

SOME DIFFERENT STYLES OF COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Some cynical people make the assumption that the goal in learning to handle your anger more effectively is simply to “make you shut your mouth and turn you into a wimp.” In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Learning to be assertive, which means looking inside yourself to discover your “truth” (**NOT** “the truth”) and then communicating that “truth” in a direct, open, honest, and respectful fashion, not just with partners and children, but with others as well, is an important part of handling anger and other feelings when they arise and, in general, feeling okay about who you are and how you are living your life. If you do this on a consistent basis, you are much less likely to become disrespectful and punishing with others or to “stuff” your anger, turning it in on yourself with all the destructive impact that this can have. You are also more likely to experience closeness and intimacy with the important people in your life.

The first step to becoming more assertive is to clearly understand the very real difference between being assertive and being passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive, the three other primary styles of communicating with others around you. The definitions of these styles are listed below. Look through them and start to work to understand how they are different. Most angry people use several of the styles that follow, if not all of them, at times. For example, if they are generally passive at work or with friends, they may come home and become aggressive and passive-aggressive with those closest to them, who make easier “targets” for their feelings, especially their anger.

Also keep in mind that the goal in communicating effectively is not necessarily to be assertive in every situation. There can be times when it makes sense to be passive. For example, you probably want to be passive when you are stopped by a police officer for speeding, even if you’re angry that this will make you even later for where you are supposed to be. Otherwise, you’re only likely to create more problems for yourself. Or you may want to be passive when you are not sure what you want to say and need some time to think about how you wish to respond to the other person. What’s important is to make clear choices about how you want to respond in a particular situation rather than simply going along with whatever you were taught in your childhood or what you’ve always done before.

BEING PASSIVE: “You count, I don’t”

Being passive is violating and denying your own rights by being unwilling to express your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs honestly to other people. It is allowing others to treat you in whatever way they wish without your being willing to take the risk to challenge them in any effective way. You may not really know what you are feeling in that moment or you may have a strong desire to avoid offending others at any price. This style can also be trying to stand up for yourself but doing it in such an ineffectual way that your legitimate rights can be easily discounted or disregarded by the other person. (e.g. with disclaimers like “*I suppose I really shouldn’t be saying this to you, but...*,” “*I hope you don’t get mad about what I want to tell you, but...*,” or “*I probably don’t have a right to say this to you, but...*”).

Being passive is failing to say what you really mean and being fearful about asking for what you really want or need. It is doing what others want you to do regardless of your own desires. Being passive essentially makes you “invisible” to others. They are left to guess about what you are feeling, thinking, and wanting in your relationship with them (and most people are not good “mind-readers”). In the end, when you are consistently passive in your interactions with other people, you literally train them not to take you into account and you also train them to expect to be able to take advantage of you and to have things their way when the two of you are interacting. The end result of being passive is submission to those around you and, potentially, both emotional (e.g. depression, anxiety) and physical (e.g. headaches, stomach problems) symptoms; decreased self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence; and an ever-growing resentment (toward yourself and others) that you don’t speak up for yourself and that other people don’t seem to see or acknowledge who you are and what is truly important to you.

- **The GOAL of being passive is to avoid conflict, disagreement, and others’ anger and disapproval at any price and to hide who you truly are from other people.**

- **Some examples of being passive:**

...“Why don’t you decide what we do?”

...“Whatever you want is alright with me”

...“It doesn’t matter to me whether we go to the party”

...“I’m not sure what I think about that”

...Nodding and smiling even when you don’t agree with or like what’s being said by someone else

...Staying quiet when you have something to say but don’t want to “rock the boat” or “create problems” in your relationships with others

BEING AGGRESSIVE: “I count, you don’t”

Being aggressive is standing up for yourself and your rights and attaining your goals (short-term) but doing so at the expense of everyone else and with absolutely no consideration for anyone else’s rights, wishes, and feelings. No one else is truly important to you or even matters in the way that you look at the world. You expect others to do what you want and you expect to be able to dominate people and situations around you. And, if they don’t respond the way you would like, you believe you have the right to punish them for their “resistance.” Aggressive people equate “winning” the argument with “success” in life and feeling “okay” about themselves.

In reality, you may get what you want at the time, but others around you end up feeling anxious, hurt, resentful, and threatened and you push others away, which will eventually lead them to distance themselves from you emotionally and, sometimes, even physically. Or they may become aggressive themselves and lash back at you, creating a rapidly accelerating cycle of escalation between the two of you that goes nowhere productive. Being aggressive in an ongoing way does not work very well because most people will, in some fashion, resist being told what to think and feel and being told who to be. It just isn’t safe to be around a consistently aggressive person. Aggression can be emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual and usually involves commands, directives, put-downs, name-calling, or intimidation. Eventually aggressive behavior leads to remorse, guilt, and shame in the aggressive person and ends up

lowering their self-esteem and self-respect and leaving them estranged and isolated from the people in their lives.

- **The GOAL of being aggressive is to control and dominate others, to “win at any cost,” and to try to appear invulnerable to those around you.**

- **Some examples of being aggressive:**

...*“You’re a jerk/asshole/loser/bitch!”*

...*“Fuck you/go to hell!”*

...*“We’re going to do it my way”*

...*“If you keep talking (acting) like that, you’re really going to get it”*

...*“It doesn’t matter what you want/think/feel”*

...*“Don’t be so stupid!”*

...*“Why can’t you ever do anything right?”*

...*“What the hell is wrong with you?”*

...*“How can you act like such an idiot all the time?”*

BEING PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE: “I count, you don’t”

This style is **NOT** first being passive and stuffing your anger for a period of time and then becoming aggressive and “blowing up.” Being passive-aggressive is a more subtle variation on the aggressive style discussed above. The basic message once again is that other people are not important in your way of looking at the world. In fact, it involves communicating your feelings and standing up for yourself and your rights but doing it in an underhanded and manipulative fashion so that the other person has great difficulty knowing exactly what you intend to communicate or holding you accountable for what you are saying or doing.

The intention in being passive-aggressive often involves wanting to punish others for feelings they have triggered in you by what they have said or done at an earlier time. Others generally sense that something “bad” is going on or that something “negative” is being communicated to them but are unclear about what it is because you are unwilling to engage in a direct and constructive dialogue. People will perceive you as hostile and disrespectful even if you refuse to acknowledge this openly to yourself and others around you.

This style may involve verbal messages but frequently also involves behavioral or non-verbal components. Being passive-aggressive is an indirect but powerful way of communicating your thoughts, feelings, and wants to other people without even openly acknowledging that they are actually there.

- **The GOAL of being passive-aggressive is to get your message across without taking any responsibility for yourself and what you are communicating.**

- **Some examples of being passive-aggressive:**

...being sarcastic, e.g. *“I’m sure you really know what you’re talking about!”*, *“Why don’t you get a life?”*, or *“You are such a winner!”*

...feeling angry that your partner is late for an activity that you enjoy and so, looking for an opportunity to “get even,” being late for something that they enjoy at a later time

- ...being hurt that a friend couldn't get together with you when you wanted to do this and so, looking for an opportunity to "get back at him," avoiding him and not being willing to talk with and spend time with him for awhile (and not telling him about what you are actually doing)
- ..."forgetting" to do something you agreed to do because you have feelings about some other issue
 - ...e.g. committing to do something important to your partner but then claiming that it "slipped your mind" because you are so busy at work (when you are, in fact, upset about not having sex the night before)
- ...procrastinating doing something because you are upset with the other person about another issue
 - ...e.g. not getting to vacuuming the house because your partner didn't pick up your shirts at the laundry
- ...sulking and refusing to talk to your partner because you didn't like what they said or did when you were together earlier that day

BEING ASSERTIVE: "We both count" or "I count and so do you"

Being assertive is an honest, open, and respectful expression of your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs in a manner that **does not** disregard the rights of others. It is knowing and speaking "**your truth**" and serves as an invitation to another person to engage in a constructive dialogue with you about whatever that "truth" happens to be. Dealing with your anger effectively cannot occur unless you are willing to develop this skill of being assertive with others. Assertiveness, especially with those who are close to you, also ideally includes your sharing how the issue or situation is actually affecting you internally (i.e. sharing even more about yourself and your feelings and interpretations).

Being assertive:

- ...is a means of directly communicating what you wish to say about your thoughts and feelings, what you want to do in a given situation, or what you want or need from someone else and then taking full and clear responsibility for what you are communicating to the other person.
 - ...e.g. being clear within yourself that those other people are not "causing" your thoughts or feelings
- ...is behaving in ways that demonstrate your strength and confidence, stand up for your legitimate personal rights, set clear limits and maintain healthy personal boundaries with others, and give expression to your own individual perspective.
- ...BUT it is doing this WITHOUT THE EXPECTATION that the other person will necessarily:**
 - ..."BACK DOWN,"**
 - ...AGREE WITH YOU, or**
 - ...DO EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO DO (which is just another form of being controlling with someone else).**

Being assertive is all about finding your "voice" and then using that "voice" to share your "truth" about who you are, what you think and feel, and what you want and need in your life. Being assertive is also like opening a door between you and another person and inviting them into your "life space" to discuss something that is important to you. They may stand at that door and refuse to enter; they may

slam the door shut and walk away; or they may enter that “room” to dialogue with you in a constructive way about whatever your concern or issue happens to be. But, no matter how they respond, you have done your part (which is all you can do) to foster effective communication and, potentially, a more close and genuine relationship.

Another form of being assertive with others is called **BEHAVIORAL ASSERTIVENESS**, and is a step that may be necessary if another person is completely unwilling to engage in a meaningful dialogue with you about what you are communicating verbally to them or simply “blows you off” when you are concerned about something important in your relationship with them. It means taking the ultimate responsibility for your feelings and wants when someone is completely unwilling to take into account what you would like from them. It involves figuring out what you can **DO** the next time the issue or problem arises to take care of yourself in that situation. For example, if a person is continually late and will not respond to your verbal requests to arrive in a more timely fashion when the two of you are scheduled to get together, you might make the decision to leave after a specific period of time (and this also involves telling them about this limit you are setting beforehand). This is intended as a way to decrease the potential for you to escalate about the situation (and that person) and, in the end, to figure out how to take care of yourself at that particular time. Another example of behavioral assertiveness is taking a respectful time-out when you actually disengage physically from a power struggle with someone else that is “going nowhere.”

Being more consistently assertive in your day-to-day life has the potential to build your self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence and increases the likelihood that you will experience understanding, trust, emotional connectedness, and true intimacy in your relationships with others. The bottom line is that assertiveness is a practical and concrete way to make a significant and lasting connection to the important people in your life and to the world around you.

- **The GOAL of being assertive is clear communication, an intention to allow the other person to know who you really are, and a desire to reach out to the world around you.**
- **Some examples of being assertive (and also what is going on “inside” for you):**
 - ...“I feel angry about what you just said. I don’t feel respected when you say something like that to me.”*
 - ...“I’d like to spend time together tomorrow. I really enjoy just being around you.”*
 - ...“I really appreciate what you just did. I felt very special to you when you went out of your way like that for me.”*
 - ...“I would rather do something else tonight. I’d feel good about having some input into the activities that we plan together.”*
 - ...“I felt hurt about what happened last night. It seemed like you didn’t really care about what I wanted in that situation.”*
 - ...“I get upset when you’re late after we’ve set up a time to get together. I end up feeling like I’m not very important to you.”*
 - ...“I’m confused about why you would say something like that to me. It makes no sense to me that you would treat me in that way.”*