

Relationships

What's your approach to managing conflict?

Imagine you are doing your grocery shopping in Coles and you come across an elderly man pushing his trolley very slowly down the middle of the aisle. You cannot go around him – he's blocking the aisle. You ask him to move to the side to let you pass but he does not respond. What would you do?

Do you:

1. Give up after the man does not respond, and trail behind him at a snail's pace, while your ice cream melts in the trolley? (i.e. a passive approach);
2. Take a run-up from the end of the aisle with your trolley, and ram into the man whilst yelling abuse? (i.e. an aggressive approach); or
3. Recognise that maybe the old man cannot hear your request so you tap him gently on the shoulder to get his attention and repeat your request louder? (i.e. an assertive approach).

1. The passive approach involves:

- Your rights being violated by another when:
 - Another person deliberately tries to dominate or control you or when a person inadvertently encroaches on your rights, because you don't communicate your feelings, wants or needs, or set limits
 - Being indirect, dishonest, and inhibited
 - Verbal behaviour that is often inconsistent with non-verbal behaviour
 - An intention to avoid conflict or rejection.

It often results in:

- You delivering confusing double messages
- Feelings of helplessness, anxiety and resentment towards others
- Blame towards others for not guessing your needs
- Unclear messages for the other person
- Feelings of guilt and confusion in the other person.

2. The aggressive approach involves:

- Standing up for your own rights, but violating the rights of others, or putting others down; blaming or attacking other people – holding them responsible
- A result of built up anger or anxiety caused by submissiveness
- A defensive reaction from others, leading to conflict in relationships
- An intention to dominate, humiliate and control.

Both aggressiveness and passivity stem from feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem. It is common to swing between aggression and passivity.

3. The assertive approach involves:

- Standing up for your legitimate rights without violating the rights of others
- An honest, direct and appropriate expression of feelings, wants, beliefs and opinions
- Communicating an attitude of self-respect and respect for others
- Verbal and non-verbal communication that match, to transmit a clear message.

And results in:

- An increased feeling of self-esteem and confidence (feel good about yourself)
- A good chance of getting what you want or at least reaching a compromise (feel good about the outcome).



Our Basic Rights

Fundamental to assertiveness, is the philosophy that we are all equal and we all possess basic rights as human beings. The ultimate goal of assertiveness is to be able to stand up for your rights without violating the rights of others.

To encourage a more assertive approach to your interactions with others, remind yourself of the following basic rights that you have. But remember, these basic rights also apply to the people you are dealing with!

I have the right to:

- Express my feelings;
- Express my opinions and beliefs;
- Say yes and no for myself;
- Change my mind;
- Say I don't understand;
- Simply be myself without having to act for other people's benefit;
- Decline responsibility for other people's problems;
- Make reasonable requests of others;
- Set my own priorities;
- Be listened to, and taken seriously;
- Make mistakes and feel comfortable about admitting to them;
- Be illogical in making decisions;
- Say I don't care; and
- Be miserable or cheerful.

Any others you can think of?



Practice Exercises for effective communication

Practice is the key to becoming effective. Choose from the following list of assignments and try out an assertive approach:

1. Say good morning or greet someone you don't usually speak to
2. Stop two people in the street and ask for directions
3. Pay a compliment to a shop assistant or fellow-worker
4. Without expecting a response, make a positive comment to the person next to you in a queue
5. Tell your spouse or close friend something personal about yourself that you have never told anyone before
6. Ask someone you know in a focused and curious way, 'How are you today?' and take a genuine interest in their reply
7. Open up and share with someone how you are feeling?
8. Pay a compliment to someone close to you
9. Ask someone for a favour in a direct and clear way.

Assertiveness Role Plays

Practise responding to the following situations in an assertive, not an aggressive or passive, way:

1. You've bought an expensive piece of clothing. When you get it home, you realise that it's damaged. You want to return it to the store.
2. A friend has just called in for a chat. You're feeling low and fragile and just want to go back to bed. He's a person who gets easily offended. How do you ask him to leave?
3. Your neighbour burns garden rubbish on the weekends and the smoke wafts into your house, stinks up the place and makes you feel sick. He's an elderly gentleman and you don't want to upset him. How do you approach him?