

Chapter 7.

Assertiveness Skills

Speaking up for one's needs, or being assertive, can be very difficult when people feel depressed or anxious. In addition, Sometimes people who are depressed and anxious may not have the energy to talk to others about their needs, or they may not believe that they are worth getting what they want. Being assertive requires some straightforward skills that not all people know about.

The communication continuum

Communicating with others requires learning about the different styles of communication that exist across a continuum. The central dimension of the continuum is the degree of respect you have in your own personal rights or the rights of others. This continuum has three key points: passive, assertive, or aggressive communication styles. See the following figure below:

passive lose - win	assertive win - win	aggressive win - lose
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Below each label on this continuum is the description of the consequences of selecting that style. Being passive means that your personal rights are dismissed in favor of the rights of others. Being aggressive means that your personal rights are valued higher than those of others, who may ultimately feel dominated or humiliated by your communication. Communicating assertively generally means that both parties feel satisfied and valued. We discuss these concepts more specifically below:

Passive Communication

In short, when we communicate passively, we are not expressing our feelings and our thoughts honestly. Communicating passively allows others to violate our rights; we speak in an apologetic manner that results in others disregarding our statements. Passive communication also shows a lack of respect for other's abilities to handle

problems. In general, the goal of passive communication is to please others while avoiding conflict. For example:

Jillian is caring for her husband who had a stroke 6 years ago. She is the sole caregiver for him even though she has two adult children that live nearby. Jillian was recently called by an old friend who is visiting from out of town. She made plans with this friend that required her to ask her daughter to stay with her husband for the afternoon. On the morning of these plans, Jillian's daughter called to say that she can't make it. Jillian told her daughter, "That's okay, it wasn't very important anyway." Jillian was not able to see her friend at all during her visit.

In the client manual, on page 95, clients are asked to respond to this example by answering the following questions:

1. How does Jillian's response fail to show respect for her rights and possibly for her daughter's rights?
2. What might be some possible outcomes for Jillian? Consider what her thoughts and her feelings might be.
3. What kind of message do you think this gives Jillian's daughter?
4. Consider the last time you acted passively. What was the situation?
5. Now, take this situation and complete a UTD to learn about your thoughts and feelings regarding choosing to act passively.
6. Clients are asked to look over their UTD to determine the costs and benefits of passive communication.
7. What does this mean to you?

Aggressive Communication

Aggressive communication involves making statements that usually violate the rights of others. The goal of aggressive communication is to dominate others and forcing the other person into a "lose" position. It is basically telling people, "This is what I want, and what you want is not important."

Instead of Jillian telling her daughter that her plans are really not important after all, she declares, "I am so disappointed in you! You never help me with your father, and now I am stuck. Well, I don't accept your excuse!"

Again, on page 97, clients are asked the following questions:

1. How does Jillian's response fail to show respect for her daughter's rights?
2. What might be some possible outcomes for Jillian? Consider what her thoughts and her feelings might be.
3. What kind of message do you think this gives Jillian's daughter?
4. Consider the last time you acted aggressively. What was the situation?
5. Now, take this situation and complete a UTD to learn about your thoughts and feelings regarding choosing to act aggressively.
6. Look over your UTD, what might be some of the costs and benefits from choosing aggressive communication?
7. What does this mean to you?

Assertive Communication

In contrast to these two styles, communicating assertively involves expressing yourself clearly and honestly while considering both your personal rights as well as the rights of others. Assertive statements are expressed without humiliating, dominating or insulting the other person.

When Jillian's daughter cancels on helping with her father, Jillian responds by stating, "It is very important to me that I get out of this house and visit with my friend. Let's find a way to work this out."

Once again clients are asked, on page 99:

1. How does Jillian's response show respect for her rights as well as her daughter's?
2. What might be some possible outcomes for Jillian? Consider what her thoughts and her feelings might be.
3. What kind of message do you think this gives Jillian's daughter?
4. Consider the last time you acted assertively. What was the situation?
5. Now, take this situation and complete a UTD to learn about your thoughts and feelings regarding choosing to assertively.
6. Look over your UTD, what might be some of the costs and benefits from choosing assertive communication:
7. What does this mean to you?

When do you use assertive communication?

Encourage clients to consider the following steps in deciding to act assertively:

1. What is the goal or objective of your message?
2. How might alternative methods of communication help you reach your goal?
3. Pick the communication style that will most likely provide the best outcome. More often than not, assertiveness is your best option.

A strategy for effective, assertive communication: THE BROKEN RECORD TECHNIQUE

Sometimes in assertive communication, negotiation is not possible. The broken record technique is a method where one, straightforward statement is repeated. This statement keeps the goal clearly in mind while being respectful of both the speaker's rights and the rights of others. This technique is particularly effective when you are dealing with obstinate people who may be pressuring you to do something you would rather avoid. This technique is also helpful in communicating with Alzheimer's patients or post-stroke patients who quickly forget information.

One day Jillian makes plans with her friends on a day when her husband goes to an activity center. On the morning of Jillian's plans, her daughter calls and asks Jillian for help. Jillian clearly demonstrates her concern for her daughter's dilemma, but she is not willing to change her long awaited plans with her friends. Jillian uses the broken record technique in her communication. Their conversation goes as follows:

Daughter: Mom, I need to get my car repaired, can Susan spend the afternoon with you?

Jillian: I have plans today, I will not be able to watch her.

Daughter: Where are you going? Maybe I can meet you? It's just for the afternoon.

Jillian: I'm sorry, I will not be able to do it. I have plans.

Daughter: Why not? I'm stuck.

Jillian: I can see that you are in a bind, but I have plans.

Review with clients (page 102):

1. What was the major point that Jillian conveyed?
2. What was Jillian's goal?
3. How did Jillian get her point across?

Summary of steps to Broken Record Technique

1. Stick to one point and don't get side-tracked.
2. Show respect for the other person. The goal statement can be preceded with a supportive comment.
3. Repeat the goal statement with minor modifications.
4. Avoid explanations for the chosen statement. This is not necessary. Explanations will introduce negotiation to the conversation. When this happens the focus of the goal is often lost.

Remember: If clients are having trouble initiating assertive behavior, encourage the use of a UTD to sort out their reactions!!!