

COMMUNICATION AND DISRESPECTFUL ANGER: A Poor Match At Best

Angry and hostile people are poor communicators. Their efforts to communicate often hurt themselves and those around them. They frequently attribute their anger and abuse problems to the fact that they and the others important to them “just don’t communicate very well” or “have communication problems.” In fact, the reasons for their angry outbursts are not this simple, but their poor communication style can be both a contributor to and a result of their angry and abusive attitudes and behaviors.

The most common type of poor communication comes in the form of becoming explosive and lashing out at others. Angry people tend to say whatever comes to mind, often arguing that being “brutally honest” is the best way to relate to others and to live their lives. They are not interested in being “polite” or “kind” and do not seem to care how their communication affects anyone else. The only people who really count in their minds are themselves. And then they react with surprise, indignation, and emotional pain when others distance and pull away from them, which is often the end result of this type of disrespectful behavior.

However, although this is the most common problem identified with angry peoples' communication, it is not the only one. Angry people may also be hurtful in what they say to others by responding in sarcastic or indirect ways. They are able to communicate their angry feelings but others have great difficulty holding them accountable for what they are saying or engaging them in any sort of a constructive dialogue.

Or they may “clam up,” say nothing at all, and thus not respond directly to others even when they really need to do so. Often, this results in their carrying around the resentment and frustration that comes from “stuffing” their anger and the other feelings that they experience. This has the potential to set them up to respond in one of the two ways mentioned above at some later time.

This article discusses the three styles of communication most frequently used by angry people. It also discusses an alternative way to communicate which is absolutely necessary to learn if you are going to handle your anger more effectively in your daily living. This style is called being **ASSERTIVE** and involves being open, direct, and honest with the people around you in a way that is not hurtful to others or to you yourself. In order to become more assertive, you first need to identify what you think, feel, want, and need and then communicate this directly and respectfully to others. Learning to do this in your ongoing life is an important part of feeling good about yourself and decreasing the anger, negativity, hostility, and cynicism that you carry within you. It can also build self-esteem and self-confidence and can increase the potential for you to be truly close to others.

Many angry people think the purpose behind presenting an anger management workshop is to turn them into “wimps,” so they will just keep their mouths shut and never speak up for themselves, even when they need to. Nothing could be farther from the truth!

Standing up for yourself effectively and respectfully, with partners, friends, co-workers, parents, and others can be very difficult. So much of how you connect with and relate to others comes from your early life experiences. The family where you grew up is literally like a laboratory where you are taught how to be a person. Relationships with parents, siblings, and peers are critical in determining what you learn about communicating your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs with others in your adult life.

You may have been told or shown that other people “were out to get you” and that you had to respond “in kind.” You might have been told that “the best defense is a good offense” and that you are “Number One” and what you want is all that counts. Those are the sorts of attitudes that set the stage for you to lash out or respond in a manipulative way in your relationships with other people.

You might have been told or shown that it was “selfish” to be aware of and think about yourself and your wants and needs. You may have been told not to ask questions because that just showed how dumb you really were. You may have been told that it was important to avoid

“rocking the boat” and creating conflict because disagreement just leads to “bad feelings” for everyone. You may have been told that it is important to stay on “the good side” of others no matter what. Those are the kinds of messages that set the stage for you to “shut down” and stay quiet in your current life.

The best way to begin to become more assertive is to clearly understand the differences between these four styles of communicating with others. Let’s define these styles and give some examples of each.

The most recognized style of communication for angry people is called being **AGGRESSIVE**. The “bottom line” message when you use this style is ***“I count and you don’t.”*** Being aggressive is certainly standing up for yourself, but it involves being hurtful, punishing, and disrespectful to others and speaking up at the expense of everyone around you. You get what you want and attain your goals but there is no consideration for others’ rights, feelings, and wishes. No one else really matters to you.

On a short-term basis, this approach may seem to work pretty well. You really might be able to get what you want at the time. But eventually others end up feeling hurt, resentful, and threatened and tend to withdraw (emotionally and sometimes even physically) from you. This only increases the anger and hostility that you end up feeling toward the rest of the world. The goal of being aggressive is to control and dominate others and to try to appear completely invulnerable.

Aggressive behavior can be emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual. It can include commands like *“We are going to do this my way!”* It could be using put-downs like *“What an idiot/jerk/asshole!”* and *“Why can’t you ever do anything right?”* It might involve threats like *“If you keep saying that, you’re really going to get it.”* Or it might include non-verbal behavior like raising your voice to drown the other person out of the conversation and a cold “steely” glare to intimidate someone and get them to “back off” when you don’t like what they are saying or doing.

A second communication style that also involves more subtle aggressive elements is called being **PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE**. Often people are confused about this style and think that it means being passive for awhile and then becoming aggressive and “blowing up.” In reality, it is much more complicated than that. Again, the basic message is *“I count and you don’t.”* And, once again, it is also standing up for yourself and communicating what you think, feel, want, or need. But, different from the aggressive style’s direct and “in your face” approach, being passive-aggressive involves communicating in an underhanded and manipulative way so that the other person generally has great difficulty knowing exactly what you intend to convey. This style also makes it hard to hold you accountable for whatever you are saying or doing at that moment.

The intention in being passive-aggressive is often to punish or “get back at” others when they have said or done something that you did not like. But, it is done in a way that avoids taking any responsibility for yourself and what you are communicating and does not “open the door” to a potentially constructive dialogue with the other person.

Being passive-aggressive can include verbal statements. An example is becoming sarcastic and saying things like *“I’m sure you really know what you’re talking about”* or *“I guess you must be Ms. Perfect.”* But frequently, it can also involve indirect but powerful messages expressed through your behaviors and your actions. You might feel angry about your partner being late for something you enjoy and then look for an opportunity to be late for something that she wants to do at another time. Or you might “forget” to do something you agreed to do because you are upset with the other person about a completely separate issue.

Being passive-aggressive is especially destructive in relationships because even if others have the “audacity” to ask directly about what you are trying to communicate, you may simply use this as an opportunity to “zing” them one more time. The other person might respond to your sarcasm with *“You seem really angry with me right now. What’s going on?”* At that point, if you want to continue being passive-aggressive, you can simply look confused and respond by saying, *“Hey, I was only joking; you sure are sensitive today; what’s the matter with you?”* Or

the other person might respond to your “forgetfulness” by expressing a feeling or concern about it, at which point you might simply say to them, *“I don’t know why this is such a big deal. I’m only human after all.”*

Using this style on a consistent basis is another way to hurt and punish others and eventually leads to emotional distance, a lack of trust, and significant relationship difficulties. Others do not know what you really want to communicate because you are not willing to be honest and straightforward about what you really think, feel, want, or need.

A third style of communicating is called being **PASSIVE**. Surprisingly, this style is more common in angry individuals than many people realize. All too often, angry people simply withdraw and “stuff” what they feel in many situations and then explode later, often with those closest to them who are deemed to be safe and reasonable “targets” for their disrespect. It is as if these people who are closer to them become their “scapegoats” for what’s going on in their lives.

The “bottom line” message in being passive is *“You count and I don’t.”* When you are passive, you violate your own rights because you are not willing to express your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs honestly and directly to those around you and to actually take care of yourself in your interactions with other people. This style involves failing to say what you really mean and being fearful about asking for what you really want. Or it may be trying to stand up for yourself but doing it in such an ineffective way that others do not really feel the need to take you seriously. An example of discounting yourself in this way might be starting to speak up but prefacing it with *“I probably shouldn’t be saying this to you, but...”* or *“I hope you don’t mind if I tell you this, but...”*

Being passive is allowing others to treat you in whatever way they want without your being willing to challenge their behavior in a direct and effective way. What is especially disturbing and damaging about being consistently passive is that you essentially train other people to take advantage of you. You essentially communicate to them the message that *“I am unimportant and what I think, feel, want, and need is insignificant.”*

The goal of being passive is to avoid conflict, disagreement, and others' anger and disapproval at any price. The end result of being passive is submission to everyone around you. Even worse, being consistently passive can bring you both emotional symptoms like depression, anxiety, or frustration and physical symptoms like headaches or stomach upset.

Some examples of passive behavior would include the following. You might say things like *"Whatever you want is alright with me"* or *"It doesn't really matter to me."* You may nod and smile even when you don't agree with what someone else is saying to you. You might agree to do something even if it is a significant inconvenience for you. Or you may communicate to others both verbally and non-verbally that you are weak, timid, inferior, and that what you think, feel, want, or need does not really matter (to you or anyone else). For angry people, being passive has the potential to build an enormous reservoir of resentment and frustration within you, which sets the stage for becoming explosive and aggressive at some later time.

The final style, which is generally very difficult for angry people to develop and use, is called being **ASSERTIVE**. Being assertive is an honest, direct, and respectful expression of your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs in a way that does not disregard the rights of others. The "bottom line" messages are *"I count and so do you"* or *"We both count."* Being assertive is looking inside yourself, figuring out what "your truth" (**NOT "the truth"**) is, and then taking the risk to become vulnerable and share what you are experiencing at that point with others in your life. This certainly involves sharing your anger but it also includes sharing the many other feelings that your anger often covers and hides from you. This process has the potential to build your self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence and greatly increases the likelihood that you will experience understanding and genuine emotional closeness in your relationships with others.

Being assertive is behaving in ways that demonstrate your strength, stand up for your legitimate personal rights, and give "voice" to your own unique perspective. But it is doing this without the expectation that the other person will "back down," agree with you, or do whatever you want them to do (which is just the expectation that if you communicate your thoughts and feelings the "right" way that you will then be able to control the people around you). The real

goal of being assertive is clear communication, not necessarily getting what you want. When you are assertive, it is as if you “open a door” and invite others to join you in a potentially constructive dialogue. This may lead to an effective resolution or it may not. But, in the end, even if it does not, you are still the one who is responsible for deciding how to best take care of yourself if the issue or concern arises again in the future. The important part of this is that you have been honest and open and let others know who you are and how you view and experience your world.

Some examples of being verbally assertive include the following. You might say things like “*I feel angry about what you just said,*” “*I’d like to spend time together tomorrow,*” and “*I really appreciate what you just did for me.*”

But what if that other person doesn’t seem to care much about what you are trying to communicate with them? For example, after you’ve talked about your partner’s lateness several times and nothing has changed, **BEHAVIORAL ASSERTIVENESS**, another form of being assertive, involves your deciding to do something to take care of yourself in the situation and perhaps go in a separate car to family gatherings so that you don’t continue to feel so frustrated and resentful at those times.

If you find yourself getting angry more often than you would like, start to think about and notice how you communicate with those around you. Begin to identify where you might want to become more assertive in your daily life. Working toward becoming more assertive can make a significant difference in how you feel about yourself, how those around you feel about you, and in how much anger, hostility, and resentment you carry within you.

SOME QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE TO THINK ABOUT FOR YOURSELF:

- 1) What were some of the messages you got in childhood about standing up for yourself and who gave them to you?

- 2) What communication styles do you use most frequently in your life at this point? Think of some specific examples.
 - Is there a connection between the styles you use most frequently now and the messages you got as a child from your parents or others? If so, what is it?
- 3) How is your anger connected to your efforts to communicate with others?
- 4) What are some situations where it might not be a good idea to be assertive? Why not?
- 5) Who are some of the people with whom you might want to attempt to be more assertive? Why?
- 6) What are some of the situations where you might want to attempt to be more assertive? Why?