

COMMUNICATION SKILLS: LEARNING TO BE ASSERTIVE

When learning to be assertive, we must first look at 3 different communication styles and choose which one best matches ours. Then, we can determine what changes we must make to improve our communication skills.

PASSIVE BEHAVIORS:

Passive behavior involves forfeiting one's own needs, beliefs, rights and feelings and allowing others' needs, beliefs, rights and feelings to come first. Passive people tend to exhibit the following behaviors:

- Consistently give in to the needs and wants of others at the expense of their own. Even though they may think their needs are important, they tend to act on the needs of others first, and their own needs and desires come last.
- Often feel afraid to give their opinion because they are scared of being embarrassed or made fun of.
- Usually feel they have little to contribute to a given situation and rely on others to make decisions.
- "Stuff" their feelings, and do not express them very often or they express them in indirect or inappropriate ways that have little or no impact on situations.
- Avoid conflict and spend a great deal of time trying to please other people.

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS:

This type of behavior involves openly expressing one's needs, beliefs, rights and feelings, with little or no respect for other peoples' opinions, rights and feelings. Aggressive people tend to exhibit the following behaviors:

- Forcefully express opinions without considering the rights and feelings of others who may have different beliefs.
- Consistently put their own needs first and disrespect or disregard the needs of others.
- Have hostile, demanding, or in some way, inappropriate expression of emotion.
- Impose their own beliefs and values onto others, believing that those who disagree are wrong (this is based on the unwritten rule that it is not OK for others to disagree with them).
- Often find that they are in conflict with others.

ASSERTIVE BEHAVIORS:

People who exhibit assertiveness understand that they have a right to their needs, beliefs, rights and feelings, and also acknowledge that other people's needs, beliefs, rights and feelings are important and deserve respect.

Assertive people tend to exhibit the following behaviors:

- Express their needs in an appropriate and respectful manner, and balance fulfillment of own needs with those of others.
- Value their own opinion, knowing that they have something to contribute. Offer their opinion with the understanding that it may or may not be accepted, and that others may have different ideas which must also be valued.
- Know that they are entitled to basic rights as human beings, and are confident in exercising them without violating the rights of others.
- Honestly and directly articulate emotions in a timely, respectful and appropriate manner.

Being assertive helps improve self-confidence and can result in mutual respect from others. It helps us learn to *"say what we mean and mean what we say, but we don't have to be mean when we say it."* Assertive communication is an important building block in healthy relationships. Assertiveness can also reduce stress levels because it decreases the internal struggles associated with passivity, and the external struggles associated with aggressiveness.