

Assertiveness Training

Assertiveness describes a way of relating to people whereby you reinforce your rights without violating those of the other. Assertiveness can be thought of as a continuum, with submissiveness at one extreme and aggression at the other.

Assertive behaviour can include both making demands of others and resisting being manipulated by them. Assertiveness training can help people recognise when they are being abused or manipulated for someone else's benefit and how to resist such treatment effectively *without* becoming aggressive. Assertiveness training emphasises the value of clear, calm and frank communication as a means of establishing relationships in which everyone knows where they stand and no one feels exploited.

Assertiveness training can help those who have previously suffered in silence to speak up for themselves. Many students on assertiveness training courses are people who have suffered a loss of self confidence due to destructive relationships in their personal or working lives. Some people in positions of authority seek assertiveness training in order to learn how to persuade people without having to become a bully or be perceived as one.

Developing Assertiveness

Why is it so difficult to be assertive? Whether you are typically prone to being too submissive or too aggressive, being assertive is, for all people, a crucial life skill that must be honed throughout the lifetime. It is more difficult for some people than others and depends on temperament and learned behaviour. It also depends upon the demands of the situation, behaviour of the other person, and one's mood and mental energy.

One theory to explain the difficulty of assertiveness is that strong emotions usually accompany situations that require it. Emotions such as anger and fear induce automatic physiological responses that inhibit clear thinking and the ability to communicate effectively. Under stress, the blood supply is automatically rerouted away from your brain and gut to your skeletal muscles to prepare them for physical action, which inhibits your ability to think clearly or efficiently.

In counselling, when exploring, in depth, the difficulties people face in attempting to be more assertive, what often emerges is a challenge to one's identity and a fear of the unknown. Common statements include:

"I have always been a gentle, soft and agreeable person and everyone knows me this way. It is probably in my nature and I don't know who I would be or how people would react to me if I suddenly became more assertive."

These are profound beliefs that may need to be explored and possibly challenged if people are to make significant changes in the way they conduct themselves. To become more assertive in general must require significant motivation along with a belief that it would be for the 'greater good'.

Importantly, assertiveness is not a thought or feeling but rather a behaviour. In her famous book 'Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway', Susan Jeffers writes of the liberating realisation: "Not only am I going to experience fear whenever I'm on unfamiliar territory, but so is everyone else." It therefore follows that personal growth cannot be accomplished without overcoming fear, since the exploration of 'unfamiliar territory' e.g. learning new skills, meeting new people or having new experiences is an essential component of personal development.

Jeffers also notes that "The only way to get rid of the fear of doing something is to go out and do it". In other words, by confronting challenges that have frightened us in the past, we can remove their power to intimidate us and thus build up our self confidence and self esteem.

"Life shrinks or expands according to one's courage" - Anais Nin

The Bill of Assertive Rights by Manuel J. Smith

Assertiveness requires confidence in your human rights. The following is based around one key principle: *'The right to be the final judge of yourself is the prime assertive right that allows no one to manipulate you'*.

1. You have the right to judge your own behaviour, thoughts and emotions, and to take the responsibility for their initiation and consequences upon yourself.
2. You have the right to offer no reasons or excuses for justifying your behaviour.
3. You have the right to judge if you're responsible for helping people.
4. You have the right to change your mind.
5. You have the right to make mistakes and be responsible for them.
6. You have the right to say, "I don't know".
7. You have the right to be independent of the goodwill or esteem of others.
8. You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
9. You have the right to say, "I don't understand".
10. You have the right to say, "I don't care".

Assertiveness Techniques

Assertiveness training involves the learning of skills and techniques for resisting manipulation and coping with criticism. Given the presence of strong emotions inhibits clear, reasonable and rational thinking, assertiveness techniques must be very simple if one is going to be able to use them effectively in pressure situations. Three of the key assertive techniques are *Broken Record*, *Fogging* and *Negative Assertion*.

Broken Record Technique:

In the broken record technique, a request is repeated over and over again until the desired response is obtained or a workable compromise is reached. Attempts at distraction or changing the subject are resisted. Person A politely but firmly repeats the request, reminds Person B of the obligation and refuses to be deflected from the point by Person B's attempts to digress or distract. Ideally, with some room for negotiation or compromise perhaps, Person A gets the desired response and a mutually-acceptable plan is agreed upon.

Fogging Technique:

Fogging involves training yourself to stay calm in the face of criticism and agreeing with whatever may be fair and useful in it. By refusing to be provoked and upset by criticism, you remove its destructive power. Why, after all, should you crave someone else's complete approval when doing so gives them power over you?

So, for instance, if someone calls you "stupid", you can agree that sometimes you are. After all, everyone does foolish things sometimes. "Stupid" is a relative term, and you probably *are* unintelligent compared to some people. If someone criticises your work, you can probably agree that it could be better. Even if it's already pretty good, there's likely to be some way in which you could make improve it.

The point of fogging is that it robs your critic's words of their destructive power. While, superficially, it may seem like a submissive strategy, it is in fact assertive because of what it implies. By refusing to become upset or angry in the face of criticism, you're denying your critic the satisfaction of seeing you being intimidated and disempowered. If they're just trying to bully you and their words don't overpower you, there's a good chance that they'll turn their attentions to someone else who's easier to intimidate.

Phrases typically used when fogging include: "That could be true", "You're probably right". "Sometimes I think so myself", "I agree", "That's true", "You're right" and "You have a point there". A phrase that is *never* used when fogging but is constantly *implied*, is: "So what?"

Negative Assertion Technique:

But what if the person who's complaining has valid, specific points to make about how you can improve? Well, then you can use negative assertion. This simply means agreeing with

those parts of the criticism that are valid, but without allowing yourself to become consumed by guilt and self loathing.

So if they tell you that your homework's late and it *is* late, admit it. Just say "Yes, you're right. I need to organise my time better" - or words to that effect. Then change your behaviour if you want to, or don't change if you don't want to - but either way, don't beat yourself up just because you've been criticised.

Another form of negative assertion is simply owning up to your mistakes before anyone has even taken you to task for them: for instance, by turning up late at the office and simply saying "Hi, I'm sorry I'm late". In that situation, you are acknowledging that there's a problem and accepting responsibility for the situation, which should count in your favour with any bosses or colleagues who are annoyed with you.

Assertiveness training teaches that it's also important to acknowledge compliments and accept them if you believe them to be sincere (rather than manipulative buttering up) and agree with the nice things that are being said about you. The really important thing is that, at all times, *you are the ultimate judge of your own behaviour.*

DESC Scripting

An assertiveness technique used for framing complaints or requests is known as DESC Scripting. 'Describe, Express, Specify and Consequences'.

In the *Describe* part, you describe how you see the situation.

In the *Express* part, you say how it's making you feel.

In the *Specify* part, you say what you'd like to happen.

Finally, in the *Consequences* part, you say what will happen if you don't get what you want. This is slightly more confrontational and you only do this if necessary. Sometimes, however, this is the only thing that the other person will take seriously, particularly if they have low empathy for your position.

For example, you might tell your flatmate:

Description - "You're playing your music really loudly again."

Express feelings - "It's getting on my nerves and distracting me while I'm trying to work."

Specify - "Would you mind turning it down?"

Consequences - "If you don't, I'll have to work at the library instead which would really annoy me" (negative sanction). If you do, I'll be able to get my work done and we can go out for dinner" (positive inducement).

Transactional Analysis

Assertiveness training may also include analysis of human interaction and the roles people play. Transactional Analysis, developed by Eric Berne, is one method of examining relationships. The central idea is that human beings have three basic 'ego-states': parent, adult and child. People move among these three ego-states, or states of mind, whether or not they are in fact parents, children or adults.

The parent ego state is based on the instructions a person received during the earliest years of their life. When in the parent ego state later in life, they'll unconsciously replay the tone and/or content of the instructions they got from adult authority figures as a young child. Consequently, they'll try to guide and control others' behaviour, either with good intentions or with the intention of manipulating their subject to their own advantage.

The adult ego state is a more analytical mode of thinking and behaviour, based upon maturity, respect, wisdom and self-understanding.

The child ego state is that of the uncomprehending infant, reacting to experiences in an emotional, instinctive and non-analytical way. When in the child state, a person is likely to be dependent, looking to others to tell them what to do and fulfil their needs, though they may also be playful and creative.

We often switch among the different ego states unconsciously in response to others' behaviour. If someone is in the child ego state and is behaving irrationally in a way that obstructs our aims, we may slip into the parent ego state and try to control them - for instance, by ordering someone to stop being noisy when you're trying to work. While this might achieve the short-term goal of getting you some peace from what you perceive as their noisiness, it's likely to harm the ongoing relationship. Transactional analysis promotes interaction between people based on an attitude of mutual respect.

Conclusion

While the above ideas, tools and recommendations may seem simple, maintaining or improving your assertiveness skills remains one of the most profound challenges for the human condition. It is certainly a very common topic of conversation in counselling. Insights into why you face unique challenges in your attempts to be more assertive are important but, considering assertiveness is an act rather than a state of mind, ultimately, improvement must be measured through *behavioural change*. Behaving more assertively



may be very emotionally challenging and uncomfortable, particularly if you are normally very submissive or aggressive. With practice however, you may become accustomed to this new identity and 'way of being' with others. If done wisely, perhaps with guidance, it may be highly liberating and unlock great potential.