

Ask ERS?

**Dear ERS Advisor,
I know that my co-workers sometimes view me as a bit of a “busy body” but I’m really just trying to help! I feel frustrated because I really just want to assist my co-workers with their projects and I often know a more efficient way of doing things. How can I get them to let me help?**

Frustrated Helper

Dear Frustrated Helper,
Some people would much rather do things in their own way, in their own time. This can be especially frustrating for someone who might have a great idea on how to improve the process. As difficult as it may be, sometimes you have to let go of the need to get involved.

There are a couple of suggestions to keep in mind. Remember that your method may not be the best method for your co-worker. Yes, you may have a great technique that works well for you but keep in mind that everyone has their own style of working. Before “charging to the rescue” you may need to take a step back and get more information. A good approach would be to ask your co-workers if they would like some assistance or feedback on another method for completing their project. Most people will be receptive to assistance if they truly need it. Those who don’t need assistance can let you know that they’ve got things under control.

It sounds like you’re a person with the best of intentions and that’s never a bad thing. Your main challenge is avoiding being too intrusive to someone else’s work process and once you’ve mastered that, then everyone will appreciate you for the helpful co-worker that you are!

Good luck!

ERS Advisor

**Interested in submitting a question or comment?
Send an e-mail to aharkleroad@ers-eap.com.
Your feedback is greatly appreciated!**

Assertive Communication

Tamar Altbeker & Maris Weinewuth

Communication happens constantly between people – it’s what you say and what you don’t say, your facial expressions and the way you move. Effective communication occurs when people believe and feel that their message has been heard and is understood. An integral, yet often difficult element of effective communication is **assertiveness**. Many of us are unable to assert ourselves and struggle with communicating our needs in a direct manner. This article will define and differentiate submissive, aggressive and assertive communication as well as cover how to communicate more assertively.

Assertiveness is the ability to communicate positive and negative feelings, thoughts and emotions in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Being assertive means expressing your rights without violating the dignity of others.

How do you know if you are an assertive person?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you able to express negative feelings to others?
- Do you ask for help when you need it?
- Do you ask questions when you are confused?
- Are you able to say “no” when you don’t want to do something?
- Do you express anger and annoyance appropriately?
- Do you look at people when you are talking to them?

If you answered “no” to more than two or three questions, you may have a problem with assertiveness. It is possible that you are assertive at home with loved ones, but tend to be more submissive at work. The nature of our relationships can influence our ability to be assertive. Often, we feel comfortable and safe asserting ourselves with some people but may tend toward submissive or aggressive behavior with others.

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People who behave submissively demonstrate a lack of respect for their own needs and rights. Nonverbal behavior also can be submissive –shrugging shoulders, lack of eye contact, soft speech, or hesitating when you talk. Submissive people do not express their honest feelings, values or concerns and ignore their own needs. They allow others to violate their space and deny their rights.

Despite this, submissive behavior is appealing to many people because it is a method of avoiding, postponing, or at least hiding from conflict. It is an effort to get the approval of others. People who behave submissively are often thought of as “nice” and are praised for being selfless and for placing the needs of others above their own needs.

There is, however, a physical and emotional price that is paid when people are submissive in their relationships. Physical symptoms such as tension headaches, asthma attacks, skin diseases, ulcers, fatigue and high blood pressure can result from long-term submissive behavior. Psychological symptoms, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and repression of anger can also be consequences of submissive behavior.

In contrast, aggressive communication is the expression of needs and feelings at the expense of others. Aggressive people win arguments by speaking loudly, being abusive, rude and sarcastic, and by **overpowering** other people.

Aggressive people get what they want and protect themselves and their personal space by intimidating others or by provoking aggression. They believe they retain control

over their lives and the lives of others, but the results are typically poor interpersonal relationships, alienation, and ill health.

Being assertive, however, offers you the opportunity to take responsibility for what happens in your life. You are able to be a friend to yourself while maintaining your own dignity and self-respect. This will enable you to protect yourself from being taken advantage of by others.

How does one communicate assertively?

According to Robert Bolton, Ph.D., “You can defend your personal space. Most animals defend their space- and their lives- by fight or flight. Only humans have the third option of verbal confrontation. One of the most successful ways of asserting oneself involves the use of a message that has three parts:

1. a non-judgmental description of the behavior to be changed
2. disclosure of the asserter’s feelings
3. clarification of the concrete and tangible effects of the other person’s behavior on the asserter.”

For instance, if a friend has borrowed money and has not repaid it within a reasonable period of time, an example of assertive communication could be the following: “I’m feeling frustrated that you have not repaid the money that I loaned to you. I need to pay some expenses.” Another example could be: “When you park your car in the middle of the driveway, I feel annoyed because I cannot pull my car into the garage.”

It is important to describe the behavior in specific terms so that the other person will know precisely what you mean, however, be careful not to draw inferences about the other person’s motives, attitudes or character. When we try to describe another person’s behavior, we frequently state what we think the other person intended rather than describe what he or she actually did, for example, “I know that you’re angry with me because you left the cap off the toothpaste again.”

Assertion messages should not attack the other person’s character. They should avoid absolutes such as **never**, **always** and **constantly**. In addition, swearing or



“He that would live in peace and at ease, must not speak all he knows, nor judge all he sees.” – Benjamin Franklin

profanity should not be part of an assertive communication. Assertion messages should also be brief and to the point and directed toward the intended person, rather than to someone else. Finally, when using assertion messages, it is important to focus on the real issue, rather than changing the subject or confronting a topic other than the one that is troubling.

The importance of body language

How the assertion message is sent will impact the effectiveness of the message and how it is received. According to Dr. Bolton, "When you send an assertion message effectively, your body language should demonstrate that you mean what you say, that you are not ambivalent, and that you expect to get your needs met. At the same time, assertive body language communicates respect to the other person."

Dr. Bolton outlines the following elements of assertive body language:

Posture – Face the other person. Lean slightly forward and maintain an "open" position, with arms and legs uncrossed.

Eye contact – Look directly at the other person's eyes when you are asserting yourself. This helps convey the fact that you mean what you say. Your goal is not to overpower the other person with an aggressive stare. A serious, steady look into the other's eyes, sometimes relieved by an occasional glance away, helps communicate your intensity of purpose without being aggressive.

Facial expressions – Your facial expression should match your message. People often smile or laugh nervously when they are telling another person that they are angry about something the other person did. This results in a double message, with the smile and/or laughter undermining the verbal message.

Voice – Use inflection to emphasize your point. Also regulate the volume of your voice so that you are not speaking too softly or too loudly. Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons, two pioneers in assertiveness training write the following, "Get control of your voice and you will have harnessed a powerful element of developing assertiveness."

It is important to recognize that learning assertive communication is a process that requires patience with oneself in addition to practice. It will take time to unlearn submissive or aggressive communication patterns or styles. Ultimately, you will find that communicating assertively will promote your own positive self-esteem, help you in building fulfilling relationships and reduce the fear and anxiety you often feel in your day-to-day interactions with others.

For additional information on assertive communication or to schedule a communication skills training, please contact the EAP at 1-800-292-2780.

Sites to See

➔ http://slideshow.health.com/slide_shows/10314/slides/11132

Having trouble with insomnia or back pain, try yoga! There are a number of poses that can assist you with relieving stress through stretching and deep breathing. Check out Health.com's site for a slide show of some of those poses.

➔ <http://designateddaughter.com/>

To assist overwhelmed caregivers, the Designated Daughter website provides "support, information and an expert network to help you maintain your health, life balance and financial security while helping your aging parents or other loved ones maintain their dignity and quality of life." Articles, tele-classes as well as workshops and panel discussions about caregiving information and solutions are provided by caregiving experts.

➔ <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2008/>

Curious about how your state ranks in the national obesity report? Check out the results on the Healthy Americans website. In their latest report, "F as in Fat 2008" they state "More than 25 percent of adults are obese in 28 states, which is an increase from 19 states last year."

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just the **FACTS.**

- According to Mental Health America's website, 3 out of 4 Seasonal Affective Disorder sufferers are women.
- Working caregivers represent 20-50% of a typical company's workforce.
- Want to stay healthy this flu season? Get a massage! Studies have shown that getting a regular massage can actually boost your immune system.

Feeling stressed and overwhelmed? Losing your temper easily? Try calling the Employee/Member Assistance Program (EAP/MAP) for free and confidential help. 1-800-292-2780

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