

Assertive, Nonassertive and Aggressive Behavior

Where do the differences lie?

Assertive Behavior:

Involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights. The basic message in assertion is: This is what I think. This is what I feel. This is how I see the situation. I understand your point of view, but this is what needs to happen.

Nonassertive Behavior

Involves violating one's own rights by failing to express honest feelings, thoughts, and beliefs and consequently permitting others to violate oneself, or expressing one's thoughts and feelings in such an apologetic, diffident, selfeffacing manner that others can easily disregard them. The basic message is: I don't count - you can take advantage of me. My feelings don't matter - only yours do. I'm sorry - you're right.

Aggressive behavior

Involves directly standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a way which is often dishonest, usually inappropriate, and always violates the rights of the other person. The basic message is: This is what I think - you're stupid for believing differently. This is what I want - what you want isn't important. This is what I feel - your feelings don't count.

Steps in Assertion

- ¥ empathy or listening component; I understand what's going on with you;
- ¥ and here's what's going on with me; where I am; what I'm feeling; and
- ¥ this is what I want.

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- ¥ a nonjudgmental description of the behavior to be changed;
 - ¥ a disclosure of the asserter's feelings; and
 - ¥ a clarification of the concrete and tangible effect of the other person's behavior on the asserter.

Preparation

Sending the Assertion Message

Being Silent

Reflectively Listening to the Defensive Response

Recycling the Process

Focusing on the Solution

Comparing Non-Assertive, Aggressive, and Assertive Behavior and their Consequences

Non-Assertive Behavior

Characteristics of non-assertive behavior include not expressing your own feelings, needs, and ideas; ignoring your own rights; and allowing others to infringe on them. This behavior is usually emotionally dishonest, indirect, inhibited, and self-denying. The non-assertive woman allows others to choose for her and often ends up feeling anxious and disappointed with herself at the time and possibly angry and resentful later.

Why does she do this? She hopes to avoid unpleasant and risky situations, to steer clear of confrontation, tension, and conflict. The problem with this non-assertive behavior is that she usually doesn't get what she needs, her anger builds up, and she doesn't feel good about herself.

The intent of non-assertive behavior is to avoid conflict.

Aggressive Behavior

Characteristics of aggressive behavior include expressing your feelings, needs, and ideas at the expense of others; standing up for your own rights but ignoring the rights of others; trying to *dominate*, even *humiliate* them. True, this behavior is expressive, but it is usually defensive, hostile, and self-defeating. The aggressive woman tries to make choices for herself and for others and she usually ends up feeling angry, self-righteous, and possibly guilty later.

Why does she do this? It is a way of venting her anger, and sometimes she achieves her goals, at least in the short run. The problem is, though, that she distances herself from other people and can end up feeling frustrated, bitter, and alone.

The intent of aggressive behavior is to dominate or humiliate.

Assertive Behavior

Characteristics of assertive behavior include expressing your feelings, needs, and ideas and standing up for your legitimate rights in ways that don't violate the rights of others. This behavior is usually emotionally honest, direct, expressive, and self-enhancing. The assertive woman makes her own choices, is usually confident, and feels good about herself, both while she is being assertive and later.

What's in it for her? She usually achieves her goals, and even when she doesn't she still feels good about herself, knowing that she has been straightforward. Acting assertively reinforces her good feelings about herself, improves her self-confidence, and leads to freer, more honest relationships with others. Assertive behavior involves rights and responsibilities.

The intent of assertive behavior is to communicate.

Assertive

Payoff:

- healing
- more love...less fear
- assertive people like themselves
- fosters fulfilling relationships:
 - less preoccupied by self-consciousness and anxiety
 - less driven by the needs of self-protection or control
 - can see, hear, and love others more easily
 - freer, more honest relationships
 - if more comfortable with self, others will be too
 - being authentic can lead to joy and intimacy
- issues addressed sooner rather than later
- effective use of you and I statements decreases judgmentalness and, therefore, defensiveness and
- increases understanding and connection
- reduces anxiety
- live one's own life
- increased productivity
- usually achieve goals
- feel good about self
- improved self-confidence
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Cost:

- disruption in one's life, especially when changing:
 - at work: people can be upset with you for being assertive in stead of submissive;
not supported or included;
fired;
 - at home: significant other and children can get upset with you; divorce (extreme)
- being authentic can lead to conflict:
 - willing to risk dissension
- involves becoming vulnerable
 - without vulnerability difficulty to experience joy of enduring love
- forces reappraisal of one's basic values
- greatest price could be exercising the willpower to forego reliance on submissive habits and develop new and effective ways of relating
- take risks
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Submissive

Payoff:

- avoids conflict which causes fear for many
- maintains comfort and security of familiar pattern of behavior
- gets approval of others...praised for selflessness
- if things go "wrong", less responsibility
- others look after and protect them
- control
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Cost:

- wounding
- continues/increases fear
- live and unlive life or the life of someone else
- usually don't get what one needs
- don't feel good about self
- relationships tend to be less intimate and satisfying than desired
- other's affection for this person grows cold:
 - can feel guilty about getting own way so much
 - others can pity, be irritated, disgusted
- this person's affection for others tends to wane over time:
 - suppressed anger and other feelings = suppressed affection
- can end up feeling angry
- inability to control one's own emotions
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Aggressive

Payoff:

- seek & secure what they want
- can sometimes achieve goals in the short run
- tend to be able to protect themselves and their own space
- creates a measure of control over their own lives and lives of others
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Cost:

- wounding
- continues/increases fear:
 - create enemies, thus more vulnerable/fearful
- diminishes vision:
 - long term, creates myopia.....
- perpetuates a lens that causes meaning that skews perception
- provokes counter aggression
- loss of control, of freedom:
 - have to watch over - because of kind of relationship
- guilt
- dehumanize/diminish self:
 - love things and use people...
- alienation from people:
 - aggressiveness creates a double bind: -aggressive people tend not to respect anyone they can dominate; yet they fear an equal relationship...
 - a person dominated will experience alienation
- can feel frustrated, bitter and alone
- ill health
- creates an unsafe graduate school, workplace, society...
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Then, too, there are times when the data we receive from our listening modifies our need to continue the assertion. For example, my son had a junior driver's license and was required to be home with the car by 9:00 P.M. When he returned from high school basketball practice at 9:30 P.M., I confronted him. He informed me that the law states that students with junior driver's licenses could not drive after 9:00 P.M. except when returning from school activities. Since his arrival home at 9:30 was OK with me as long as it was legal, I had no further reason to assert.

A third value of listening to the other's response after an assertion is that you sometimes discover a strong need of the other person which conflicts with your need. You may decide to switch to collaborative problem solving. That is what occurred when a dormitory counselor sent this assertion to the custodian of his building: "When you leave the floors and sinks dirty, I become irritated because I have to work in an unclean environment." In listening to the custodian's response, the counselor discovered that because of cutbacks in the college budget, the janitor had to clean twice as many square feet as he had previously. He also had a need not to work overtime. The counselor realized that collaborative problem solving (a skill described in Chapter 14) was more appropriate than assertion in this case. Together, she and the janitor found a way to meet both of their needs.

Finally, when you assert to someone you are likely to receive a lot of data about how that person perceives you and your relationship. Because the words are spoken from a defensive stance, they may seem much more extreme than the other person actually feels. Still, they are important clues and too valuable to ignore. Much of this data would probably go unspoken if it were not for the assertion that you sent. If you reflect rather than defend yourself, you will be alerted to many ways the relationship can be improved. (During an assertion, however, do not respond to these issues except by means of reflective listening. Once the assertion is over, probably on another day, the two of you may wish to look at some of the issues that cascaded out of the other's mouth when she was most defensive.)

While you will find some occasions when your need to assert is modified by data that you receive from the other person, and though you will sometimes discover that the other person has a strong need that makes problem solving appropriate, most of the time the key result of your reflective listening will result in the diminishment of the other person's defensiveness.

Handling hostile responses. The finest assertion message is often received as a hostile blow. Instead of really listening to the assertion, "most people are searching for a counterblow at the time the information is being presented to them."⁷ The counterblow contains words designed to put you "on the defensive

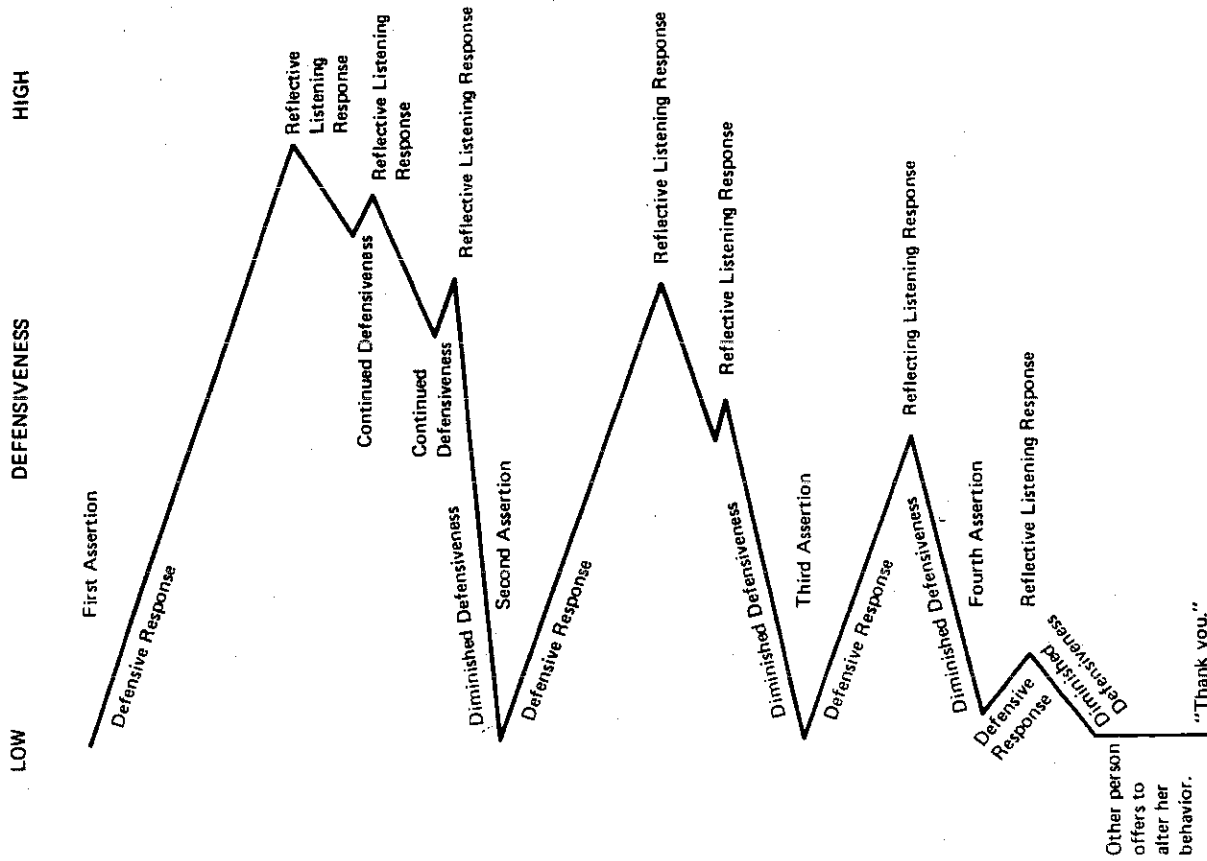


Figure 10.1. The increase and decrease of defensiveness in the assertion process as the asserter "shifts gears" between asserting and reflective listening responses. (Adapted from a similar chart by Thomas Gordon, Ph.D.)

Other person offers to alter her behavior. "Thank you."

Frames of Reference

Blame Frame:

1. What's wrong?
2. Why do you have this problem?
3. What are your limits? (What makes it difficult to solve this problem or what's keeping you from solving this problem?)
4. Whose fault is it? (Who is responsible for the problem?)

Outcome Frame:

1. What outcomes do you want?
 - a. How will you know when you get there?
 - b. In what context do you want it? (the situation)
 - c. What would the effects be? (ecological check)
2. How can it be done?
3. What possibilities or resources are there to make it happen?
4. How can you use whatever happens in a useful way?

Aiki Approach to Conflict Resolution

1. Choose to be centered
2. Accept your connectedness
 - by definition of the conflict you're connected
3. Come from discovery
 - letting go of past knowledge and future expectations
 - allows one to explore solutions vs. waste energy on determining who is responsible
4. Be willing to understand
 - TRUE understanding leads to commonality of vision
 - requires shifting our position and perspective
 - change your point of view in order to establish a viewpoint
5. Be willing to change/Get out of your own way
 - avoid resisting
6. Choose to co-create

Six Steps of the Collaborative Problem-solving Method

1. Define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions.
3. Select the solution (or combination of solutions) that will best meet both parties' needs.
4. Plan who will do what, where, and by when
5. Implement the plan.
6. Evaluate the problem-solving process and at a later date, how well the solution turned out.

STEPS IN BECOMING ASSERTIVE

The key to developing assertiveness is to practice new behavior patterns. The following is a suggested step-by-step process for developing assertive behavior (Alberti & Emmons, 1975).

- Step 1: Observe your own behavior.** Are you asserting yourself adequately? Are you satisfied with your effectiveness in interpersonal relationships? Assess how you feel about yourself and your behavior.
- Step 2: Concentrate on a particular situation.** Spend a few moments with your eyes closed, imagining how you handle a specific incident (being shortchanged at the supermarket, having a friend "talk your ear off" on the telephone when you had too much to do, letting the boss make you "feel like 2 cents" over a small mistake). Imagine vividly the actual details, including your specific feelings at the time and afterward.
- Step 3: Review your responses.** Write down your behavior in Step 2 in terms of the components of assertiveness - eye contact, body posture, gestures, facial expression, voice, message content. Look carefully at the components of your behavior in the recalled incident. Note your strengths. Be aware of those components which represent non-assertive or aggressive behavior.
- Step 4: Observe an effective model.** At this point it would be very helpful to watch someone who handles the same situation very well. Watch for the components, particularly the style - the words are less important. If the model is a friend, discuss his/her approach, and its consequences.
- Step 5: Consider alternative responses.** What are other possible ways the incident could be handled? Could you deal with it more to your own advantage? Less offensively? Differentiate between non-assertive, aggressive, and assertive responses.
- Step 6: Imagine yourself handling the situation.** Close your eyes and visualize yourself dealing effectively with the situation. You may act similarly to the "model" in Step 4 or in a very different way. Be assertive but be as much your "natural self" as you can. Repeat this step as often as necessary until you can imagine a comfortable style for yourself which succeeds in handling the situation well.
- Step 7: Role play the situation.** Having examined your own behavior, considered alternatives, and observed a model of more adaptive action, you are now prepared to begin trying out for yourself new ways of dealing with the problem situation.
- Step 8: Get feedback.** This step essentially repeats Step 3 with emphasis on the positive aspects of your behavior. Note particularly the strengths of your performance, and work positively to develop weaker areas.

Step 9: The real test. You are now ready to test yourself in the actual situation.

Step 10: Further training. You are encouraged to repeat such procedures as may be appropriate in the development of the assertive pattern you desire.

Step 11: Reward your assertive behavior. As a final step in establishing an independent behavior pattern, it is very important that you understand the need for on-going self-reinforcement.