

ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module Two

How to Recognise Assertive Behaviour

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Recognising the Difference between Passive, Assertive and Aggressive Communication Styles.

It is important that you learn how to recognise the verbal and non-verbal characteristics of the different communication styles. Once we know these we will be able to recognise passive, assertive or aggressive behaviour in ourselves and others.

The first step to changing behaviour is recognising which bits we need to change. It may be that you are able to speak assertively, i.e. your verbal skills are assertive, but your nonverbal communication may be quite passive and contradicting your verbal communication. For example, if you say “I don’t like it when you do that”, which is an assertive statement, but you do it in a very quiet voice with no eye contact and shuffling your feet, then your nonverbal behaviour will undermine your verbal and your message will probably not be taken seriously.

You will notice that each communication style has some payoffs or positive aspects and costs or negative aspects. It is important to acknowledge these as you may not have realised that there can be a cost to being assertive. For example, a cost of becoming assertive is that people around you may have been getting some benefit from your being unassertive. If they are typically aggressive and want things done their way, they may not want you to change. If you are aware of this possibility it will perhaps make it easier for you to change.

As you read the descriptions below take note of which behaviours you need to add your repertoire!

Characteristics of Passive Communication

Definition:

- Not expressing honest feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, allowing others to violate your rights. Can also mean expressing thoughts and feelings in an apologetic, self-effacing way – so that others easily disregard them.
- Violating your own rights.
- Also sometimes showing a subtle lack of respect for the other person’s ability to

take disappointments, shoulder some responsibility, or handle their own problems.

Verbal characteristics:

- long rambling sentences
- beat-around-the-bush
- hesitant, filled with pauses
- frequent throat clearing
- apologise inappropriately in a soft unsteady voice
- using phrases such as “if it wouldn’t be too much trouble...”
- fill in words, e.g., “maybe”, “er”, “um”, “sort of”
- voice often dull and monotonous
- tone may be sing-song or whining
- over-soft or over-warm
- quiet often dropping away
- frequent justifications, e.g., “I wouldn’t normally say anything”
- apologies, e.g., “I’m terribly sorry to bother you..”
- qualifiers, e.g., “It’s only my opinion” or “I might be wrong”
- self-dismissal, e.g., “It’s not important” or “It doesn’t really matter”
- self put-downs, e.g., “I’m useless...hopeless” or “You know me...”

Non-verbal characteristics:

- averting gaze
- looking down
- posture can be slouched
- wringing hands
- winking or laughing when expressing anger
- covering mouth with hand
- crossing arms for protection
- ghost smiles when expressing anger or being criticised
- raising eyebrows in anticipation
- jaw trembling

- lip biting

Thinking style:

- “I don’t count”
- “My feelings, needs and thoughts are less important than yours”
- “People will think badly of me or not like me”
- “If I say no then I may upset someone, I will be responsible for upsetting them”

Payoff:

- Praised for being selfless, a good sport
- Rarely blamed if things go wrong because you haven’t usually shown initiative
- Others will protect and look after you
- Avoid, postpone or hide conflict so in short term can lead to reduction of anxiety

Cost:

- Sometimes prone to build up of stress and anger that can explode in a really aggressive manner
- Others often make unreasonable demands of you
- Can get stuck in relationships that aren’t healthy and find it very difficult to change
- Restrict self into other people’s image of a lovable good person
- When repressing anger and frustration this diminishes other more positive feelings in you
- Loss of self esteem

Aggressive Behaviour

Definition:

- You stand up for your personal rights and express your thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way which is usually inappropriate and always violates the rights of the other person.
- People often feel devastated by an encounter with an aggressive person
- Superiority is maintained by putting others down.

- When threatened you attack.

Verbal characteristics:

- Strident, sarcastic or condescending voice
- Fluent, few hesitations
- Often abrupt, clipped
- Often fast
- Emphasising blaming words
- Firm voice
- Tone sarcastic, cold, harsh
- Voice can be strident, often shouting, rising at end
- Use of threats, e.g., “You’d better watch out” or “If you don’t...”
- Put downs, e.g., “You’ve got to be kidding...” or “Don’t be so stupid”
- Evaluative comments, emphasising concepts such as: should”, “bad”, “ought”
- Sexual / racist remarks
- Boastfulness, e.g., “I haven’t got problems like yours”
- Opinions expressed as fact, e.g., “Nobody want to behave like that” or “That’s a useless way to do it”
- Threatening questions, e.g., “Haven’t you finished that yet?” or “Why on earth did you do it like that?”

Non-verbal characteristics:

- Intruding into the other person’s space
- Staring the other person out
- Gestures such as pointing, fist clenching
- Striding around impatiently
- Leaning forward or over
- Crossing arms (unapproachable)
- Smiling may become sneering
- Scowling when angry
- Jaws set firm

Thinking style:

- “I’ll get you before you have a chance of getting me”
- “I’m out for number one”
- “The world is a battle ground and I am out to win”

Payoffs:

- You get others to do your bidding
- Things tend to go your way
- You are less vulnerable
- You like the feeling of being in control
- Release of tension
- You feel powerful

Price:

- Your behaviour will create enemies and resentment in those around you
- This can result in a sense of paranoia and fear
- If you are always trying to control others it can be difficult for you to relax
- Your relationships will tend to be based on negative emotions and are likely to be unstable
- Aggressive people tend to feel inferior deep down and try to compensate for that by putting others down
- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Decreasing self confidence and self esteem

Assertive Behaviour

Definition:

- A way of communicating our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs in an open, honest manner without violating the rights of others.
- It is an alternative to being aggressive where we abuse other people’s rights, and passive where we abuse our own rights.

Verbal characteristics:

- Firm, relaxed voice
- Fluent, few hesitations
- Steady even pace
- Tone is middle range, rich and warm
- Sincere and clear
- Not over-loud or quiet
- Voice appropriately loud for the situation
- “I” statements (“I like”, “I want”, “I don’t like”) that are brief and to the point
- Co-operative phrases, e.g., “What are your thoughts on this”
- Emphatic statements of interest, e.g., “I would like to”
- Distinction between fact and opinion, e.g., “My experience is different”
- Suggestions without “shoulds” or “oughts” e.g., “How about...” or “Would you like to...”
- Constructive criticism without blame, e.g., “I feel irritated when you interrupt me”
- Seeking others opinions, e.g., “How does this fit in with your ideas”
- Willingness to explore other solutions, e.g., “How can we get around this problem?”

Non-verbal characteristics:

- Receptive listening
- Direct eye contact without staring
- Erect, balanced, open body stance
- Open hand movements
- Smiling when pleased
- Frowning when angry
- Features steady
- Jaw relaxed

Thinking style:

- “I won’t allow you to take advantage of me and I won’t attack you for being who you are”

Payoffs:

- The more you stand up for yourself and act in a manner you respect, the higher your self esteem
- Your chances of getting what you want out of life improve greatly
- Expressing yourself directly at the time means that resentment doesn't build up
- If you are less driven by the needs of self-protection and less preoccupied with self consciousness then you can see, hear and love others more easily

Price:

- Friends / family may have benefited from you being passive and may sabotage your new assertiveness
- You are reshaping beliefs and values you have held since childhood and this can be frightening
- There is no guarantee of outcome
- There is often pain involved in being assertive

Module summary

- There are differences in the verbal and nonverbal characteristics of aggressive, assertive and passive communication. Each style has its own benefits and costs.

Coming up:

The next module introduces some of the unhelpful thinking patterns that stop us from being assertive and shows how to change these.

ABOUT THIS MODULE

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

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