

Assertiveness – Finding your voice

Assertive behaviour is learned behaviour that allows you to speak up effectively. When you act assertively, you act in your own best interests according to your own values. You stand up for yourself and express your opinions, feelings and attitudes without violating the rights of others. To enjoy better health, we have to be willing to speak up and let our opinions be known. If we don't, it can lead to distress and possible illness.

Part of wellness is acknowledging that when it comes to yourself, you are the expert. Trust your intuition. You have a responsibility to express your thoughts and feelings honestly. If you don't express your needs and let your rights be ignored or let someone else make your decisions, you are not being assertive. As a result, you may think less of yourself, feel humiliated, feel helpless and bitter because you are not saying or getting what you need. All of this because you didn't speak up.

Most people use one of four styles of relating to others: aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive or assertive. Here are some descriptions of the styles. Which style do you think is most effective? Do you see yourself using any of these styles?

An aggressive person tends to overpower other people. They are often loud, bossy and dominating. They blame other people and are rarely willing to admit responsibility for their own part in a conflict. An aggressive person violates other people's rights in order to get what he or she wants.

A passive person tends to avoid dealing with problems and does not speak up for their rights. They are often nervous and anxious and seem to have little self-confidence. They often try so hard to please others that they don't take care of their own needs. Because the passive person hides his or her anger instead of expressing it, their anger may build up inside and can lead to health problems such as depression, sleeplessness and anxiety.

A passive-aggressive person may behave quietly and not address conflicts. But instead of hiding their anger, this person will get back at the person they are angry with in a way that will hurt the other person; such as making them feel guilty. This person is often suspicious or distrustful of others and because the real problem is not dealt with, they don't get their needs met.

An assertive person is clear, confident and calm when they stand up for their rights without stepping on other people's rights. They speak directly, honestly and respectfully with a clear voice. The assertive person is able to say no to something they are uncomfortable with and does not compromise her or her own values or beliefs in order to make another person happy. An assertive person expresses their opinions and states their feelings using "I" messages such as, "When this happens, I feel..."

Here are two situations and the responses using the different styles of behaviour. An older person realizes they are out of milk. Aggressive style: "You haven't done my shopping so now I'm out of milk." Passive style: "Oh dear! I'm out of milk and I don't know what I'll do for breakfast." Assertive style: "I'm out of milk. When you do your shopping today, would you please buy a carton for me?"

Consider this situation: A grandchild asks for a loan but hasn't repaid a previous one. Aggressive style: "You need to get a job and stop bothering me for money." Passive style: "Well, just this time but I hope you will pay me back soon." Assertive style: "I do want to help you but I can't loan you more money as I am concerned that you haven't paid me back the last loan."

When you take control and realize that you can still make decisions about your life then you will feel better about yourself.