

assertive communication

Assertiveness means expressing your point of view in a way that is clear and direct, while still respecting others. Communicating in an assertive manner can help you to minimise conflict, to control anger, to have your needs better met, and to have more positive relationships with friends, family and others.

Assertiveness is a style of communication which many people struggle to put into practice, often because of confusion around exactly what it means. Sometimes it helps to start by explaining what assertiveness is *not*:

Aggressive Communication

People often confuse assertiveness with aggression, because it involves sticking up for yourself. But the two are actually quite different:



Aggression

Force your needs or opinions onto others.
Often involves bullying or pushing others around.
Only your needs matter.

No compromise.
Damages relationships.
May lead to shouting or physical aggression.
Damages self-esteem

Assertiveness

Express your needs clearly but respectfully.

Others are treated with respect.
Considers the needs of others as well as yours.

Often compromise.
Stronger relationships.
Using clear language to get point across.
Builds self-esteem

For example, imagine you are standing in line at the bank and someone else pushes in front of you. An aggressive response could be to grab them by the shoulder and say loudly:

Hey! What makes you so important that you don't have to wait in line like the rest of us?

This might make you feel better in the short term, but you will probably also spend the rest of the hour feeling annoyed about the interaction. Or perhaps the other person will shout back at you and the situation will get even worse, *really* leaving you in a bad mood.

A more assertive response could be to gently tap the person on the shoulder and say in a clear but respectful voice:

Excuse me, there is actually a line here. It would be better if you could wait your turn like the rest of us.

Chances are you will get a more positive response to this - perhaps the other person will apologise and move to the back of the line, or they may explain their reason for wanting to push in and you may feel happy to do them this favour. They may still respond badly - your assertiveness does not guarantee others will not be aggressive - but at least you will feel good knowing that you did your best and used assertive communication.

Passive Communication

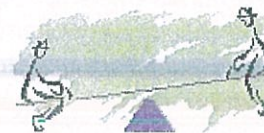
Another thing that assertiveness is *not* is passive communication. Passive communication is:

- Not speaking up for yourself, either because you think your views don't matter or for reasons like trying to please everyone or 'keep the peace'
- Putting your needs last to the needs of others
- Allowing yourself to be bullied or ignored
- Often involves speaking quietly or with a hesitating voice, or with body-language like looking at the floor or shrugging the shoulders
- You may undermine your opinions with passive phrases such as: *only if you don't mind*, or: *but it really doesn't matter that much to me*



Passive communication can be damaging to your self-esteem, and also to relationships. If you use a passive communication style, others are more likely to ignore your needs, which may leave you feeling hurt or even angry with them for not treating you better.

So Assertiveness is....



Think of assertiveness as the halfway point between passive and aggressive - just the right balance!

Here are some tips for practicing being assertive:

- State your point of view or request clearly.
- Tell the other person how you feel as honestly as you can, and remember to *listen* to what they say as well.
- Tone and volume of voice: *how* you say it is as important as *what* you say. Speak at a normal conversation volume, rather than a shout or whisper, and make sure that you sound firm but not aggressive.
- Make sure your body language matches - your listener will get mixed messages if you are speaking firmly while looking at the floor. Try to look the other person in the eye, stand tall, and relax your face.
- Try to avoid exaggerating with words like *always* and *never*. For example: *You are 20 minutes late and it is the third time this week*, rather than: *You are always late!*
- Try to speak with facts rather than judgements. For example: *This report has important information missing*, rather than *you have done a bad job again*.
- Use "I Statements" as much as possible, to tell the other person how you feel rather than be accusing. For example: *When you leave your dishes on the table, I feel frustrated because I don't like the mess but don't want to clean it up for you*, rather than: *You're such a pig!*
- Practice often - assertiveness is a skill which requires you to practice in many different situations. And don't forget to praise yourself for your good efforts!

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BIDERMAN'S STAGES OF COERCION

Biderman's stages of coercion	Abuser's actions	Victim's response
Isolation	<p><i>Befriends the newcomer</i></p> <p><i>Introduces to others with high self-praise.</i></p> <p><i>Monopolises until other staff begin to reject.</i></p> <p><i>Warns of the perils of associating with other members of staff.</i></p>	<p><i>Deprived of developing social support with colleagues</i></p> <p><i>Initiates total dependence on abuser</i></p> <p><i>Acquires a false sense of security</i></p> <p><i>Confuses reality</i></p>
Monopolisation of perception	<p><i>Informs victim through stories about power alliances</i></p> <p><i>Outlines superior knowledge and skills</i></p> <p><i>Intimates that victim does not possess necessary knowledge and skill, but may be able to acquire it through association with abuser</i></p>	<p><i>Loses self-esteem.</i></p> <p><i>Doubts ability to perform.</i></p> <p><i>Self-blames for accepting a position because unworthy.</i></p> <p><i>Consumed completely by introspective thoughts.</i></p>
Induced physical and mental exhaustion	<p><i>Overburdens victim with time-consuming and/or physically demanding tasks.</i></p> <p><i>Places unrealistic standards of acceptance on these tasks.</i></p>	<p><i>Becomes physically and emotionally too weak to resist or challenge.</i></p> <p><i>Loses ability to reason rationally.</i></p>
Threats	<p><i>Reminds of power over victim's workload, promotional opportunities, and acceptance in the hierarchy of the company.</i></p> <p><i>Warns with stories of the demise of predecessors who did not reach the acceptable standard.</i></p>	<p><i>Complies with demands to escape retribution.</i></p> <p><i>Displays anxiety about every action performed.</i></p> <p><i>Despairs of any change in the situation.</i></p> <p><i>Shows symptoms of depression.</i></p>
Occasional indulgences	<p><i>Praises victim's work in a public forum.</i></p>	<p><i>Believes they have finally reached the accepted standard and pattern of abuse will stop.</i></p> <p><i>Doubts that the abuse really happened because everything seems all right for the moment.</i></p> <p><i>Becomes reliant on the abuser for further praise.</i></p>
Demonstrating 'omnipotence'	<p><i>Exercises complete control over the victim, who is taken for granted.</i></p> <p><i>Has 'read my mind' expectations.</i></p> <p><i>Affects martyrdom for the company, and of being indispensable to the company.</i></p> <p><i>Claims victimisation by those who challenge abusive behaviour.</i></p>	<p><i>Accepts powerlessness.</i></p> <p><i>Accepts the pattern of behaviour by the abuser as normal.</i></p>
Degradation	<p><i>Spreads derogatory stories about the victim on work and personal topics.</i></p>	<p><i>Feels disgraced and humiliated.</i></p> <p><i>Loses all will to resist.</i></p>
Enforcing trivial demands	<p><i>Continues to remind victim through innuendo, suggestion, and intimidating stories that abuser's demands will be complied with.</i></p>	<p><i>Accepts habit of compliance.</i></p>

Developed from Biderman's Chart of Coercion in Amnesty International (1975) *Report on Torture*, London, Gerald Duckworth & Co., P.53, by Di Adamson and Associates, 2002.