



Assertiveness 101

By Sarah Wesch

When people hear the word assertive, negative connotations often come to mind. Things like “pushy” or “selfish” or even “nag” or “jerk.” But, in reality, being assertive means that you communicate your own needs and wants in a way that is respectful to others. People confuse assertiveness with aggressive behavior, which is getting your own needs and wants meant at the expense of others. Often, in an attempt to avoid being aggressive or selfish, people revert to passive behavior, allowing others’ needs and wants to always come first.

A Continuum of Behavior

Everyone falls along the continuum from completely passive behavior to very aggressive behavior. Often, this may vary. We may behave passively in some situations (e.g. at work) and aggressively in others (e.g. with family.) Ideally, we would all work to balance our needs and wants

with those of others. Where do you fall on the continuum? Check out this quiz, published on another website, to help assess your level of assertiveness:

http://www.unh.edu/health-services/ohep/pdf/stress-communication_assertiveness-inventory.pdf

How To Change

If you’re like most people, you aren’t perfectly assertive all the time. Sometimes, you might not feel like you can stand up for what you need or want. Othertimes, you might not take the needs and wants of others into consideration. Here are some communication strategies that can help you communicate more assertively:

1. Know Your Rights

You have the right to say “no.” You have the right not to have to justify your decisions to others. You have a right to express your feelings. You have the right not to take responsibility for the behavior of others. You have the right to expect others to do/pay their fair share. You have the right to expect honesty from others. You have the right to make mistakes. You have the right to go places and see people without accounting for your whereabouts to a friend or significant other.

What other rights might you have? Right now, what rights do you feel are being infringed upon? Are there any situations in which you aren’t respecting the rights of others?

2. Express Yourself Clearly and Succinctly (Repeat as Needed)

When you've identified a situation in which you need to be more assertive, try to phrase your request in a simple, fact-based way. For instance, a common situation for college students is having a roommate who is late on rent. A simple phrase could be "The rent was due last Tuesday. I need you to pay your share." Often, the person will start making excuses. At that point, you can repeat yourself "I still need you to pay your share." If the roommate doesn't come forward with the rent, you may need to give a consequence "I need you to pay your share, or you will need to move out."

3. Use "I Statements"

When we try to resolve a conflict, we often turn to accusations and name calling. By taking this approach, we make it difficult for the other person to hear our point of view. Rather than focusing blame on the other person, focus on describing the situation and your feelings. For instance, if your friend often leaves you waiting, you could say "When you arrive later than we said we would meet, I feel hurt and disrespected."

4. Say "No."

One area that can be difficult is turning down requests. College students can find themselves overwhelmed with activities because they find it hard to say "no." You may find that you feel like you have to justify why you are saying "no" but this is not the case. A simple "no" or "no, thank you for asking" is enough. If you are prone to saying "yes" too easily, you may want to start by saying "Let me give that some thought." That will buy you the time you need to really decide if you have room in your life for one more activity.

Need More Help?

If you find that you are struggling to communicate assertively and it is having a negative impact on your life, it may be time to make an appointment with a therapist. For students at Kansas State University, you are eligible for counseling through KSU Counseling Services. Follow this link for information on how to make an appointment:

<http://www.k-state.edu/counseling/student/appointment.html>



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