

“The biggest difference between being assertive and being aggressive is how your words and behaviors affect the rights and well-being of others.”

Sharon Anthony Bower

What is assertiveness? Miriam-Webster defines assertive as “disposed to or characterized by bold or confident statements and behavior.” As that definition suggests, being assertive requires us to be present and aware of our own wants and needs, and to communicate those needs and wants clearly and directly. What the definition doesn’t capture is that assertive behavior also places value on equity and respect for others. Assertive people advocate for themselves in ways that are positive and proactive.

	Doesn't Respect Others	Respects Others
Doesn't Clearly Stand Up for Own Rights	Passive-Aggressive	Passive
Clearly Stands Up for Own Rights	Aggressive	Assertive

Non-assertive styles of communication can create problems. Passivity is characterized by swallowing feelings rather than communicating them directly, and placing others’ needs above our own. Passive communication styles reinforce feelings of worthlessness and poor self-esteem, and often leave people feeling resentful of others. Aggressiveness can be hurtful to others. It also creates conflict and distance between people. Passive-aggressive behavior creates conflict and confusion in relationships and often leaves all parties feeling that their needs have not been respected or honored. Assertive communications can help relationships become more productive and intimate.

Why is it hard for us to be assertive?

- Our communication patterns are shaped by our beliefs about what it means to “be nice,” or what kinds of behaviors get attention. Socialization practices also influence our communication patterns. For instance, ideas about gender roles often result in women being socialized to set aside their own needs in order to support and agree with others, while men are often socialized to react forcefully and aggressively. It’s worthwhile to examine our beliefs and values and the impacts that they have on our communications. Once we are aware of these beliefs, we can examine them and determine how we really want to move forward.
- Stress activates the flight-flight-or-freeze response, which tends to pull us either toward aggression (fight) or toward avoidance or passivity (flight/freeze). Tending to our own stress management can help us engage in the communication patterns that will be most productive.
- Assertiveness is a skill that takes practice, not a trait with which we are born. If assertiveness is a skill you are working on, begin practicing with somewhat less intense situations (like asking to eat at the restaurant of your choice) and work your way up to more intense situations (like confronting a partner about their hurtful behavior).

If you’re interested in learning more about your own tendencies toward passive, assertive, aggressive and passive-aggressive communication styles, check out the Communication Style Quiz at:

<http://www.newlineideas.com/communication-style-quiz.html>



The Wellness Resource Center

Emotional Intelligence is the capacity to recognize our own and other people's emotions and to use that information to guide our thinking and behavior, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and with empathy.



Knowing Your Emotions

Tuning into what emotions you are feeling and how they might affect your thoughts and behaviors is a key attribute of emotional intelligence and can give you more control over your emotions. With self-awareness, you are more likely to act in a conscious way and to communicate your own feelings and needs clearly.

Activity: Set a timer to go off throughout the day. When the timer goes off, take a few minutes and practice self-awareness.

-Pay attention to how you are feeling emotionally. Where is that emotion in your body? What does it feel like? Ask yourself, “Why am I feeling like this?” “What events or experiences may have contributed to this feeling?”

-Pay attention to how you behave. How do you act when you experience different emotions? How does that affect your daily life? How does that affect your relationships?

-Practice naming your emotions. How do you feel when you first wake up? How do you feel about getting cut off in traffic? How do you feel when you are praised for hard work? How do you feel when someone is critical of you? How do you feel when someone else is expressing anger?

-Practice responding and not reacting.

- Responding is a conscious process that involves noticing your feelings and then deciding how to behave. (i.e., I feel irritated because you interrupted me, can I finish my thought?)
- Reacting is an unconscious process where we experience an emotional trigger and behave in an unconscious way to express and relieve that emotion. (i.e., Someone snaps at you for no apparent reason because they are irritable).

How do you feel today?

