues such as anger, stress, anxiety or fear are getting in your way, consider talking with a mental health provider. The payoff will be worth it. By becoming more assertive, you can begin to express your true feelings and needs more easily. You may even find you get more of what you want as a result.