

## Assertive Communication

### What Does It Mean To Be Assertive?

The term “assertive” is used to describe a communication style that is respectful of others but clear and firm in intent. Assertiveness is sometimes confused with aggressiveness – being rude, hostile, blaming, threatening, demanding, or sarcastic is not being assertive – these are all examples of aggressive communication styles. Assertive communication does mean standing up for yourself but doing so in a way that does not trespass on the rights of others and respects your own rights and feelings and the rights and feelings of others. When you communicate assertively, you communicate honestly but appropriately. Assertiveness is often correlated with good self esteem and confidence and is a very valuable skill to develop if you don’t already use assertive communication.

### Four communication Styles

As indicated above, style of communication can vary in significant ways. Four typical communication styles are:

**Aggressive:** *Is intimidating, forceful, and does not consider the needs, rights or feelings of others. It can involve yelling or saying rude, cutting or abusive. Communicating aggressively can feel powerful and can seem effective as others may fear you and do what you want as a result, however, this sort of communication tends towards bullying behaviour that is potentially quite harmful to others and ultimately ineffective as it does not engender like or respect from others.*

**Passive:** *Is submissive and deferent, avoids conflict at all costs, puts your own needs last, means giving in to unreasonable demands from others and holding back your opinion. Passive communication tends to avoid negative criticism and strives to avoid the notice of others. Passive communication tends to focus overly on pleasing others at the cost of ones own needs and rights.*

**Passive-Aggressive:** *Has an overtone of aggression disguised in a benign or even pleasant tone of voice. It is a way of not complying with the needs and wishes of others but without being upfront about it. For example, claiming a headache when you are about to go out with a friend so that you don’t have to go instead of being upfront about not wanting to go in the first place. Passive aggressive communication can involve undermining others or “accidentally” taking an action that is harmful to another.*

**Assertive:** *As described above, assertive communication is clear in its intent, involves standing up for your own rights and wishes but respecting others at the same time. This is the most effective of the four communication styles.*

You may have used each of these styles at some time or noticed others using them. It is not unusual to find women employing more passive styles of communication and men employing more aggressive styles of communication. This seems to be something that is culturally programmed – that is, aggressiveness is generally accepted for men while women are expected to be deferent and put their needs aside. This can sometimes mean that women try to assert their rights by being passive aggressive, which can be challenging to respond to as the intent is aggressive but the tone and language are passive. However, we can all learn to improve our communication style or our communication in challenging situations and learning to communicate more assertively is a very good starting point.

## How Do You Become More Assertive?

Assertiveness is a skill and like any other skill, is something you can develop and perfect with practice even if you are unused to being assertive. A good rule of thumb to remember is to always own your own feelings in your communication (use "I" statements) and avoid blaming others for your feelings. Here is a handy sentence structure to enable you to communicate assertively:

**When you** (describe the other person's action or the event of concern in a purely factual way – don't embellish!)

**I feel/I felt** (describe your own feelings in response to the above action or event – for example, sad, angry, hurt, frustrated)

**Because** (describe your interpretation of the event and the reason why you feel the way you do)

**And what I would like in the future is or what I would prefer is** (offer a future alternative that better meets your needs whilst not infringing on the needs/rights of the other person).

**For example:** "When you didn't respond to my suggestion in the meeting, I felt hurt and angry because it seemed that you did not value what I had to say and what I would like in future is to be given space to express suggestions and ideas"

As you become more skilled at communicating in this format, you'll feel more comfortable and sound natural. Sometimes you can decrease tension in problem situations with humour, the tone of your voice and a smile, as you make your point.

## Other ideas on becoming more assertive:

1. Explore your own beliefs – do you think you have a right to your feelings? Work on giving yourself that right. It is okay to be angry, to say no, to ask for help and to make mistakes.
2. Maintain direct eye contact, keep your posture open and relaxed, be sure your facial expression agrees with the message, and keep a level, well-modulated tone of voice.
3. Resist giving into interruptions until you have completed your thoughts. (Instead, say - "Just a moment, I haven't finished.")
4. When saying "No," be decisive. Explain why you are refusing but don't be overly apologetic.
5. Use "I" statements such as "I want" or "I feel" statements. Always acknowledge the other person's situation or feelings followed by a statement in which you stand up for your rights. E.g., "I know you're X, but I feel..."
6. Listen and let people know you have heard what they said. Ask questions for clarification.
7. Practice! Encourage yourself to be assertive in more and more situations and reward yourself each time you've pushed yourself to be assertive regardless of whether or not you get the desired results.

## Being assertive isn't just for problem situations.

The same assertiveness techniques are a great way to compliment, support and encourage someone you care about. Being assertive builds healthy relationships.

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## Remember that being assertive means...

- You express your feelings and your rights clearly.
- You act in your own best interests but still consider the needs and rights of others.
- You develop trust and equality in your relationships.
- You ask for help when you need it.

All of which lead to better outcomes for you and for the important others in your life too.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at **9925-4365** between 9am and 5pm.

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