

What Is Assertiveness?

Have you ever been to a party and found yourself avoiding someone because you did not know what to say? Have you ever realized, after the fact, that you had been unfairly criticized or taken advantage of? Are you hesitant to express your thoughts or opinions? Do you find dealing with authority figures difficult?

These are examples of situations that involve assertive behavior. Assertiveness can be defined as communication in which one expresses oneself in a direct and honest manner in interpersonal situations, while simultaneously respecting the rights and dignity of others.

What Is Assertiveness Training?

Assertiveness training can be an effective part of treatment for many conditions, such as depression, social anxiety, and problems resulting from unexpressed anger. Assertiveness training can also be useful for those who wish to improve their interpersonal skills and sense of self-respect.

The Reasons for Assertiveness Training

Assertiveness training is based on the principle that we all have a right to express our thoughts, feelings, and needs to others, as long as we do so in a respectful way. When we do not feel like we can express ourselves openly, we may become depressed, anxious, or angry, and our sense of self-worth may suffer. Our relationships with other people are also likely to suffer because we may become resentful when they do not read our minds for what we are not assertive enough to be telling them. There are no hard-and-fast rules of what assertive behavior is; rather, it is specific to the particular time, situation, and cultural context. In other words, behavior that is appropriately assertive for one person in one situation may be either excessively passive or too aggressive for someone else in a different situation. Finally, assertiveness training is based on the idea that assertiveness is not inborn, but is a learned behavior. Although some people may seem to be more naturally assertive than others are, anyone can learn to be more assertive.

Although these ideas may sound simple and straightforward, behaving assertively can sometimes be difficult for almost anyone, and is often impossible for some people. For this reason, assertiveness training focuses on not only talking about the importance of assertiveness, but also on learning assertive behaviors and practicing these behaviors with the help of a professional therapist.

What Is the Difference Between Assertiveness and Aggression?

People sometimes confuse assertiveness with aggression, believing that assertiveness training might make them pushy or inconsiderate of others. In fact, assertiveness can be thought of as a middle point between passivity and aggression. In interpersonal situations, passive behavior occurs when you focus on the needs and desires of another person, but ignore your own needs and wishes. In contrast, aggressive behavior occurs when you force your own needs on others. Assertive behavior involves expressing your own way of seeing things, but in a way

that is respectful of the other person. Although no one can guarantee that the other person will like what you do or say, assertive behavior requires that the other person be treated with respect. Assertiveness training can help not only those who tend to be overly passive in interpersonal situations, but also those who tend to be overly aggressive.

What is the Difference Between Assertiveness and Passive-Aggression?

Passive-aggressive behavior includes pieces of both aggressive and passive styles. Rather than speak or act directly, passive-aggressive behavior involves masking aggression to avoid accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's behavior. Consider this example: On a busy weekday morning your spouse asks you at the last minute to mail an overdue bill on your way home from work. You do not want to do this, as you know you are going to have an unusually busy day. So rather than skipping your lunch break to mail it without saying anything to your spouse (passive), shouting at him or her (aggressive), or explaining how busy you are (assertive), you simply leave work after the post office closes. You get your way, your spouse is upset, yet you can deny any responsibility for your behavior. Sometimes such things really do happen and people have legitimate excuses. Behavior becomes passive-aggressive if at some level one really wished for the bad outcome. Appropriate assertiveness can help alleviate negative feelings that build up from constantly letting others down.

How Is Assertiveness Training Done?

Therapists help clients figure out which interpersonal situations are problems for them and which behaviors need the most attention. In addition, therapists help to identify beliefs and attitudes the clients may have developed that lead them to become too passive. Therapists take into account the clients' particular cultural context in this process. Therapists may use a combination of interviews, tests, or role-playing exercises as part of this assessment.

Therapists help clients understand what assertiveness is and how behaving assertively may be helpful. Inaccurate or unproductive attitudes and beliefs about assertiveness are discussed. Once clients understand the importance of assertive behavior for their situation, therapists help them develop more assertive behaviors. For example, using a technique called behavioral rehearsal, a specific situation is described and then role-played by the client and the therapist. Initially, the therapist may play the role of the client and model assertive behavior. The client and therapist then switch roles, and the client practices the new behavior. The therapist gives supportive, honest feedback after each role-play exercise in order to help the client improve his or her skills. Assertiveness training focuses on both verbal and nonverbal behavior. Verbal behavior is the content of a communication — in other words, what is actually said. This includes expressing requests, feelings, opinions, and limits. Nonverbal behavior refers to the style of communication: eye contact, posture, tone and volume of speech, interpersonal distance, and listening.

Examples of Assertiveness Techniques

There are several specific strategies that can be useful when trying to develop assertiveness. One, called the broken-record technique, is useful for situations in which another person will not acknowledge or accept your message. For example, suppose a salesperson is attempting to pressure you to buy something you do not want. You respond, "Thank you, but I am not interested in buying anything today." If he or she continues pushing, you simply repeat the same statement, keeping your tone of voice constant, without becoming upset. Eventually, the person will be forced to accept your refusal. Another technique, sometimes called fogging, is a method for denying requests or disagreeing with someone while showing them that you nevertheless recognize and respect that person's position. You begin by summarizing the other person's feelings, and then explain why you cannot, or choose not to, comply with that person's request. For example, your husband is warm and asks you to turn down the heat, but you are cold. You respond, "I'm sorry you feel warm, but I've got on a sweater and long underwear, and I'm still freezing. I do not want to turn down the heat any more. Maybe you could dress more lightly or go for a walk." These are only two of many behavioral techniques that can help develop better assertiveness skills.

In addition to teaching specific assertiveness skills, the therapist can work with clients to help reduce depression, anxiety, worry, and stress through exposure-based interventions, cognitive interventions such as cognitive therapy or rational-emotive behavior therapy, acceptance and mindfulness interventions, or other techniques.

Can Therapy Help?

All of us can learn to improve our assertiveness skills. Some people are able to improve their skills by reading books on assertiveness training and practicing the exercises outlined in the books. Such books are widely available in libraries and bookstores. For many others, however, professional help is necessary to make real and lasting improvements in assertiveness skills. This is especially true if one's interpersonal problems are associated with strong feelings of anxiety or depression. If you or someone you know might benefit from assertiveness training, it is important to find a therapist or counselor who is an expert with this approach. Ask directly about the professional's training and experience with assertiveness training. Your family doctor may be able to refer you to a competent professional.

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or Goals might involve:

- a way of acting - like smoking less or being more outgoing;
- a way of feeling - like helping a person be less scared, less depressed, or less anxious;
- a way of thinking - like learning to problem-solve or get rid of self-defeating thoughts;
- a way of dealing with physical or medical problems - like lessening back pain or helping a person stick to a doctor's suggestions; or
- a way of adjusting - like training developmentally disabled people to care for themselves or hold a job.

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well, with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

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