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Assertiveness

Assertiveness can be defined as: 'The ability to communicate our thoughts, feelings and ideas, both positive and negative, in an open and honest way which does not abuse our rights or the rights of others'

In addition to this we should include the ability to:

- Be responsible for ourselves
- Find a compromise where there is conflict
- Say 'no' to other people

Being assertive is not the same as being aggressive. Being assertive is not about getting our own way at all costs or through the manipulation of others. It is difficult to be assertive all the time, but most of us can benefit from learning to be more assertive in certain areas of our lives



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING ASSERTIVE?

Through being assertive we can improve our self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of self. By making clear our needs and feelings without being aggressive or worrying about upsetting others, we can reduce stress, tension and anxiety. We are more likely to have our needs met if we make them clear to others



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE ARE NOT ASSERTIVE?

Through being unassertive we can suffer a loss of self-esteem as the needs of others override our needs. If we do not express our thoughts, feelings and ideas we can lose our sense of who we are. Relationships can also be affected by a lack of openness and poor communication, leading to stress, anxiety and depression.

IF WE AREN'T BEING ASSERTIVE WHAT ARE WE BEING?

When talking about assertiveness, three main types of

behaviour are often mentioned:

- Assertion
- Aggression
- Passivity

We use each behaviour in different ways depending on the circumstances. How we behave can be influenced by the past. It is important to remember that we can learn to behave in different ways if we choose to

Characteristics of assertive behaviour

This type of behaviour involves standing up for your rights and expressing your thoughts and feelings directly and honestly in a way which respects the rights of others. The goal of assertiveness is to communicate clearly with each other. This allows us to express what we think whilst valuing the opinion of others and being open to exploring areas of conflict. Characteristics of assertiveness include:

- Really listening
- Firm but relaxed voice
- Direct eye contact
- Erect, balanced, open body stance
- Voice appropriately loud for the situation
- "I" statements (e.g. "I like", "I want", "I don't like")
- Cooperative phrases (e.g. "What are your thoughts on this?")
- Clear statements of interest (e.g. "I would like to...")

Although the process of developing more assertive ways of communication may have its difficulties, there are numerous benefits as noted earlier

Characteristics of aggressive behaviour

This behaviour comes from a desire to have our own needs met, but abuses the needs of others. Characteristics of aggression include:

- Not respecting personal space
- Staring the other person out
- Sarcastic or condescending voice
- Certain gestures (e.g. finger pointing)
- Threats (e.g. "You'd better watch out", "If you don't...")
- Put downs (e.g. "you've got to be kidding", "Don't be so stupid")
- Comments such as "should", "bad", "ought"
- Discriminatory remarks (e.g. references to a person's appearance)

Although this type of behaviour can help you get what you want, it can also create enemies, making life more difficult for you

Characteristics of passive behaviour

This type of behaviour means you may not be able to express your own thoughts, feelings and needs. Often we may express our own needs in such an apologetic way that other people think they are unimportant. Passivity can give the message that our thoughts and feelings are less important than the other persons. This behaviour enables us to avoid conflict at the cost of our own needs. Characteristics of passivity include:

- Rambling
- Letting things slide without comment
- Beating about the bush - not saying what you mean
- Apologising inappropriately in a soft, unsteady voice
- Being unclear; averting gaze
- Posture - backing off from others, slouching shoulders
- Wringing hands; winking or laughing when expressing anger
- Covering mouth with hand
- Using phrases such as, "If it wouldn't be too much trouble", "...but do whatever you want", "I...er...um..would like...um...you..er...to do..."

Although this behaviour can lead to you being viewed as unselfish, it can also lead to unreasonable demands being made of you. Once you have allowed a relationship to develop in a way you don't like it can be difficult to change the pattern of that relationship. You may hide feelings of anger and frustration and be less able to express positive feelings

HOW CAN I BECOME MORE ASSERTIVE?

There are many self-help books concerning assertiveness and developing confidence. Some colleges and mental health groups run courses on confidence building and assertiveness skills. If you think you would be interested in either books or courses try consulting your local college, mental health groups, library or bookshop. You may wish to consult the following books:

- Assertiveness: A Practical Approach. Holland, S. and Ward, C. (1994) Wilnslow Press, Oxon
- The Mental Health Handbook. Powell, T. (1999) Wilnslow Press, Oxon

Source: Leeds Mental Health Trust and Leeds Primary Care Trusts

The original version of this leaflet was written by Ardsley Community Mental Health Team, East Ardsley Health Centre, Wakefield WF3 2DN

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