

## **Are You Assertive?**

### **Understanding the Four Styles of Communication**

People's behavior can be divided into four categories -- assertive, passive, aggressive and passive-aggressive. Living an *assertive* life means taking an active and responsible approach to others and to your life. Individuals who interact *passively* seldom feel happy and often put themselves down. *Aggressive* people feel in control, but they will be watching in case someone tries to win over them. They often are defensive and seldom have many friends. *Passive-aggressive* people are manipulative and controlling similar to an aggressive person, but they do so in a more passive and subtle way. A more detailed description of each of the four styles is listed below.

#### **A Passive person tends to:**

- Be quiet and timid, silent due to fear
- Avoid conflict, be a people-pleaser
- Not make eye contact
- Be a chameleon, change to suit the situation
- Not offer own opinion or express feelings
- Feel insecure, have low self-esteem
- "You're ok, I'm not ok"
- The other person's needs generally get met, yet the passive person's need to avoid conflict is met.

#### **An Aggressive person can be:**

- Loud and in your face, blunt, tactless
- Believe in "My way or the highway"
- Blaming and shaming
- Can be violent, though not necessarily so
- Sarcastic, uses jokes in a cruel way
- Controlling and manipulative
- Takes care of self and own rights only
- Angry, jealous
- Though may appear overly confident, has low self-esteem
- "I'm ok, you're not ok"
- The aggressive person's needs tend to get met over the other person's needs

**A Passive-aggressive person:**

- Uses silence and guilt trips to manipulate
- Uses sarcasm
- Pouts and plays the martyr
- Excels at playing “the victim”
- Gives mixed messages
- Uses triangling, i.e. complains about your sister to you, but does not talk to your sister directly.
- Is controlling and manipulative
- Often others start off confident in their position, but leave the interaction the passive-aggressive person feeling confused and guilty, but not sure what happened to cause them to feel that way
- A favourite statement is “It’s for your own good”
- Hints, expects mind-reading from others
- Has low self-esteem
- “I’m ok, you’re not ok”
- The passive-aggressive person’s needs get met over the other person’s needs

**An Assertive person is:**

- Direct, calm, clear and concrete
- Expresses personal opinions, thoughts and feelings
- Non-verbal and verbal message are congruent
- Considers rights of self and rights of others
- Honest and tactful, respectful
- Confident
- Makes eye contact
- Uses “I” statements (owns opinions, feelings etc.)
- Takes self-responsibility for their own choices and allows others self-responsibility for theirs
- Has healthy self-esteem
- “I’m ok, you’re ok”
- Sometimes the assertive person’s needs get met and sometimes the other person’s needs get met. A compromise or collaboration may be necessary. Whether their direct needs get met or not, every time assertive individuals express themselves honestly, they validate themselves.

The key difference between assertive communication and the other three styles is that assertive communication is *direct* (clear, concise and to the point), while the others are *indirect* (hinting, mixed messages and avoiding the point). Also, the assertive person tends to have healthy self-esteem while the other three have low self-esteem. Yes, even the aggressive person has low self-esteem although they may appear confident. Think of it this way, why would someone have to control and put down someone else if they felt good about themselves?

Being assertive means being direct, expressing our feelings, thoughts and needs without hinting, playing games, blaming, shaming, or being silent and hoping the other person reads our mind.

We ask for what we want. We state it clearly and concisely. We say it in a respectful way believing that we can deal with the consequences whatever they may be. We don't beat around the bush. We don't numb our feelings by eating or drinking when we are upset. Instead we express our feelings.

An initial step toward becoming more assertive is to identify your current styles of communicating. Ask yourself the following questions:

*Where do you see yourself in the above four descriptions? Which of these 4 communication styles do you use most often?*

*If you use a different style with different people, or in different situations, why do you use that specific communication style at those times?*

*Think about people in your life both past and present. How would you classify:*

- *Your mother's predominant communication style?*
- *Your father's?*
- *Any other adults who raised you?*
- *Your siblings?*

*Who are you most like? Who did you learn your style from?*

*How did these different styles interact within your family? Which ones worked best together? Which ones conflicted?*