

Assertiveness

Many of us are taught that we should always defer to others and do what others want. We are told that we should always consider others feelings, and do what is asked of us, no matter how we truly may feel about it. This is often called passivity, which violates our own rights by failing to express honest feelings, thoughts and beliefs. The basic message behind passivity is that “my feelings don’t matter, and my thoughts aren’t important, so I will yield to you and do and say whatever you want.” The goal of this type of behavior is to avoid conflict and appease others.

Although you may seem that you are doing the right thing by not creating conflict, you can actually do harm to yourself. Not considering your own honest feelings about a situation or request can lead to many negative consequences. Whenever you comply with others wishes and really don’t want to, you put yourself at risk for the following:

- Depression: when you comply with someone’s request and you end up feeling helpless with no control over your life.
- Resentment: from feeling like others are manipulating or taking advantage of you.
- Frustration: being upset with yourself for acting like a wimp, and allowing yourself to be victimized.
- Violence- if you don’t adequately deal with your feelings about complying, these negative feelings can build up and then erupt.
- Anxiety and Avoidance- you may begin to avoid situations and people that you know will put you in a spot where you feel like you should comply with a request. This can cause you to miss out on many activities that you enjoy doing.
- Headaches, ulcers, and high blood pressure: All of the above can lead to these physical symptoms as a result of the stress placed upon your body.

The alternative to passivity is assertiveness. Assertiveness is considered a middle ground between being a doormat and a bully. It is the ability to honestly express your opinions, feelings and attitudes and rights in a way that doesn’t infringe upon the rights of others. Assertiveness is not meant to degrade or disrespect others, but to let others know what you are feeling in a way that conveys that your feelings matter, and that you want to be heard, and that you have a right to be heard.

Before you decide to assert your rights you should remember that assertiveness will not always be accepted by everyone. Some might be shocked by your behavior change and not know exactly how to respond to you. You should also remember that others have a right to respond to your assertiveness with their own wants, needs and ideas. Lastly, being assertive also includes working out an agreeable compromise that everyone is happy with.

Assertive Behavior consists of three components:

- Empathy and validation: try to respond in a way that shows your understanding of the other person's feelings. This shows the other person that you are not out to pick a fight and that his or her feelings are also important. An example would be "I know that you really enjoy going to that place with all your friends..."
- Statement of the problem: describes your difficulty or dissatisfaction and conveys that you need something to change and why. Ex. "... But I feel out of place because I don't know anyone and I really don't enjoy myself."
- Statement of what you want, in the form of a specific request, sometimes asking for a change in another's behavior. Ex. "From now on I could bring a friend, and that way we can both enjoy ourselves."

How to be effectively assertive:

- Use assertive body language by facing the other person either while standing or sitting.
- Maintain direct eye contact, and display a pleasant but serious facial expression and keep your voice calm, not whiney or abrasive. Speak clearly, and audibly. Use facial expressions and gestures to add emphasis to your words.
- Use "I" statements by keeping the focus on your problem as opposed to what's wrong with the other person. For example: "I am really not comfortable doing the project that way," as opposed to "You are doing that project all wrong!"
- Be factual, not judgmental. For example: "You forgot to address these envelopes," as opposed to "I can't believe you forgot to address these, you are a such a horrible worker."
- Own your thoughts and express them. Say: "I get angry whenever he does that instead of "he makes me angry whenever..."
- Don't invite others to say no by making clear and direct requests.
- Keep repeating your request or point and don't allow yourself to be pulled into an argument.
- Prevent fights and ward off negative criticism by agreeing with the facts but maintaining your right to make a choice. For example: If your mother says, "It's too late for you to go out," respond by saying "you are right, it is late."

Keep in mind that the way you convey your message or wants is just as important as the message itself. Remember to allow your body language to be in line with your verbal message. Don't speak so forcefully or stand so rigidly that your message is lost because of conflicting messages.

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned and maintained with practice. If you or someone you know could benefit from assertiveness training, there are many counselors and facilities that could assist an individual in learning these skills.

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette Counseling and Testing Center offers free confidential counseling to students, faculty, and staff members. Please contact the center at 482-6480 for more information.

