

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is a direct and appropriate expression of one's feelings, beliefs and opinions. When an individual stands up for his or her legitimate rights in such a way that the rights of others are not violated, he or she is being assertive. Assertiveness involves recognizing one's right to let others know how their behavior affects you and asking them to change that behavior. By behaving assertively, you open the way for honest communication with others and for the possibilities of negotiation and compromise. Assertiveness is an interpersonal communication skill that can be learned and practiced in an ongoing way.

How Does Assertive Behavior Differ from Passive Behavior or Aggressive Behavior?

Passive Behavior

Passive behavior may result in a person's rights being violated. The passivity may consist of hesitant speech, and avoidance of eye contact. Passive behavior usually reflects the underlying belief that one's feelings aren't important, or that one is too weak (or too afraid of being strong) to act on those feelings.

Aggressive Behavior

Aggressive behavior is interpersonal behavior in which a person stands up for his or her rights but in a way that violates the rights of others. The aggressive person may appear tense and angry and may connote an air of superiority. Aggressive behavior typically is experienced by the other person as humiliating, dominating or controlling. Unfortunately, aggressive behavior blocks the individual from enjoying supportive relationships with others.

What are the Benefits of Behaving Assertively?

To be assertive, you must first become aware of your own needs. In a situation where your needs are being violated, you can then express your needs in a direct and non-aggressive way. The other person may have had no intention of violating your needs, and may graciously make a change that makes both of you feel better. If you appropriately express a wish NOT to do what was requested, the person will adjust their expectations of you, and will be less likely to make similar requests in the future.

How Do I Become More Assertive?

In working on becoming more assertive, it is helpful to have situations in mind that typically create conflict for you. The following are just two examples of common conflict situations that might arise in college.

Example:

You are feeling pressured as spontaneous plans are being made to celebrate a friend's birthday that evening. You have a major exam in two days and need to study. Your usual tendency would be to try to accommodate your friends' schedules, but this time you really have to study for your exam.

Your roommate is looking through your closet. She typically wears your clothes and leaves them dirty in a heap on the floor. You don't mind sharing clothes, as long as they are cared for and put back. You can lose your temper sometimes, and you know you are in danger of exploding after finding your favorite sweatshirt stained at the bottom of a pile of clothes.

Suggested Guidelines:

Behaving assertively involves both **what you say and how you say it**. Assertive body language consists of direct eye contact, and a relaxed, upright body posture. Speech is clear and audible, and polite but firm. In regard to what is said, there is a simple effective formula you can practice in any conflict situation:

1. An empathy statement in which one recognizes the other person's needs. This begins the communication on a positive note.
2. A direct statement of one's own needs in the situation. This should be brief and clear, and should indicate to the other person that there is a conflict that exists for you.
3. An action statement or proposed way to resolve the conflict. (This can be an offer to discuss the situation further if needed).

Using the formula above, assertive statements in the above scenarios might be:

"I think it's a great idea to take (friend) out to celebrate her birthday. Unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to go tonight because I have a big accounting midterm on Friday, but I would really like to be there. How about figuring out a time we could all go out this weekend?"

"I know that you like to borrow my clothes and I like to wear yours sometimes too. But I'm feeling very frustrated lately because my clothes are dirty and not returned, and today I found my favorite sweatshirt stained. Can we talk about this and try to come up with a solution?"

When responding assertively, be sure to stick to the main point and avoid being sidetracked by other issues. While assertive behavior definitely increases the odds of better communication, it does not guarantee that the other person will respond as you hope they would. But you are in control of your reactions, and can continue to interact with that person in an assertive manner. Remember, skill at being assertive improves with practice.

For More Information

Caring psychologists are available at Union College Counseling Center for individual help with developing assertiveness skills. Appointments can be made by calling (518) 388-6161 or stopping by the front desk at the Wicker Wellness Center.