

How to be assertive

What is assertiveness?

- Active, rather than reactive approach to situations
- Positive, non-judgemental attitude towards both self and others
- Standing up for one's own rights, without denying the rights of others
- Communicating wants, dislikes and feelings in an honest and open manner, but without threatening others

Co-operators need to be able to behave assertively in difficult situations – even if we can't all manage it all of the time! It is rational behaviour, but doesn't suppress our intuitive or emotional side. Rather, it allows us to present our preferences and desires in an effective way. The main alternatives to assertive behaviour:

Aggressive behaviour

Approaches problems with a win-lose frame of mind; denies others needs in order to realise its own. It is effective in the short term, and may deliver a sense of emotional release, but in the long term it invites retaliation and breaks down relationships.

Submissive behaviour

Avoids conflict by evading issues and limiting expression. Does not initiate conflict, but only reacts. May succeed in avoiding conflict in the short term, but in the longer term does not achieve aims and diminishes self esteem and confidence.

Manipulative behaviour

Seeks to achieve its goals through mis-representing facts and trickery. Can be successful in the short term, but can undermine trust and damage relationships.

So how can we try to avoid these unsatisfactory behaviours and achieve our needs whilst at the same time respecting the needs of others?

Try to remember your:



- **rights and responsibilities**

Are you conscious of the rights of all participants in a situation – including your own? What responsibilities do these rights imply? Where possible, consider these issues in advance, and try to analyse them from an objective viewpoint, as if you weren't personally involved. To be assertive, you will need to respect others' rights, and behave responsibly – even if others don't.

- **inner dialogue**

Most of us anticipate situations with expectations and a 'narrative' of what's going on. In the story you are constructing in your head, what judgements have you made about the people involved? Have you been balanced in your characterisation? Is it about winning or losing, or about avoiding conflict – or is it about reaching an honest agreement? Become aware of your inner dialogue and challenge the extreme or unbalanced assumptions in it..

- **self-presentation**

Consider your patterns of speech, your voice tone, expressions and body language. How do they look from the outside? Are you sending aggressive or submissive messages? Are there any mixed or ambiguous signals? You can have in mind some 'scripts' that communicate your assertive intentions. These are formats for expressing your feelings. For example, sentences that begin "I feel..." are a good way of being honest without being aggressive. Sentences like, "I understand that... but I am concerned that..." show you've listened (respected the rights of others) but maintain your point of view (respect your own rights). Of course, our language would be very stilted if we spoke like that all the time, but these 'scripts' can help us get into the habit of assertive expression.

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