

ASSERTIVENESS

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN ASSERTIVENESS & AGGRESSIVENESS

Assertion involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways which do not violate another persons rights. Assertion involves respect for one's own rights and needs and the rights and needs of the other person. The goal of assertion is honest communication, to give and receive respect, to ask for fair play and to leave room for compromise when the needs and rights of two people conflict.

Aggression involves directly standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a way which is often dishonest, usually inappropriate and always violates the rights of the other person. The usual goal of aggression is domination and winning, forcing the other person to lose. Winning is ensured by humiliating, degrading, belittling, or overpowering other people so that they become weaker and less able to express and defend their needs and rights.

Non-Assertive Behaviour involves violating one's own rights by failing to express honest feelings, thoughts and beliefs and consequently permitting others to violate oneself, or expressing one's thoughts and feelings in such an apologetic, diffident, self-effacing manner so that others can easily disregard them. Non-assertive behaviour is often confused with politeness and with genuine concern for others.

Some personal indicators of whether you are acting non-assertively or out of genuine concern for others are as follows:

- Often when you are nonassertive your body signifies tension – e.g. a churning stomach, a headache, facial muscles freezing, breathing faster, etc.
- Is your relationship with this person likely to change if you fail to honestly express your feelings and instead “politely” keep quiet?
- Are you likely to remind the other person of their previous behaviours which were “politely” disregarded when they happened?
- Do you feel that the person owes you something for your having “politely” disregarded their actions?

The goal of nonassertion is to appease others and to avoid conflict at any cost.

What Are My Rights?

Assertion is based on the premise that all human beings require certain basic human rights in order to live well together and that these should not be violated.

Obviously, due to the variety of human activities, there are many possible rights, although they can be grouped into categories:

- **The right to be**, e.g. the right to be left alone, to be independent, to be successful, to be assertive
- **The right to have**, e.g. your own opinions, the right to get what you paid for
- **The right to do**, e.g. the right to ask for what you want, to refuse requests without feeling guilty, to make mistakes

Role Rights versus Human Rights

- Role rights pertain to specific roles, e.g. boss/employee, doctor/patient
- Human rights generally apply to all people, e.g. the right to own feelings, to change, to make decisions

Developing Confidence In My Rights

It is important to begin developing a belief system to support and justify assertive behaviour. Confidence in rights (a) help maintain assertiveness when being unjustly criticised, (b) counteract any irrational guilt or fear arising from assertiveness, (c) lead to pride in one's assertive behaviour, even if others are not pleased.

NB: Being assertive does not guarantee that you will get what you want, but it does allow you to express yourself confidently. Because some rights require co-operation from others, the ability/strength to speak assertively is often enough.

Two of the Beliefs Underlying Assertion are:

1. Assertion means more satisfying personal relationships
2. All people are entitled to honestly express their thoughts, feelings and beliefs

What Stops Us from Having Confidence in our Rights?

- Lack of belief in rights, e.g. parental permission
- Incompatible beliefs, e.g. asking for a raise
- Counter beliefs, e.g. "I can't be properly assertive when another may feel hurt"

Some Questions to Help You Focus on the Source of Difficulty:

- If I accord this right to others, why not to myself?
- Is there some experience I've had that causes me to believe I don't have this right?
- What would happen if I gave myself this right?