



Assertion – how to communicate well and improve relationships

Sarah Patterson

Therapist, Health & Wellbeing Service

What is assertion?

Assertiveness enables us to act in our own best interests, to stand up for ourselves without undue anxiety, to express honest feelings comfortably and to express personal rights - without denying the rights of others.

Modes of communication:

Passive

- Avoid the discomfort of confrontation/conflict and please others at our own expense.

Agressive

- Only valuing and enforcing our own opinion, not considering the views and feelings of others

Passive aggressive

- Passive aggressive behaviour is a deliberate and masked way to express anger and is an indirect expression of hostility

Assertive

- We stand up for our own wishes, wants and desires, but take into account that others' wishes may be equally as important
- We communicate honestly, in an appropriate way, at the relevant time
- We are all equal in worth

Modes of communication:

Assertion continued...

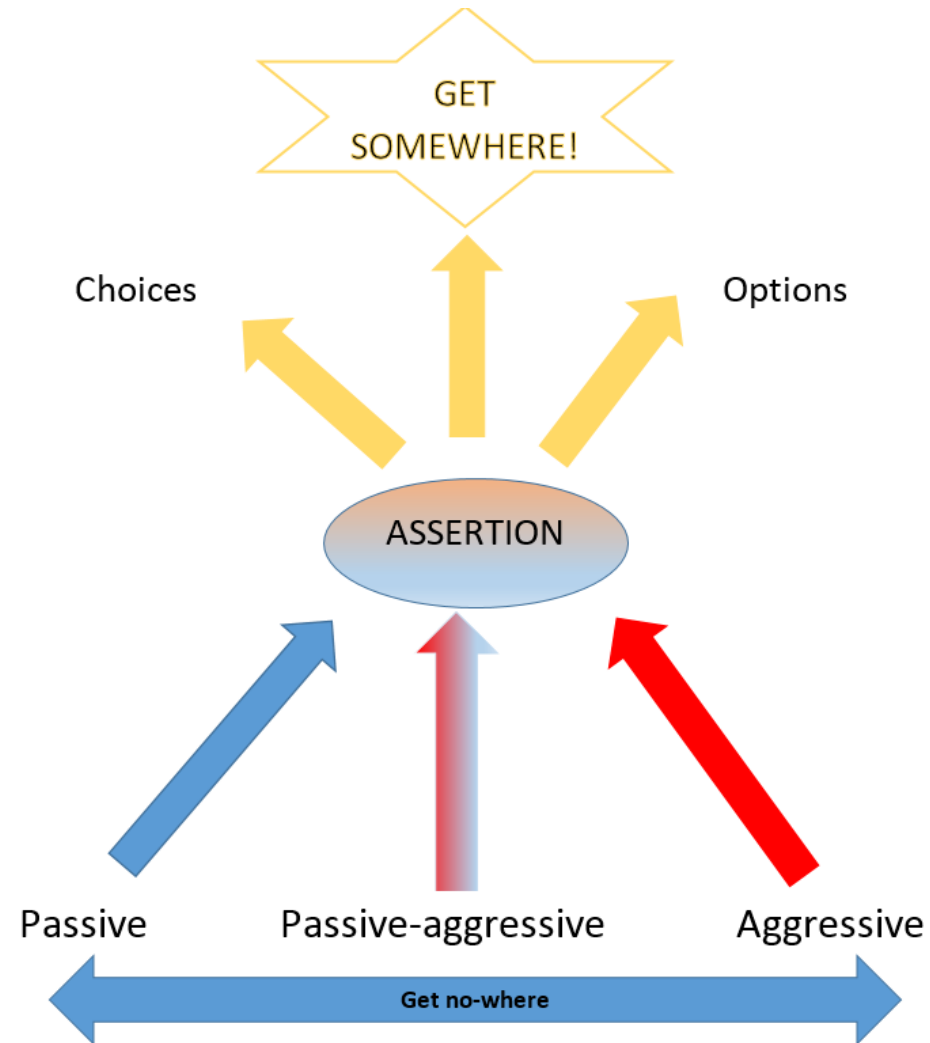
- Cognitively, to be assertive implies a lack of anxious thoughts in light of stress, you demonstrate confidence with your point of view and where you stand.
- Behaviourally, assertion is about asking for what you want in a manner that respects others. Assertive people don't shy away from defending their points of view or goals, or from trying to influence others. They do this with consideration for other peoples' points of views, needs and opinions too.
- In terms of affect (how we feel), assertion means reacting to positive and negative emotions without aggression or resorting to passivity or passive aggression.

Assertion

- *Your preferences won't always be met. Assertion requires cooperation and negotiation and helps us experience and overcome disappointments far more quickly*
- *It is often necessary to balance the needs of others against our own. Consideration needs to be given as to when it is appropriate to assert personal rights and when it is not*

People who are stressed or anxious can often resort to passive, passive aggressive or aggressive behaviour when expressing their thoughts and feelings

Being Assertive decreases the stress we take on



Personal reflections...

- Our assertiveness is often altered by situations and the people we are with.
- In which situations / with whom might you be assertive?
- In which situations / with whom might you avoid being assertive? Why might this be?
- Consider some examples

Road blocks to assertion:

- The fear of not being liked
- The fear of being rejected
- The fear of being selfish
- The fear of hurting or up-setting others
- Thinking that others should know what we want / know how we are feeling
- Keeping our feelings to ourselves

The 5 stages of assertion *(not all steps may be necessary in all situations)*

Stage

1. Describe the behaviour

2. Express your feelings

3. Empathise

4. Indicate consequences

5. Negotiate a change

Example

When you keep asking me to go to the pub

I feel anxious because I still want to avoid any busy places where possible, given COVID-19 is still in circulation

I totally understand you really want to go out and party after we've been locked-down for so long, I miss doing that too

However, I really need you to bear with me with this for now, or I'm afraid things will get awkward between us, which I don't want to happen

Our friendship is really important to me and I definitely want us to go out and do nice things. Can we have a think about what we can do together that works for both of us?

Assertiveness techniques

- Identify what communication mode you are employing – passive, passive/aggressive or assertive?
- If necessary, modify your body language and voice tone accordingly
- Distinguish between fact and opinion, use 'I' statements – 'as I understand it', 'my thoughts are...', 'I don't see it that way'
- Enquire about the other's thoughts and opinions '*what do you think?*', '*have you got any ideas for resolving this?*', '*how does this sound to you?*'
- Appropriate self-disclosure : '*I feel awkward saying this as I'm afraid you won't like what I'm going to say. I'm really trying hard to practice being more assertive and could really use your support*'
- Request specific examples: '*will you tell me when you think I ate all the chocolate?*' and using agreement: '*you're right, I did eat some of it on that occasion, but certainly not all of it*'

Assertiveness techniques continued...

- Be specific about behaviour, not a character attack. *'I feel disappointed when you're late', 'I find your attitude towards me disrespectful', 'I've noticed you using a lot of my milk recently'*
- 'Assertive sandwich' – you give a positive, a negative and another positive e.g. *'I love sharing a house with you, however when you keep playing your music late at night I feel cross because it stops me sleeping. This really affects my ability to do my work the next day. Can we have a chat so we can work out some kind of compromise... You're a great friend and I'd hate us to fall out over this.'*
- The "broken record" technique consists of sticking to your point and repeating your requests or your refusals every time you are met with resistance - without getting angry, irritated, or loud.
- *'Fake it to make it' (but be sincere, don't fake the reality of who you are); assertive pose*
- *Rehearse - creates neural associations*

Communication skills - avoid 'defence triggers'

- Name-calling – *'you idiot', 'you're just being stupid'*
- Judging – *'well you should like musicals, they're great fun'*
- Avoid sarcasm – this can be a form of aggression
- Keep your cool, stick to the facts *(Dryden & Constantinou, 2004)*

Assertion – techniques for good communication

It's all about the “I statements”

Adopt the philosophy

Selfcare

- In order to communicate our needs effectively, we need to attune to our thoughts, emotions, behaviours and physical feelings
- Pay serious attention to our own preferences or interests; be seriously concerned with our own lives (whilst respecting the preferences of others)
- If we communicate effectively and assertively, we will be more likely to feel heard and understood and get our needs met

Self-reflection

- Consider one area of your life where you would like to develop being more assertive
- What might you have to adapt in order to do this? E.g. barriers to assertion; communication styles

And finally...

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the courage to be ourselves and show the world our likes and dislikes, our thoughts, feelings, and shortcomings. It's about **communicating** honestly with family, friends and colleagues. As we become more **assertive, we drop** the mask and show our true selves. We proclaim: "This is who I am, this is what I feel, and these are my needs."

Shakti Gawain