

## **UNDERSTANDING ASSERTIVENESS**

Many people are confused by the term 'assertiveness' and associate it with 'getting your own way' or aggression, but this is not so. Assertiveness considers the rights and needs of everyone, it assumes that everyone is equal, and therefore it may be considered a way of increasing choices for everyone.

In reaction to a situation that arises where you are unhappy, you have at least four choices:

- 1) Accept the situation
- 2) Be aggressive
- 3) Be passive
- 4) Be assertive

Most people behave in each of these ways in different situations. If we are happy to accept a situation then that is one choice, if not, one of the other three options tends to be followed and these can be explored further.

### **Aggression**

The aim of aggression is to win in spite of the consequences for others. It does not consider their rights or needs and is usually destructive either physically or psychologically. People who are aggressive may often achieve their aims, but aggression has other results too:

- a. Aggression often breeds aggression and once people start to behave aggressively towards each other it can be hard to stop thus causing an escalation in hostility. People look for new ways to hurt each other and can soon become lifelong enemies.
- b. Aggressiveness can make you unpopular; once you have gained a reputation for being aggressive people will be wary of you and avoid you. They may fear being abused, or feeling embarrassed by your behaviour towards other people. They may also worry about losing friends or influence because others assume that they, like you, are aggressive. Eventually the only friends you have left are as aggressive as yourself, or are frightened of you.
- c. Aggression discourages others from helping you again in the future. By forcing someone to cooperate they may be resentful and refuse to help another time when you really need them.
- d. Behaving aggressively does not create respect from others, it simply makes them frightened. They will do what you want while you watch them, but tend to do their own thing once you stop hence making your aggression a waste of time.
- e. Aggression can make you feel good for a short time but is it worth it?

### **Passivity**

Being passive means you behave as though your rights are less important than those of others. Passive people behave as though they don't have the right to give their opinions and say what they really think, they may miss out on things, or even worse comply to things when they don't really want to. They don't dare to join in with others and contribute their opinions because they are frightened of looking stupid in front of others whom they consider more able or important. Passive people often act as if they have no value and are worthless, ultimately others may start to treat them this way and it makes it harder for them to change. Passivity usually results in:

- a. Not getting what you want or need; if you don't join in and tell others what you actually want you probably won't get it. This often results in greater unhappiness and causes a more difficult situation.

- b. Less respect from others because you are behaving like a doormat people will treat you that way. Most people think more highly of others who are prepared to stand up for themselves.
- c. Reduces short-term stress because it is easier to let people have their own way and avoid conflict, but is it worth it?

### **Assertiveness**

The aim of assertiveness is to find a win-win situation and to achieve the best outcome for all people. It sees everyone as equal, possessing equal rights, and equal responsibilities.

- a. Assertiveness increases the chances of your needs being met, by telling people what you want without being aggressive they are likely to help, or by accepting that they can't help without becoming aggressive you maintain a friendly relationship.
- b. Being assertive allows you to remain in control, decide what you want to do and to seek the opportunity to do it, or something similar.
- c. Assertiveness increases self-confidence; as you learn to take control and see what you can achieve your confidence and self-esteem increases. You feel better and more effective.
- d. By acting assertively you will be able to have greater confidence in others as it helps them to state their needs and wants. By being honest and open with them they are encouraged to be the same back.
- e. Assertive people have more friends; in treating people more fairly you engender respect and trust; other people like you and like to spend time with you. They respect you rather than walking all over you (passivity) and don't fear you (aggression).
- f. Behaving assertively reduces stress because you feel more in control. You don't worry about doing things you don't want to do, or about controlling others or being controlled. You have the power to choose your own destiny.

Having established that assertiveness is the best way forward does not necessarily make it easy to achieve, but some things may help: Remember that there are many ways to interact with others; you can inform, explain, discuss or just have relaxed conversation. Whichever way you choose it is often useful to know in advance how you intend to interact. If you intend to inform someone of a decision you have made you don't necessarily need to discuss it unless you choose to do so and you don't have to explain it. Having a clear idea of the boundaries you have set beforehand is extremely useful especially when dealing with aggression.

Another important point is that other people have no idea what you are feeling inside, they only know what you show them, so by looking and sounding confident you give the impression that you are confident. This makes assertive interactions easier.

Finally, by being assertive you are treading a path of mutual respect with others. By being neither aggressive, nor passive you increase your self respect and therefore your feeling of well-being and self-confidence. This will also result in better understanding of others accompanied by greater trust and friendship, leading to cooperation and collaboration, which in turn will help you reach your goals.

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