

Assertive Communication

We communicate with others both verbally (e.g. speaking) and non-verbally (e.g. body language).

Sometimes we may have difficulty with communication, examples may include:

- **having general conversations with others**
- **advocating for ourselves**
- **getting our point of view across to others**
- **showing respect to ourselves and others**
- **speaking to someone of authority**
- **respectfully disagreeing with someone**

Communication Styles

When we talk about communication styles, we can often break it down into four categories. Communication styles exist on a continuum, with assertive communication as the mid-point.

Passive

This is when a person does not express their own needs, thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. It may diminish one's own value, respect, rights, and self-esteem. It is an "I lose, you win" outcome.

Example: A person does not share their opinion or express their wants in a group conversation, and verbally agrees to what others say (even if internally they disagree). They may also speak softly, avoid eye contact, and fidget during the conversation.

Assertive

This is the ability to express our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and rights in a manner that is clear, honest, and direct, whilst demonstrating respect for the rights of others. It is an "I win, you win" outcome.

Example: A person listens to another's point of view, and then calmly, with a conversational yet firm voice, expresses their opinions or wants.

Aggressive

This communication style focuses on a person's own wants and may disregard the thoughts, feelings, or rights of others. Aggressive communication may involve attacks, threats, demands and promote non-assertive behaviour from others. It is an "I win, you lose" outcome.

Example: A person bluntly interrupts others to express their wants in a loud and demanding manner.

Passive Aggressive

This communication style is indirect and may be sarcastic, deceiving, or manipulative. It is an "I lose, you lose" outcome.

Example: A person verbally agrees with others' opinions but with a sarcastic tone of voice, glared eye contact, and annoyed facial expression.

What influences assertive communication?

Whilst communicating assertively cannot guarantee helpful responses from others, or our needs being met, it can improve the likelihood of meeting our needs, promoting self-esteem, and boosting relationships.

Despite knowing this, it can still be difficult to implement assertive communication. Some of the factors that may contribute to the difficulty are:

- Low self esteem
- Past experiences and modelled behaviour
- Unhelpful beliefs about being assertive
- Stress

Tips

There are many different assertive skills, and choosing the most appropriate option may vary depending on the situation. Below are a few assertive communication tips you can try:

- "I"-statements: Using "I" statements to describe your own feelings thoughts, and beliefs when communicating. E.g. "I can see that you have not completed your part of the project, I am worried about missing the deadline".
- Using empathy: E.g. if a person was interrupted, they may respond with "I know this is important to you, but I would like to finish what I was saying".
- Expressing emotions: Reflect on your feelings, then describe the feelings and why you feel that way. E.g. "I feel ... because...".
- Broken Record Technique: Once you have made an assertive statement, repeating it in conversation until it is accepted. E.g. "No, I don't want to buy that product".
- Body language, facial expressions, and voice, are also methods of communication to be mindful of. Some examples of assertive non-verbal communication include, medium levels of eye contact, appropriate facial expressions, smooth gestures whilst speaking, upright body posture, and appropriate pace, volume and tone of voice.

Practise

You can develop and improve your assertive communication skills through practise. You can be creative with this, but some ideas to get you started may include:

- Writing down scripts of a conversation, with emphasis on noting down assertive responses
- Saying assertive responses out loud to yourself, or rehearsing your assertive body language in the mirror
- Trying out assertive responses talking to a stranger (e.g. a retail worker)
- Role playing a difficult scenario with a trusted friend, and asking for their feedback

References

The following resources were consulted for the development for this TIP Sheet. They contain further information on assertive communication skills and can be sourced through the ECU Library:

Hargie, O. (2017). *Skilled interpersonal communication: research, theory and practice*.

Routledge. Kelly, A. (2018). *Social skills: developing effective interpersonal communication*. Routledge.

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