

Defining Assertiveness As A First Step in Developing Assertiveness

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Although most people have some pretty clear-cut notions about what assertiveness is and isn't, assertiveness is often confused with aggression. Assertiveness is not necessarily about having your will prevail over the will of others. That is actually more descriptive of aggression. Especially when there is little regard to the rights or feelings of others. Instead, assertiveness is simply about being able to stand up for your own rights without trampling on the rights of others.

Some examples of assertive behavior:

- a) Saying "no" to a request without feeling excessively guilty and without being mean or rude.
- b) Taking responsibility for your own feelings, behaviors, decisions, actions, and reactions, while letting go of responsibility for those same things in others.
- c) Practicing open, honest, and direct communication.
- d) Setting boundaries without building walls.
- e) Expressing a full range of emotions to others, without undue anxiety

Passivity, on the other hand, generally involves abandoning your own rights, wants, and needs to the wants or needs of others. It is an absence of assertiveness and the opposite of aggression.

Some examples of passive behavior:

- a) Saying "yes" to a request, when you really want to say "no".
- b) Allowing others to insult, hurt, or abuse you or someone else in some way, without trying to protect yourself or them.
- c) Not taking action, when some form of action is called for.
- d) Suppressing your own feelings, thoughts, needs, and wants out of fear or self-imposed subordination.

Aggression involves stepping on the rights of others in the process of trying to get your own wants or needs met. It violates others' boundaries.

Some examples of aggressive behavior:

- a) Demanding that others do things your way.
- b) Voice tones and body language that imply some level of threat.
- c) Violating others boundaries by getting to physically close to them, physically, emotionally, or verbally abusing someone else.

Passive-aggression is a way of being aggressive in a covert, sneaky way. More often than not, passive aggression involves acting out anger in a hidden way.

Some examples of passive-aggressive behavior:

- a) Someone asks you to do something that you don't want to do. Instead of saying "no", you make excuses to not do it, say you will, then simply not follow through, or do it and do a lousy job.
- b) Gossiping, backbiting, talking about others behind their backs.
- c) Tardiness, "conveniently forgetting things you don't want to do or deal with,
- d) Procrastination
- e) Sarcasm

Clearly, there are differences between assertiveness, passivity, aggression, and passive aggression. Knowing those differences allow you to begin to develop assertiveness skills that are helpful in all areas in a person's life. The ability to be assertive goes a long way in the development of ability to be genuine in all your relationships, in the development of self-esteem, and in the development of positive self-worth and self-efficacy.

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